

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Geelong — 15 February 2013

Members

Mrs A. Coote

Ms G. Crozier

Ms B. Halfpenny

Mr F. McGuire

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officer: Ms V. Finn

Witness

Mr M. Johnson.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr Max Johnson. Thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. With him is Mr Chris Pianto and Mr Joseph Saric. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precinct of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation this afternoon, Max, the committee members will ask questions relating to the evidence that you provide today, so thank you again for being before us and for providing the written information that the committee has received. Please commence when you are ready.

Mr JOHNSON — My name is Max Johnson. I am 72 years old. I have been in nearly every orphanage there is: Royal Park, Poplar House, St Augustine's and Morning Star. I lost a sister in a Catholic home in Geelong, and I still do not know what she died of. I got knocked around really badly in the government house places, especially Poplar House. It was nothing for a grown man to smash you in the mouth, kick you around the floor and throw you against a wall, or stand you in front of your room for two or three days on end. I could handle that — it taught me to be stronger in life.

But I went to a place called Morning Star Boys' Home; it was run by priests and they could not keep their hands off you. They were always mauling you and touching you in the showers. If you were in the dormitory you were all right, but if you were in a place called the Wing, they just did anything to you and they were allowed to do it. The place is half the size of St Augustine's, so they had to have known what was going on. You could not say anything, because if you said anything, the kids would put you on a name that was not very nice. They were pretty good at belting you if you had done the wrong thing. They would always make you take your pants down and flog you with a cane. If you were in the single rooms — what they called the Wing — they came to your room at any time they wanted, and they did whatever they liked to you.

I ran into these Franciscans about five months ago. They had a meeting in Geelong with me, and they said that they did not believe what had happened to me. I said they must have known what was wrong because it happened five times. I was raped there. I never learnt to read and write when I went through all these homes, so I can't read or write at all. They said, 'We would like to help you out, so if you sign these papers, we will give you \$5000'. I can't read and write, so I did not sign the papers. They have rung my house about three times trying to get me to sign these papers, whatever they were, for \$5000. I got legal advice through some friends of mine that helped me — these two gentlemen and a woman called Helen — and they said not to sign anything until we see what is going on.

I am under a psychiatrist at the moment, because the government has done that. I do not know why — to try to help me, I suppose. They were allowed to get away with it for years. They just did what they liked there, and nothing was said about it. As far as I am concerned, they were just a breeding ground for paedophiles, and that is what they were. I am sorry about this.

The CHAIR — No, don't be sorry. Just take your time.

Mr JOHNSON — You are thinking years later you would just forget about it, but when you are by yourself and you have no family — I have only got a boy — you sit down sometimes and it all comes back to you. A few times I have nearly done silly things and I have stopped myself.

I do not go to churches. I would not even go to my friend's funeral last week because there was a priest there doing it. I hate them, and I will never forgive them as long as I live. Sorry about that. People say to you, 'So what? You cannot read and write. They did not teach you. That is nothing'. But I have had to struggle all my life — get a job. I tried to join the army to go to Vietnam because my brother was going there. I wanted to be with him. They would not take me because I could not read and write. It has been such a disadvantage.

Even now when I get letters I take them down to Chris Pianto's or Joe's house because they can read what the letters say. People laugh at you and say, 'That is nothing'. I say to them, 'I blame the orphanages — the whole lot of them'. The Catholic Church said, 'You could not read and write when you got to Morning Star'. I said, 'But you did not do anything. All you did was work us — make us scrub floors and do other jobs'. If you did the wrong thing, you got caned really badly. I have never forgiven them, and I never will.

I only have my son now. I have been that ashamed of myself over the years that I could not tell him. How do you sit down with your son and tell him what happened to you when you were in orphanages and that? You can't. It just rips you to pieces. Now I just sit around or walk my dog, and that is life. I cannot get any work.

But it will come to them one day. They will get their whack one day. They have had it all these years where they could do what they like, and it is about time something happened to change. The government should take it over and at least go through these people who get these jobs as priests and that. I am sorry. That is enough.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Mr JOHNSON — I am sorry about this.

The CHAIR — It is okay. The hearing will be adjourned for 10 minutes.

Mr JOHNSON — I am terribly sorry.

The CHAIR — Don't be sorry.

Mrs COOTE — No, don't say that.

Mr JOHNSON — Is there anything you wish to ask me?

The CHAIR — Thank you for asking, Max. I thank you very much on behalf of the committee for being as strong as you have been and sharing your story with us. If you are happy for us to ask couple of questions, we would be very grateful. If you are not comfortable, please indicate to us, and we will understand. Is that okay?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — You have just told us the story, and I think you said the government should come in and do something with the church. Can you explain in your own words what you think the government should do? I know that you had some assistance with your written submission, but what do you think the government should do?

Mr JOHNSON — I have got this hearing aid thing, and it is playing up.

The CHAIR — I will speak a bit louder. In your evidence this afternoon you suggested that the government should come in and do something. I am wondering if you could explain in your own words what you think the government should do.

Mr JOHNSON — I think at least they should help some of the people. There must be lots of other people who have probably gone through worse than what I have. One or two of my friends have committed suicide. They are gone. But I have a brother, much younger than me, who was at St Augustine's. All he does is lock himself away in a room in Brisbane. He does not go anywhere and does not work because the priests have taken him at St Augustine's. Like I said, I would like to see the government step in on these people and at least screen them or whatever they do to make sure that it does not happen again.

The CHAIR — To screen them before they become a part of the institution?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

Mr McGUIRE — Thanks, Max, for your courage in bearing witness today and your fortitude. You have really articulated what happens and how this wounds your sense of self, particularly if you were in an orphanage and you had no-one around you. Could you just explain how you still carry that with you today?

Mr JOHNSON — It has made me hate authority from being in these homes. I got that many bashings and floggings that I took up professional fighting when I got out of the homes, to protect myself. I do not even let police push me or anybody. I have had enough beltings and floggings for the rest of my life, so now I am aggressive against people. I should not be. People say, 'You should forget it. It happened years ago'. But when you sit around by yourself and do different things — you can be lying in bed and you are awake half the night. You get to bed at 11 o'clock at night and go to sleep at half past 3 or something. It just keeps coming back. I just don't know.

Mr McGUIRE — That is the critical issue that a lot of people still do not seem to understand, isn't it? You live with this daily, nightly and when you are trying to go to sleep. It is a shadow that you carry all through life, isn't it?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you.

Mr JOHNSON — Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

Mrs COOTE — Max, I would like to tell you that what you have had to say to us today is really powerful. We have had in this inquiry a lot of really courageous people, and you being here with us is a very courageous thing too, and I really want to say thank you. I would like to ask you, if I can: you spoke about the impact of reading and writing on your life, and that because you have not been able to read and write that has been a big issue for you. We have had lots of people come to this inquiry and Georgie has asked them, 'What does justice mean for you?'. Some people have said that justice means for them making certain it does not happen again. Others have said that they hope that the priests are going to be held accountable, and others say that it is not so much the money but they would like to get some counselling, some support and some help.

It is probably a combination of a lot of those things, but can I ask you: would it be helpful if there was money put aside to help you at this stage to learn to read and write, to go back, so that in the future you will be able to read and write? Would that be the sort of thing and sort of help that could be useful to you?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes, it would.

Mrs COOTE — If an independent body was put up and gave that really practical type of support — not buckets of money, but something really real — that would be an important sense of justice to you?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes, it has been a big disadvantage against me. It has cost me — I have never, ever had a job long enough to earn the superannuation, or whatever it is called, which would be a help to me now. I am struggling. I have got a mortgage on a house.

Mrs COOTE — So also perhaps some financial counselling would be helpful — that is what I mean. I am trying to see what sort of things other than money. We had Father Dillon today who said he felt it would be a good idea if there was a lot more pastoral care and support and other more practical means. You are really saying to us that if you could use a fund that was put up for learning to read and write and perhaps some financial counselling on how to cope with your mortgage and other things, that is the sort of help that would be useful.

Mr JOHNSON — It would be very good to learn to read and write, to feel I could pick up a book and read it, or something. I get a letter. I do not even give my son the letters to read because he does not realise that I cannot read or write — I take it to my brother's or my friend's place and get them to read what it is.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you. It is really important for us to get your personal comments onto the record here with our Hansard reporters because that will help us when we are writing the report. You have given us some really helpful information today. Thank you very much.

Mr JOHNSON — It has helped me.

The CHAIR — Are you all right for a couple more questions, Max?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — I will ask Ms Halfpenny to ask a question of you.

Ms HALFPENNY — I was just going to ask about when you made a complaint to the church, to the Franciscan monks, about what happened to you. Should I speak a little louder?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes, if you would not mind.

Ms HALFPENNY — When you made your complaint to the church about what happened to you at the Morning Star orphanage and they said that they did not accept your complaint, what sort of investigation did they do? Do you know what they actually did?

Mr JOHNSON — They would not believe me. I said, ‘At least could you come and listen?’. And they said, ‘We are not prepared to help you in any way’. And then when this went on in Geelong they rang me and said they had a meeting with these priests, and when I met them I took my brother with me because he knew that I could not read or write. I got a bit aggressive and I had to get out of the place and go for a walk for an hour and come back. Then my solicitors, or whoever these people are that are looking after me at the moment, got in touch with them to see if they were prepared to help me in any way. They said, ‘It is not in our policy to send him to or pay for him to see a psychiatrist to see if they can help him more’, but the government stepped in because I had been in the government homes. I am going to a psychiatrist at the moment, and he is trying to sort things out. I said, ‘How do you sort things out years later?’. It just keeps coming back to you. You just do not forget them. I never will. I am sorry I could not answer it properly.

The CHAIR — You did very well.

Mr WAKELING — Max, can I just say, thank you very much for coming along today and having the courage to tell us your story. I know you have been supported by Chris and Joseph, but the fact that you are here telling us your story puts a human face to what we have been hearing from so many people. I know the Catholic Church offered you money, but in the position you are in now and after what you have had to go through, what would you like from the Catholic Church now? Do you want an apology? Do you want an admission that they were wrong? What is it for someone like you? What would you really like?

Mr JOHNSON — I would like them to at least try to help me a little bit in life, which they are not prepared to do. The way they spoke to me — they just do not want anything to do with you, and they do not believe you. They kept saying to me, ‘Did you see the priest’s face?’ I said, ‘Dozens of kids never saw any priest’s face at that orphanage’. A lot of people might laugh at me, but they dressed like Friar Tuck, and they wore this cloak. When you were in the wing they would switch the lights off, and they would come in with their cloak over their head. You did not know who they were. I have said to them a few times what happened. People who were even there said, ‘We didn’t know it was going on’. I said, ‘The place is not even half the size of St Augustine’s. You must have known what was going on’. They said, ‘Oh, no, we really didn’t’.

Mr WAKELING — So if they were to acknowledge what in fact had gone on and admit to you that you are right, will that provide you with some solace?

Mr JOHNSON — They should. It is not only me; there must be dozens of other fellas who went through this home and had done to them what they did to me.

The CHAIR — Max, you can stop if you would prefer.

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — You would like to stop?

Mr JOHNSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — That is absolutely fine. As members have said, we are very grateful to you for coming before us this afternoon. On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much indeed. Your evidence has been very helpful. Thank you.

Mr JOHNSON — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.