

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 4 March 2013

#### Members

Mrs A. Coote

Ms G. Crozier

Ms B. Halfpenny

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Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

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#### Witness

Mr R. D'Brass.

**The CHAIR** — Good afternoon, everybody. In accordance with the guidelines of the hearings, I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the Family and Community Development Committee secretariat are to approach committee members. Members of the media are also requested to observe the media guidelines and could I ask you all that you have your mobile phones turned off.

On behalf of the committee I welcome Mr Raymond D'Brass, and I thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. 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 precincts 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 committee members will ask questions in relation to the evidence that you will be giving to us and also the submission you have provided to us. We again thank you very much indeed for being before us and look forward to hearing from you. Please commence when you are ready.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Thank you very much to the Chair and the committee for this opportunity. I was born and raised in Melbourne and between 1979 and 1983 — I was aged between 9 and 13 — I was a member of both the choir and altar boys at St James, Gardenvale, during which time I was regularly abused by Father Ronald Pickering, now deceased. He groomed me by giving me cigarettes, money and alcohol. Over this four-year period I am aware that two other boys were also sexually abused by Father Ronald Pickering. I was regularly fondled and petted by Pickering, as were other boys. This occurred within the change rooms of the church and within the presbytery. I began smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol with Pickering from the age of nine and on many occasions passed out from consuming the alcohol, which left me vulnerable to such abuse.

I now have several vivid memories of the sexual abuses, as well as some vague flashes due to the state of intoxication. In 1983, I stopped going to the presbytery after Pickering verbally abused me in front of the other boys for choosing not to attend the upcoming Sunday service and instead going to the cricket with my father. He told me that I was not welcome back and that I would burn in hell. Between 1983 and 1987, the two other boys who I know were abused continued to visit the presbytery and receive money, alcohol and cigarettes from Pickering, but I chose not to because I was terrified of him. I have no doubt that they were continuing to be abused by Pickering. One night after one of the boys paid a visit to Pickering, he attempted suicide. He was unsuccessful on this attempt, but he would go on to successfully commit suicide a short time later.

During my time at St James Gardenvale, a known paedophile to the Catholic Church, Father Ryan, was placed at Gardenvale in the care of Pickering by the Catholic Church authorities. I was terrified and intimidated by Pickering, and I was constantly blaming myself and feeling guilty, which I believe contributed to me repressing my memories of the abuse. I never told my parents or anyone in the church about what was happening. It was a very confusing time for me, as I came from a very staunchly Catholic household and upbringing where the priest was considered to be the centre of our community and a direct link to God which could never be questioned. At the same time I was getting beaten with the strap, rulers and bare hands at Christian Brothers College and attending detention almost three times a week for not being able to complete most homework assignments. I was repeatedly told that I was lazy, dumb, irresponsible, sly and useless. Alcohol made me feel better.

On reflection I have no doubt that the abuse that I experienced as a boy had a direct impact on my inability to apply myself at school. At age 16 I attempted suicide and was then referred to a psychiatrist. At no point did I disclose the abuse, and as a result the psychiatrist thought that my gambling, smoking and drinking were all signs of me acting out. As a teenager I never spoke of the abuse I experienced as a child, as I did not understand what I had experienced, and I was left wondering why I was acting this way. I guess it had not entered my mind because I had repressed these memories by heavily drinking alcohol and had feelings of guilt that it was all my fault, and that it was my choice to be acting this way.

Around 1987 to 1988 I lost contact with one of the boys who was abused at Gardenvale, but I was aware that he was still getting money from Pickering and was now using it to purchase heroin. I would later learn that this boy died from a heroin overdose in 1992. By the age of 18 I realised I was not handling my money well and was drinking a lot, and I looked to the military lifestyle to provide some discipline before I totally ruined my life. I have avoided close relationships throughout my life because I have believed that my behavioural issues would

only bring my loved ones down with me. I saw myself as poison. This also affected my work performances, as illustrated in my written submission.

Whilst working interstate in 2009, I spoke to my daughter over the phone nightly and she complained to me about a young boy who had touched her inappropriately. At that point something clicked in me, and I lost motivation. I then self-referred to the military psychology unit. At this time I was presented to the navy base medical centre with a rash on my penis and anus. This was diagnosed as a stress rash, a non-STD, by a dermatologist. During psychological sessions the counsellor asked if I was abused as a child, to which I responded, 'I don't think so', which at the time was true because I had no memory of the abuse. However, I was aware that I had been drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes at St James parish.

Within a few weeks of that my grandmother, who I was visiting on weekends whilst based in Melbourne, passed away, and a relative offered me some marijuana. A few days later I was randomly drug tested by the military and returned a positive sample. As a consequence I was kicked out of the navy two weeks before I was due to have an ankle reconstruction. I was now unemployed, near broke, on one good leg, relocating to South Australia where I had no family or friends other than two children under six years old, a hostile ex-wife, and an even more hostile ex mother-in-law. I lived in caravan parks and hotels for three months before I could find a rental and apply for a birth certificate to be able to prove to the Department of Veterans' Affairs who I was, so as to receive post-military surgery and also receive financial assistance.

I was suffering and sought help from a psychologist. Around May 2011 through this process, I found that I started talking about my childhood and in particular Father Ronald Pickering, which led to thoughts and dreams about the abuse that I experienced as a boy. I then continued to receive support from my psychologist to work through my repressed memories of abuse. About three or four months later, I heard an independent Senator for South Australia, Nick Xenophon, name a Catholic priest in Parliament, and he named Father Ronald Pickering. I emailed Nick Xenophon the next morning and he responded advising that I should contact the police and the Catholic Church to complain about my abuse. I later came to understand that my abuser, Father Ronald Pickering, was never convicted of sex offences and was deceased.

I was interviewed by the South Australian police but was told that they would not take a statement or pursue a prosecution because Father Ronald Pickering was dead. I was concerned that the police should have conducted an inquiry into the church's cover-up of abuse by priests, even though my abuser was dead. I was also disappointed to hear that they do not keep records of crimes committed because the offender is dead. If other abuse victims are complaining about a deceased offender then there is no central database or record of this.

On 1 December 2011 I contacted the independent commissioner appointed by the Archdiocese of Melbourne to inquire into the report on allegations of sexual abuse by priests. I explained to him my situation and that I wished to make a complaint in regard to being a victim of sexual abuse by a Catholic Church priest. The independent commissioner suggested that I contact Carelink. I was asked to attend an interview in Melbourne but because I lived in South Australia I was invited to provide a written account of my concerns instead. I was then referred to Carelink for support. I contacted Carelink by phone and was flown to Melbourne for the interview on 13 January 2012.

I met with a psychiatrist and the Carelink coordinator at the psychiatrist's office in Melbourne. The head of Carelink told me that she was a psychologist and I asked both practitioners at the outset if they were Catholic because I was concerned that they might not be unbiased in relation to my case. The psychiatrist advised me that she was not Catholic, however the head of Carelink confirmed that she was a Catholic and offered to leave the discussion. I agreed to her staying to take notes. I was comfortable with the fact that I believed that the practitioner compiling the report was not biased by religious beliefs and that the head of Carelink should be aware of what she was going to be approving funds for.

I agreed to the interview being taped and there were also notes taken throughout the discussion. The interview was largely managed by the psychiatrist, but the head of Carelink also asked questions about my abuse. She also sought my opinion of the Catholic Church. When I was asked to explain how I felt about the Catholic Church and its clergy the head of Carelink scoffed in disbelief at my responses. During the interview she continually demonstrated her inability to act as an unbiased observer. I felt that this was disgusting because I should have been allowed to talk about my anger and spiritual experience instead of hearing her views on the matter.

The head of Carelink also inquired into the lady who cleaned the presbytery at St James during my time there and confirmed that this presbytery cleaner had fled the country with Father Ronald Pickering. When asked how my abuse affected my spirituality I explained that I lacked trust in the motives of authority figures and from a young age was forced to become a freethinker. I told them that I believed in God but I refused to have any religious affiliation. I had been obsessed with thoughts on the subject of religion and science throughout my life, but up until the last 18 months I had always wondered why, because I was neither religious nor an academic.

On the following Monday, 16 January 2012, I met with the head of Carelink only and this interview was also recorded. Prior to the recorded interview she informed me that some angry and bitter people had been making false allegations regarding the Melbourne Response and asked if I had heard any of these rumours. I told her that I recalled the news article about the independent commissioner but nothing more. She then went on to praise Carelink's efforts before proceeding to ask me again about my abuse.

On 22 February 2012 the head of Carelink met with me in Adelaide to review the report written by the psychiatrist. The interview was held in the office of my psychologist in Adelaide, but he was only present for small parts because he was conducting counselling sessions with other clients. I was told by the head of Carelink that their assessment was: 'We think you are a drug-induced schizophrenic. We don't think you are going to enjoy hearing this'. I was offended by this comment as I had never been diagnosed with schizophrenia. I read the report, which I thought was tainted because the information I had provided had been changed from what I had said in the interviews on 13 January and 16 January to make me fit the diagnosis of a drug-induced schizophrenic. There were long sections of the report involving transcripts of the interview in which a lot of what I had said was noted to be inaudible — after every second or third word. 'Inaudible' was stated approximately 20 times within two paragraphs. This was their way of saying that I was waffling nonsense, but in any case why would it have been necessary to include meaningless, inaudible, parts of the transcript other than to make it look as if I were incoherent?

In the last paragraph of my statement of abuse dated 10 February 2012, which the head of Carelink had asked me to email to her as well as the independent commissioner, I had expressed that I am willing to clarify further any information regarding my views and all the effects upon my life. I was never asked to clarify anything. I then asked the head of Carelink whether she had edited the psychiatric report and she said, 'Yes, I did, with the psychiatrist's approval'. I left the meeting in anger but before I left the door I returned to ask her for a copy of my psychiatric report. She told me, 'No, it is our report; we paid for it'. My psychologist was provided with a copy of this tainted psychiatric report and to date I have been unable to obtain a copy.

At the time, Carelink agreed to pay for my counselling with my psychiatrist in Adelaide. I had previously only been able to afford monthly sessions but Carelink offered to pay for weekly sessions. However, I had not signed the release form for Carelink, which was presented to me with the announcement of up to \$75 000 compensation, because I did not trust them then and I still do not today. To this day I have not signed this release document. I do not agree with the release form because if I sign this gag order, it will stop me from telling anyone what happened to me. I feel that Carelink is trying to change what I have said and I feel they are trying to shut me up as well as discredit me.

I have recently noticed that in the Catholic Church's submission to this inquiry — 'Facing the Truth', I believe it is called — they have gone to great lengths to state that in the deed that is signed by victims who have gone through the Melbourne Response to accept compensation there is nothing stopping them from speaking and there is nothing stopping them from taking legal action. I have not come across this deed yet because my process has been put on hold for the moment. In their submission to this Parliamentary inquiry they have not stated that in what they call the application for compensation. That is the document that gags us and that is the document that stops me taking further legal action. They have, I believe, misdirected this Parliament by not speaking of it. It is within one of their enclosures, though.

After my final meeting with the head of Carelink on 22 February 2012 I did an internet search and found a website for other victims of church sexual abuse. It had come to my attention that the head of Carelink was a former nun. I felt she should have disclosed this during our first meeting because it shows that she is representing the Catholic Church and does not have the victim's best interest in mind, and there is a clear conflict of interest.

On 29 February 2012, approximately a week after my last meeting with Carelink, I made a complaint to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency about Carelink's behaviour towards me being unethical, manipulative and bullying. This was on the request of police, because I initially went to the police with my complaint and they said that AHPRA was the regulating authority in this matter. I will not go through my complaint. This is within my written submission. On 19 April 2012 I received correspondence from the independent commissioner stating that he was satisfied that I was in fact a victim of sexual assault by Father Ronald Pickering, that he had advised the compensation panel of his findings and that the panel would receive reports from Carelink and the psychologist. He also mentioned that he was aware of the complaint that I had lodged with AHPRA, and that he would be taking no further steps until the resolution of the AHPRA complaint.

I must note that I have received a payment of \$22 000 after talking with the independent commissioner. I am currently in the Family Court. I have been accused of being an unfit parent because of my past abuse, and I am using my future compensation funds to pay for this to regain access to my children.

Almost two weeks ago, on 21 February 2013 I received AHPRA's verdict that they would not take any further action as the assessor could find no basis on which to conclude that the head of Carelink practises as a psychologist in her role at Carelink. I found this astounding as whenever her name is mentioned in any advertising documents it will be along with 'and psychologist' or 'consulting psychologist'. It is written everywhere. She introduces herself as a psychologist and head of Carelink. I believed I am talking to a psychologist. I felt angered, frustrated and physically sick. I was alone, and the Psychology Board of Australia washed their hands of my situation. By 3.00 a.m. on 22 February I was still physically and emotionally a mess when I sent an email to AHPRA. I will read the email that I sent on 22nd of last month:

AHPRA, the reason for this decision is that the assessor could find no basis on which to conclude that the head of Carelink practises as a psychologist in her role at Carelink. How utterly preposterous. The head of Carelink, a registered psychologist, admitted to me that she deliberately edited my psychiatric documents without being a cosignatory, but apparently she was not wearing her psychologist hat while doing so. What a joke. But wait, it gets better. I read a few months ago that the psychology board had found the head of Carelink to be counselling as a psychologist in her role at Carelink. This seems to contradict the line above that AHPRA has fed me. She gained my faith by introducing herself as a psychologist and head of Carelink so as to sit in on a psychiatric interview and even conducted my interview alone on 16 January 2012. It is obvious that the assessor has not listened to Carelink's recordings of my interview with her on 16 January as evidence in this decision making. I was led to believe I was being interviewed by a professional psychologist on the state. It has been almost 12 months since I submitted my notification regarding two health care practitioners, yet AHPRA has only ever commented to me on one individual. That was a psychologist and head of Carelink, but nothing has been said of the psychiatrist who wrote the report and allowed this to happen.

Could you please advise on who to contact for complaints regarding AHPRA and the board.

I have edited that. You have the full transcript.

**The CHAIR** — Raymond, sorry to interrupt you at that point. I am just wondering: have you got something further you would like to add? Thank you for your comments so far, but I know members would like to ask questions of you.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes, please.

**The CHAIR** — Are you happy for us to go into questions or would you like to conclude with any further comments?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Questions are fine, thank you very much.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Thank you very much, Raymond, for having the fortitude to come and testify here. Thank you for your submission. I want to pick up a couple of issues around the grooming that you have identified with you and also with the others you were talking about. You testified that one of the people who was affected died of an overdose of heroin and you said that money was given by Pickering to buy heroin. Can you provide greater insight into that?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes, the boy in question told me on several occasions that we were on our way to get money so he could purchase heroin. I have never done heroin or any heavy drugs in my life, and I had not witnessed this boy during heroin. I knew he was, but he had told me directly that he was getting money to do that.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Directly from Pickering?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Correct.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Pickering knew the money was going to purchase heroin?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Can you also put on public record how this grooming worked and how it played out between the three of you and how you knew about how this worked?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Absolutely. First and foremost, a bit of a description about Pickering: he is a very tall man. He is a large figure. He is always touchy-feely, so whenever boys are around he has got one on either side of him, normally hands on bottoms. That was the normal, everyday accepted thing from him. Within his office, in the presbytery, he always had a boy sitting on his lap, hands in the boy's lap. We were offered alcohol from him, either through the glass he was drinking out of or Scotch mixed with soft drink. But most of the alcohol we did drink there was the altar wine, which was highly expensive, very fine wine and delightful to a young boy's palate. The altar wine was left in our dressing room within the church. He used to inform us that were allowed to have a drink on the side. Later on, after a few years of doing this, he even complained that were drinking too much and we had to stop it a little bit.

Regarding cigarettes, we used to be given cigarettes from him. At first he offered. One of the boys who was abused, and is now deceased, invited me first to meet Pickering and asked for a cigarette. That was the first day I had met Pickering. From then on we were asked to buy cigarettes from the shop for him, and we smoked pretty frivolously around the presbytery and behind the church, in plain sight of parishioners. It would have looked pretty horrendous, looking back on it now. Money was given to us by Pickering. There were several different reasons: for doing odd jobs, for performing certain types of church services and also just randomly at times. I know the other boys went to Pickering's bedroom for the money more than I did. I went there maybe on two occasions. I do not recall any overt abuse at those times for myself, but I have no doubt he used that for other boys. They spent extensive times up in that room. I think that might cover the question.

**Mrs COOTE** — Raymond, thank you very much indeed for your submission — what you have given us today and also the comprehensive submission that you have given us to read. Can I just clarify something out of what you have given as to read? You said that Susan Sharkey was actually a former nun.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — Is that right? How did you come to that knowledge?

**Mr D'BRASS** — From two paths. One was an abuse survivor that I contacted. He has his own website about sexual abuse by the clergy. I spoke to him on the phone and he gave me that information. I verified it later with a victims agency. I can give you that name, if you like.

**Mrs COOTE** — That would be helpful, yes.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Helen Last from Melbourne Victims Collective.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you very much indeed. The other thing is also when you went to South Australia, to Adelaide, at any time did they ask you if you would like to meet with them at the Hilton hotel?

**Mr D'BRASS** — No, no.

**Mrs COOTE** — No, the Hyatt, not the Hilton? You met in your psychologist's rooms, that is right? Okay. And given the fact that you have come to understand about Ms Sharkey's lack of counselling in her role at Carelink, have you had time to think, again about what you said when she said to you, 'We think you are a drug-induced schizophrenic'? Has that been something that has stayed with you, given that that was a while ago now, 2012? Has that had an impact on you?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes, it has. I have questioned it with all my counsellors ever since. Most of them have scoffed. During this time of understanding my repressed memories, I have been fortunate enough to have a new GP. That started when I left the navy and moved to Adelaide, when I did not know that I was abused at that stage. He was in contact with the psychologist. Also veterans affairs had set up an organisation called Personnel

Placement Consultancies, which has a psychologist there to help me get back to work after surgery, and she has been fully aware of before and after the abuse. Sorry, I have got a bit lost there from the question.

**Mrs COOTE** — I was asking if it had an impact.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — And you have had other psychological support since that time.

**Mr D'BRASS** — All these people who have known me before and afterwards have all said there is no schizophrenia involved, and I hope I can demonstrate that today.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you. That is very helpful. Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR** — We will just do one last question if that is all right, Raymond.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Following on from what Andrew said, I guess with this allegation about schizophrenia, I just note that you were actually a very well trained and decorated member of the Australian Defence Force. You also fought in the Gulf War, so I suppose I just thought I would like to put that on the record. But the question I wanted to ask you, it seems that the abuse happened both at primary school going into secondary school. Is that correct?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Correct.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So you were at a school in East St Kilda; was that the secondary school or was that the primary school?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Primary and secondary.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — It was both at East St Kilda, so you did not meet the priest through the school system? How did you actually meet the priest?

**Mr D'BRASS** — Prior to Christian Brothers East St Kilda, I attended St James Primary in Gardenvale where I was introduced to Pickering. It was part of the school system at St James primary, which is directly across the road from St James Church, and this school was initially run by nuns. There is a convent across the road as well, Star of the Sea school in Brighton. I come from a very religious family. They would have sent me there as well, but I believe I was encouraged by the primary school. As soon as Ronald Pickering came to Gardenvale, he wanted to set up the choir and the altar boys. We did high mass in Latin for 2 hours. It was very — he was a very arrogant and pompous man.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So he was very connected into the primary school, and that is where he sort of wandered around.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Yes, and I spent much time at the presbytery, and my parents were not worried about me at all. It was a safe place, apparently, but because of choir practice and altar boy practice I was there pretty much every night and weekends.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Raymond. Can I thank you again on behalf of the committee very much for your appearance before us this afternoon, for your submission and your evidence. It has been most helpful. Thank you again.

**Mr D'BRASS** — Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here.

**Witness withdrew.**