



Remembering a survivor of institutional abuse

There are tens of thousands of survivors alive today who experienced abuse in institutional care. These are the children who were brought up in orphanages and children's homes in the twentieth century. Recently, Bob, one of these survivors died. He was about to turn 74. This week also saw two reports released by Government. These three events are connected.

The first report is the *Final Report of the Second-Year Review of the National Redress Scheme*. This review describes the state of the redress scheme that was created following the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. The review, although acknowledging the challenges facing the redress scheme, is critical of the lack of transparency in assessing claims, the delay in processing applications and the psychological and emotional damage done to applicants by the redress process.

The second report, *Out of Sight*, examines the residential care system in Victoria. The report describes the circumstances of children and young people, under the guardianship of the State, who live in residential care. The report concludes that the residential care system is unable to keep these children and young people (some as young as seven) safe. The residents of this care system are often sexually exploited and frequently become involved in criminal activities.

What do these reports have to do with the death of a 74-year-old? Bob's story has recently been documented by the Life Stories Project*. His story illustrates the flaws of the National Redress Scheme. The account of his childhood institutional abuse mirrors the continuing deficiencies of today's residential care system for children and young people.

Bob's family life was characterised by brutality, neglect and sexual abuse. When Bob was taken into care his abuse continued. Bob spent four years at the notorious Westbrook Children's Home in Toowoomba, Queensland where he was regularly flogged and sexually abused by the staff. The conditions at Westbrook Home are described in chilling detail in the 1999 Forde report (*Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions*). Victorians don't need to be comforted by the thought that things were/are done differently in Queensland. The Royal Commission spent much time highlighting the brutality of many Victorian institutions. We need look no further than the infamous Bayswater Boys Home.

Bob survived. He found comfort in horses and the small kindnesses of people he met in in his early adult life. All his life he waited for two things. He wanted recognition and justice for the suffering he endured at the hands of the State. He believed redress could do this. He died before his claim was recognised.

Bob also wanted to be sure that the child welfare system had learnt from its past. Bob could never understand how the State that was intended to protect him could replicate the neglect and brutality he had experienced at home. Bob and many others who have survived the past child welfare system share this bewilderment.

Bob story concludes with these words:

But then, when I couldn't stay with my parents, I was looked after by the State. The State of Queensland paid people to look after me. Now that's a joke! Effectively the State of Queensland was paying people to be sadists and paedophiles. The State provided the opportunity for these evil bastards to abuse and exploit children.

As children we should never have been put through it. I look at the TV today and see stories of paedophiles abusing kids in care. My abuse happened to me nearly 60 years ago. It is still happening to the kids in care today. These are the kids who, like me, come from poor families.

I am still waiting for redress. It's been 20 months since I put my claim in. I am not surprised. The money would make a difference but do Governments really care? The mean way the redress scheme works (or doesn't!) suggests that they don't care at all. And the delay is a joke. How much more does the Government need to find out about Westbrook and Riverview? There have been so many inquiries... They are just waiting for us to die...

It is within our collective capabilities to implement a just and timely redress scheme for the many thousands of survivors who, like Bob, are out there waiting. It simply needs political leadership and a determination to provide justice. And it is within our collective capabilities to better look after children in care. This too needs political leadership and the will to implement humane and child centred care arrangements.

But first we have to be able to listen to the suffering experienced by these survivors. We must then apply the lessons provided by these quiet voices.

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