



Royal commission into child sexual abuse begins

By Amy Simmons, staff

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The chairman of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse says more than 5,000 people are expected to share their experiences with the commission.

In his opening address to the commission's first sitting at the Victorian County Court in Melbourne on Wednesday, Justice Peter McClellan said given the scope of the inquiry, it was unlikely the Federal Government's December 2015 deadline would be met.

But he urged victims to remain patient as the commission begins its work.

Justice McClellan started by addressing the sitting on the commission's terms of reference.

"The terms of reference of our inquiry provide, amongst many other matters, that it is important that those affected by child abuse can share their experiences to assist with healing and to inform the development of strategies and reforms," he said.

PHOTO: The royal commission sits on the opening day in Melbourne. (AAP: Les O'Rourke)

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"The terms of reference direct the commissioners to inquire into the experience of people directly or indirectly affected by child abuse and related matters in institutional contexts.

"And the provision of opportunities for them to share their experiences in appropriate ways, while recognising that many of them will be severely traumatised or will have special support needs."

Justice McClellan says the commission will aim to right the wrongs of the past.

"Although a painful process, if a community is to move forward, it must come to understand where wrongs have occurred and so far as possible, right those wrongs," he said.

"It must develop principles which, when implemented through legislation and changes in the culture and management practices of institutions and the behaviour of individuals, will ensure a better future for subsequent generations."

Justice McClellan says it is likely 5,000 people will speak to the commission, each needing at least an hour to tell their story.

"The commission has been told that many people who will wish to give an account of being sexually abused as a child will have difficulty recounting that experience," he said.

"For some, the opportunity, although of significant benefit to them, may also trigger trauma."

He says those listening to the individual accounts will be appropriately trained.

"Private sessions will be structured to provide assistance to people in giving their accounts, and arrangements will be made

How to contact the commission

Call 1800 099 340 between the hours of 8am and 8pm
Write to GPO box 5283, Sydney NSW, 2001
solicitor@childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au
www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au

to refer those who may be in need to appropriate counselling services," he said.

There is no cut off time to make a submission

But he warns the process will be traumatic for all involved.

"The advice we have received from psychiatrists is that, however robust the listener, persons exposed continuously to the account of these traumatic events are themselves at risk of harm," he said.

"We understand that there are limits upon how many personal accounts a commissioner and the commission staff can safely listen to in any one day."

An initial report is due by mid next year and the Federal Government had requested a final report by the end of 2015.

Justice McClellan admits it is unlikely the commission will be able to complete its work by the Government's deadline.

"It will be apparent that the task defined by the terms of reference is so large, both as to the number of people who may wish to give their account and the number of institutions who may be affected by allegations, that it is unlikely the commission can complete its work within the timeframe currently fixed for delivery of the final report," he said.

"However, I and the commissioners propose to use the time between now and the delivery of the interim report to complete as much of our task as we can, and when that report is delivered, government will be able to make a judgment as to the future course which the commission should take."

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Justice Peter McClellan

Justice McClellan stressed the commission was not a prosecutorial body, but says

links have been established with state and territory authorities to which matters may be referred.

He also says it is important to understand the commission will not determine whether any person may be entitled to compensation.

The senior counsel assisting the commission, Gail Furness, also delivered an opening statement.

She says people can phone the commission to share their experience, make a written statement, have a private face-to-face hearing, or speak in a public hearing.

She outlined the types of institutions the commission would be investigating.

They include:

- Residential care facilities such as orphanages
- All religious organisations and their various entities
- Recreational and sporting groups
- Child care centres
- State government child protection agencies
- State government departments and authorities, including the police force
- Detention centres, including those that house refugees
- Defence forces
- Educational facilities, including kindergarten, primary, secondary schools and boarding schools
- Juvenile justice centres

Victims 'elated'

Anthony and Chrissie Foster, whose two daughters were sexually abused by a parish priest when they were in primary school, were at the hearing.

One of the girls took her own life and the other requires 24-hour care after a car accident.

Mr and Mrs Foster say the hearing is a milestone for their family.

"We're elated we finally got there and I think fairly confident that the

commission will be powerful enough to do what's required," Mr Foster said.

"I was impressed by what I heard, about how they're going to go about it and what they're looking at," Mrs Foster said.

Nicky Davis from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests says many people are anxious to hear more details about what will happen next.

"That detail is very important to them and to whether they will be able to tell their story and how well they will cope with it," she said.

"I know a lot of victims would like to be involved, to have their voices heard... because nobody but a victim really knows what it feels like to be going through that.

"So we hope that there are at least a handful of victims being consulted as they make those decisions."

The commissioners will likely start holding private discussions with victims of child sexual abuse in May.

Public hearings are not expected to start for several months.

'Important moral moment'

Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who announced the royal commission in November last year, told ABC NewsRadio on Wednesday morning that the commission is "an important moral moment for our nation".

"What I want to achieve out of the royal commission is twofold: for the survivors of child sexual abuse, I want this to be a moment of healing, for us to say to them as a nation 'we hear you, you're valued and you're believed' because for too long, so many of these survivors have just run in to closed doors and closed minds," she said.

"And second, I want the royal commission to provide for us recommendations about the future.

"We've let children down in the past as a country - we need to learn what we can do as a nation to better protect our children in the future."

Ms Gillard announced the commission a week after explosive allegations made by a senior detective in the NSW police force.

Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox alleged in an interview with Lateline last year that the Catholic Church hierarchy protects paedophile priests, silences investigations and destroys critical evidence to avoid prosecution.

But Chief Inspector Fox has told the ABC's 7.30 program that NSW Police have informed him he will not be considered a whistleblower.

He says that decision leaves him open to litigation.

Topics:catholic, federal-government, royal-commissions, sexual-offences, melbourne-3000, vic, australia

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