

AUTHORISING VIOLENCE AND ABUSE AGAINST CHILDREN

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Institutional responses to child sexual abuse

On 3 March 2016 the *Courier Mail* carried an editorial which sought to set the public inquisition of Cardinal Pell in a wider context.¹ It referred in particular to the passage of time in relation to attitudes towards the authority of churches, schools and those who worked within them:

If we have learnt one thing from the Royal Commission to date, so many of our religious and education institutions have had an endemic culture which dictated evil would be neither seen nor heard, let alone reported. As we have seen in the case of some Brisbane schools, the primary concern when confronting abuse allegations was often not the well-being of the victim but rather protecting the reputation of the institution itself.

Even Pell, after all that has happened in the distant and immediate past, sustained this priority in an unguarded moment in Bolt's volte-face friendship-renewing interview. Pell cited the interests of the Church's reputation before concern for those abused by it; when challenged, he excused this as a Freudian slip.²

But Pell is only the standard-bearer of one of several proponents of organized Christianity which have been accused of promoting intolerance as well as defending violence against children. Many of those who loudly proclaim their Christian credentials have been in the forefront of resisting changes designed to protect non-conforming school-children from bullying, law changes designed to allow same sex couples adoption rights available in the rest of Australia and any alteration in the provision for Christian indoctrination masked by the term 'Religious Education'.³

Senator Bill O'Chee gave testimony of the role of a convenor of a school debating competition, reinforcing the institutional authorization of abusive practices by those in authority.⁴

Growing up in Tasmania and working in an Anglican school as assistant housemaster, I remained totally unaware of the abusive practices at my school until they were uncovered by the Royal Commission during their hearings in Hobart. The reasons for the change of headmaster during my

¹ The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>

² 'George Pell tells Andrew Bolt he won't resign from Vatican position', *The Guardian*, 4.3.16: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/04/george-pell-tells-andrew-bolt-he-wont-resign-from-vatican-position>

³ Remeikis A, 'Instruction confused with education with religion in Qld state schools', *Brisbane Times*, 3.3.16, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/instruction-confused-with-education-with-religion-in-qld-state-schools-20160303-gna0qf.html?>

⁴ O'Chee B, 'Brisbane's Shameful Secret Past', *Brisbane Times*, 1.3.16, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/comment/the-hermit/brisbanes-shameful-secret-past-20160301-gn7vgo.html>

time there was concealed in a wide-ranging cover-up by the school governors and those to whom they were accountable, including senior judges.

But we ought not to be complacent about the capacity for institutions to change their culture. The implementation of policy decisions can sometimes happen at break-neck speed or they can impact with the speed of the dripping of tar-like substances in a UQ engineering laboratory.

Institutional responses to corporal punishment in schools

All but the most avid readers of the *Sunday Mail*, might have missed the couple of column inches captioned as 'last schools drop the cane'. (28.2.16) This records that Central Queensland Christian College has recently amended its discipline policy that continued until now to allow corporal punishment. It is now possible for the *Sunday Mail* to reassure its readers that 'corporal punishment has been removed from all schools in Queensland after internal reviews at the remaining two schools'.

When I was appointed as Director-General of Education in 1990, I inherited a policy commitment from the ALP government, derived in turn from a conference resolution sponsored by the Queensland Teachers Union. The commitment was to remove corporal punishment from Queensland schools. I embraced this commitment enthusiastically, but not because I was at all traumatised by being caned during my own school-days (although my father was very upset). It was important in my own view that Queensland follow a trend towards civilized behavior management which had seen, up to two decades earlier, the abolition of corporal punishment in all state schools in the rest of Australia.

Implementing this policy commitment proved unexpectedly difficult. The Catholic school system had thrived on corporal punishment since its inception. Protestant schools followed suit. Nobody was rushing to change.

I had seen the play 'The Christian Brothers' when I first came to Brisbane in 1977 and I knew that over half of the Goss Cabinet had attended Catholic schools. I am reliably informed that when the first proposal for immediate implementation reached Cabinet that there was not majority support.

Resistance was based on the axiomatic truth that each of them had reached the political pinnacle with frequent beatings so the opportunity should not be closed off to the younger generations. A second submission provided for gentle phasing in of changes over three years, and for the opting-out altogether of non-state schools. But it was still apparently, like Waterloo, a close-run thing, and my Blucher was the wife of the Premier and her life-long commitment against domestic violence.

It remains a compelling argument now, as it did then, that authorizing violence against children through the school system – for whatever misdemeanor or petty crime – legitimates the same resort to violence by parents, relatives or even police. But my sad experience is that many teachers did not accept this then or even now. Removing the cane diminished their sense of authority and their perception that students would only change their behavior under threat of violence. I have met men teachers who worked in the Department of Education during my time there and sadly they regard 'dropping the cane' as one of my worst decisions.

So I was pleased to learn that in February 2016 all the schools in Queensland have now been placed on an even playing field, after 24 years. Conducting our teaching, just like conducting domestic life or conducting ourselves in night club venues is more enjoyable with diminished threats of violence.