

Australian government announces inquiry into institutional child sex abuse

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19 November 2012

The Labor government's decision last week to convene a Royal Commission into the perpetration and cover up of sexual abuse of children in religious, non-governmental and state institutions is a cynical and politically calculated move. While posturing as a defender of children, Prime Minister Julia Gillard is working to protect the Catholic Church, and, at the same time, implementing an austerity agenda that will only add to the social distress facing many children.

The inquiry announcement follows a series of horrific revelations of crimes committed by Catholic priests. In September, the church told a parliamentary investigation in the state of Victoria that its priests had sexually abused at least 620 children, mostly during the 1960s and 1980s, with not a single incident reported to the police by the church. The real figure is believed to be far higher. It is also believed that at least 40 people assaulted by priests subsequently committed suicide.

Evidence of even more widespread abuse has emerged in the Newcastle-Maitland diocese, centred on the industrial and mining area of the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney. Since 1995, eleven priests and six Catholic teachers have been convicted of crimes against children, and three more priests are currently on trial. There are at least 400 known victims of sexual abuse in the area. One priest has been convicted of providing a false statement in an attempt to protect an abuser, while other senior clergy have come under investigation for remaining silent on what they knew.

The Royal Commission has been carefully framed to provide cover for the Catholic Church. Gillard's decision to have the inquiry investigate every institution for child sex abuse—including sporting

organisations, scouts, non-profit organisations, state-run children's homes and services agencies—was intended to draw an equivalence between the record of criminality within these institutions and that of the Catholic Church.

In a press conference held last Monday, Gillard emphasised that “this is not a Royal Commission targeted at any one church,” and said she had earlier telephoned Cardinal George Pell, the archbishop of Sydney, to reassure him of this.

Sexual abuse has in fact occurred at a much higher rate within the Catholic Church than it has in other institutions. *The University of Sydney's Professor Patrick Parkinson, a specialist in family law and child protection, has explained:* “[B]ased on the available data, there has been around *six times* as much child sexual abuse by clergy and religious [personnel] in the Catholic Church as there is by ministers of religion in *all the other churches in Australia combined*—and I would regard that as a conservative figure... [T]he reality is that the levels of abuse in the Catholic Church are strikingly out of proportion with any other church—and, from what I have seen, this is an international pattern.” (Emphasis added.)

By tasking the Royal Commission to investigate incidents of abuse within every institution in Australia, Gillard has ensured that it will take years, possibly more than a decade, to issue any findings. There is no guarantee that any criminal prosecutions will eventuate. Royal Commissions have frequently been utilised by Labor and Liberal governments alike to produce whitewashes. The 1987-1991 Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, established by the federal

Hawke Labor government, reviewed 99 deaths in prison or police custody during the 1980s, without a single charge of homicide being laid. The deaths have continued unabated ever since, with nearly 150 Aboriginal deaths in custody in the 1990s alone.

It is doubtful whether child abuse victims will be able to claim any financial compensation from the Catholic Church. The Australian legal system immunises the church's lucrative wealth and property holdings from any liability claims, because it is not recognised as a legal entity. "Whether it's the Anglican Church, the Uniting Church, the Salvation Army—they can be sued in respect of negligence or misconduct in a way that the Roman Catholic can't," Andrew Morrison of the Australian Lawyers Alliance explained on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio. "The church is effectively immune from suit, unlike every other church in Australia and unlike the Roman Catholic Church in the rest of the common law world."

The complex social issues underlying the sexual assault of children in churches and other institutions will go unaddressed by the government's Royal Commission.

Gillard has declared that child sex abuse is "an evil thing, done by evil people." This explains nothing. That child abuse is such an internationally widespread phenomenon within the Catholic Church underscores the implausibility of attributing it to a few "evil" or criminal individuals. In reality, the criminality is an expression of the reactionary nature of the church itself and the destructive impact of its various doctrines related to human sexuality, including the imposition of celibacy upon priests (see: "Why the epidemic of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church?").

While casting itself as the "progressive" and compassionate defender of children, the Labor government is actually advancing a social and economic agenda that is placing more young people at risk of neglect and abuse. On behalf of big business, Gillard is spearheading an assault on the social position of the working class, which falls heavily on the most vulnerable, especially children. Labor's austerity

measures are aimed at gutting public spending on health, education and other basic social services, with welfare recipients especially targeted. Already, about 100,000 single parents of children between 8 and 15 years old have been forced onto the unemployment benefit, slashing their incomes by more than \$100 a week, as part of the government's efforts to expand the pool of exploitable cheap labour for business.

Incidents of child abuse occur across every socio-economic layer of society, but numerous studies have documented the correlation between poverty and social hardship, and the likelihood of abuse. The government's attack on the single parent welfare payment alone will see more than a hundred thousand children face potentially higher risks of abuse. With their parents compelled to accept low-wage shifts, many will have no supervision after school hours, or be placed in new child minding arrangements. At the same time, while poverty rates are increasing and financial insecurity hitting ever-wider layers of the population, publicly funded support agencies continue to be starved of funds.

The situation underscores the reality that for Gillard the Royal Commission is not aimed at protecting children but at boosting her political fortunes going into an election year.



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