

MEDIA RELEASE

Child Abuse Survivors Angry at WA Minister's Confession Betrayal

09 June 2020

Victims of childhood sexual abuse from across Western Australia feel betrayed and angry at interference with the Seal of Confession by the State's Minister for Child Protection.

Non-Catholic and Catholic survivors are today petitioning members of Western Australia's Legislative Council to reject proposed amendments to the Children and Community Services Act which will require Catholic priests to report knowledge of child sexual abuse when received through the practice of confession.

James Parker, 52, who runs peer support groups for child abuse survivors in Western Australia, describes proposed legislation as a "betrayal of every survivor's journey of recovery".

Mr Parker said, "The Hon. Simone McGurk MLA is not listening to survivors' lived realities and how our stories can help to protect children today and into the future.

"It is commonly known that perpetrators don't talk about abuse in the confessional. But many survivors do. The confessional remains the only place that a vulnerable child or adult victim can easily access without cost to talk with anonymity and privacy about their present or past trauma."

As a non-Catholic teenager, Parker used the confessional to first disclose his extensive history of childhood sexual abuse. "I was a suicidal teenager. I had no one to turn to who would let me talk at my pace and respect my need at that time for utter privacy. It was the kindness and empathy of a Catholic priest that literally saved my life."

Two decades later, Parker's witness was fundamental in convicting a serial paedophile. "Without the Seal of Confession, I would never have begun my journey of recovery, which would have left a prolific child abuser roaming free even today to continue molesting children.

"Many victims tell me they feel betrayed and want the Minister to concentrate on bolstering support for survivors rather than threatening and policing a critical private space which many survivors use and have used to find hope and healing."

Aboriginal woman, RB, a 26-year old non-Catholic, speaks of despair and being "retraumatized" by the Minister's proposals. "In 2020, where else can an Aboriginal child or teenager go within their community setting and find a totally confidential listening ear to talk to about abuse while remaining completely anonymous?"

"What looks like a visible win for the government will be a complete catastrophe for survivors. This will have abusers rubbing their hands with glee. They keep winning, courtesy of the government, and the vulnerable lose once again.

"It seems to me that the State Minister for Child Protection really doesn't care. Can't she and her advisers see that this is children's lives and trauma they're messing with? It's obvious that this [amendment] will lead to more mental illness, addiction and even suicides."

27-year old survivor, SM, who is Catholic, says proposals are increasing his anxiety, making him feel "totally betrayed and abandoned by this government on so many levels."

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“We the abuse victims are being frightened away from going to confession. Shouldn’t the government be on our side? If we aren’t strengthened inside of ourselves, which is what confession has done and does for me continually, then how are we going to start building up the confidence and courage to be able to report past crimes to the police and then have the inner strength to deal with the pressure and stress of any potential court proceedings?”

“The thought of losing [sic] the security and safety of the Seal of Confession brings me to tears. Where else do I turn? Where else will provide me with what I need to begin the process to inner healing?”

18-year old, SR, who regularly uses the confessional, says, “This is the safest place for me to talk about my past abuse. Can’t we get them to stop this stupid law?”

Survivors are calling on Members of the Legislative Council to set up a Select Committee before amending the Children and Community Services Act so that:

- their firsthand experiences can be given careful consideration,
- their insights into child safety and best practice can be deliberated, and
- their journeys of recovery can be respected rather than jeopardised by ill-informed politicians.

ENDS.

Media contact: James Parker 0452 012 091
on behalf of W.A. Survivor Groups

See below for:

- a copy of the letter sent to Western Australia’s MLCs (page 3)
- copies of three survivors’ full statements (page 4)

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Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr Citizen,

URGENT: The Seal of Confession and the Children and Community Services Act

I write to you on behalf of several W.A. groups of deeply concerned adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. We are made up of:

- teenagers to those in their 70s,
- both men and women,
- indigenous and non-indigenous, and
- those from varying academic and political standpoints.

In brief, we feel betrayed by the Minister for Child Protection and her team of advisers. It is blatantly clear to us that their proposed amendments to the Children and Community Services Act **fail to take into account the lived reality of many victims and survivors of childhood sexual abuse.**

We understand the proposed amendments to be a response to the Royal Commission's 409 recommendations, which included a call to ignore the seal of confession and to force Catholic priests to report knowledge or suspicions of child sex abuse. In principle, this seems most sensible; in reality, it can cause **grievous harm to the very people it seeks to protect** and actually **permit further abuse to transpire.**

As a teenager and a non-Catholic, I personally used the confessional to first disclose my extensive history of childhood sexual abuse. I was suicidal and had no one to turn to. It was the profound empathy of a Catholic priest that literally saved my life. Two decades later, my witness was fundamental in convicting a serial paedophile. Without my **confidence** in the Seal of Confession, I would never have begun my journey of recovery, which would have left a prolific child abuser free to continue molesting children.

Sadly, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse gave no space for survivors to speak of how they had **benefitted from services provided by religious groups today**, which in turn have led to much healing and recovery and the saving of lives.

The greater majority of childhood sexual abuse takes place within the family and by those known to victims. Only the smallest fraction of sexual abuse is likely to transpire today in educational institutions, religious groups, sporting organisations, state institutions and youth organisations.

The Seal of Confession has permitted many survivors to begin to heal and to "start building up the confidence and courage to be able to report past crimes to the police" as one 27-year-old male survivor has expressed.

The Minister has failed to understand that the **anonymity and privacy of the confessional offer survivors safety way beyond any therapist's office.** It is **a unique space like no other in society where deep healing takes place.** For a government minister with responsibility to protect children to interfere so crassly with a sacred space of trust and healing frequented by those who have been grossly betrayed and violated, demonstrates a distinct removal from reality upon which no amendments should be made to law. Above all, indigenous children – who are already often vulnerable – will suffer the most.

We ask you to consider proposing the creation of a Select Committee to further examine what amendments might be needed to the Children and Community Services Act in the light of survivors' insights and experiences of the Seal of Confession.

The Minister has spoken forcefully of "putting safety first" and yet her recommended amendments are an outright betrayal of abuse victims, including those who have suicided and today depend on our voices to speak up on their behalf.

I have **attached** for you copies of two brief emails from brave survivors who requested I share these with you, and a short text message from an equally vulnerable and pained 18-year-old male survivor.

We hope that you will stand today as a voice of reason and offer your support to the true safety of children by rejecting the State Government's amendments as they presently stand.

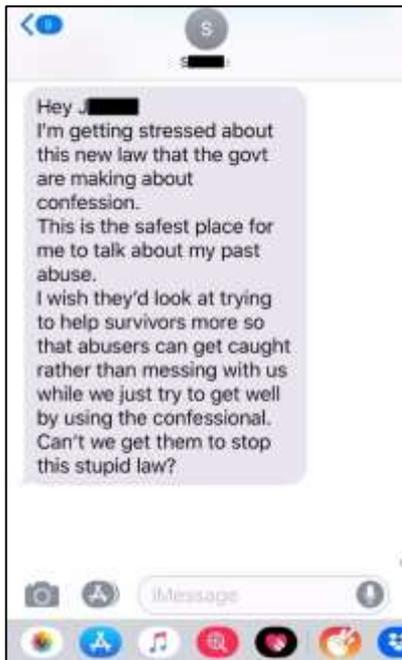
Yours faithfully,

James Parker

W.A. Survivor Groups

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SOME SURVIVOR STATEMENTS



Recent Changes - Catholic Confessional

From: R
To: J
Date: Monday, 8 June 2020

Hi J

I've heard from other abuse survivors who I know here in Perth that you've become a central point where survivors can voice their concerns about a law the State Govt are trying to get passed which interferes with any mention of abuse spoken about in the Catholic confessional.

I am Aboriginal woman who continues to really struggle to survive childhood sexual abuse. You know that there are barely any avenues open to an Aboriginal child where he or she can go and talk with absolute confidence, free of charge and without question, about the horror of sexual abuse without fear of retribution as the suicide rate can be the witness too. **Aboriginal kids need more help and more care, and more respect.**

It doesn't take a genius to know that the Catholic Church has worked hard in recent years to put child safety at the top of its action list. In 2020, where else can an Aboriginal child or teenager go within their community setting and find a totally confidential listening ear to talk to about abuse while remaining completely anonymous?

I may not be Catholic but I can see that the confessional must actually save lives, even if just a few. Don't kids lives mean anything to the government anymore? And anyway, if any minor or adult survivor, Aboriginal or not, gets even a sense that authorities could be sniffing around near the confessional then people will stay away and their recovery will either get stunted or will regress and certainly won't move forward. What looks like a visible win for the government will be a complete catastrophe for survivors. This will have abusers rubbing their hands with glee. They keep winning, courtesy of the government, and the vulnerable lose once again.

It seems to me that the State Minister for Child Protection really doesn't care. Why should we expect any different? She seems to be playing the ministerial role but no real positive change will happen. If anything she is now setting out to persecute the vulnerable people she's paid handsomely to protect.

Her position isn't about town planning, tourism or agriculture. Can't she and her advisers see that this is children's lives and trauma they're messing with? It's obvious that this will lead to more mental illness, addiction and even suicides.

I honestly despair. I feel retraumatised just thinking about this. I have no idea how to get my views out there. If you need to quote me somewhere then please do.

Why can't a Minister for Child Protection actually think through her actions properly and do everything possible to protect and support children? I have to stop writing here. This all becomes more and more painful for those of us who are child abuse survivors.

Thanks for listening at least.

R

Seal of Confession

From: S
To: J
Date: Monday, 8 June 2020

Hey J

I was just wondering if you knew about this new law that the state government is trying to push through to control what happens in the Catholic confessional.

Do you know how this will affect me as a survivor? I'm now starting to get really anxious. Does this mean that if I make any mention of my childhood abuse in any future confession that the priest will have to ask me questions to find out who abused me? I'm not ready to talk about that information to anyone – not yet anyway. And if I do speak about my childhood abuse in confession, will the priest be required by law to report any facts to the police? Will this open me up to having the police knock on my door to question me about it without any warning? The thought of this happening only adds to the trauma of what has happened to me in the past, as it will mean yet again mean I will be forced in to a situation that invades my privacy and that I will have no say or control in!

Do you know why the government's doing this? Everyone knows that no child abuser ever uses the confessional. And even if they did then it's obvious that they couldn't be forgiven unless they were willing to turn themselves in. So, the only people who will be affected by this law will be us the victims and survivors of abuse, when laws should be there to help and protect us from any further pain and suffering, not punish us further.

I feel that we the abuse victims are being frightened away from going to confession. Shouldn't the government be on our side? If we aren't strengthened inside of ourselves, which is what confession has done and does for me continually, then how are we going to start building up the confidence and courage to be able to report past crimes to the police and then have the inner strength to deal with the pressure and stress of any potential court proceedings?

I feel totally betrayed and abandoned by this government on so many levels. They tell us that they are on our side and care, yet they have clearly been spending lots of time, energy and the money wasted (which could have been used elsewhere to help us survivors) creating a law that penalises the very people they should be trying to help and adding to the layer of pain we already experience, the same people who could help them to make WA a safer place for everyone. The thought of losing the security and safety of the Seal of Confession brings me to tears. Where else do I turn? Where else will provide me with what I need to begin the process to inner healing?

Thank you so much for listening.

S

ENDS.