

Mr. Elton Humphery,
Secretary – Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care
The Senate,
Parliament House,
Canberra. A.C.T. 2600.



Dear Sir,

Just over a week ago I heard reference to the above inquiry on an A.B.C. radio programme, and as the subject was of interest to me I made some enquiries as to the terms of reference and as to my being able to make a submission, and was very disappointed to learn that the inquiry was completed, however a staff member of Senator Knowles office advised me that I should still write to your office with my experiences.

In January 1946, when I was just 12 years of age, my three younger brothers, a younger sister and myself were committed to the care of the Child Welfare Department in Western Australia as Destitute children and were placed in the care of the Swan Homes at Middle Swan, this was then operated by the Anglican Church and had been in operation at this time for many years, in fact our father had been in this institution as a child also.

I am now over 70 years of age but still find my experiences of this Institution remain with me, and some of the traumatic things I experienced still bother me, and I believe have had a profound effect on my life.

I will try and relate a few of these matters to you to indicate some typical forms of child abuse to which the children of this place were subjected.

Just a couple of days after my arrival at Swan we were taken swimming in the river which bordered the property, as I had already been subject to some bullying by a couple of the other boys I was keeping fairly close to the member of staff who was supervising us when the member of staff was approached by an older boy, he would have been probably about 14 or 15 years of age and like the rest of us was naked, as this was an isolated area and it was the custom for the boys here to swim nude. This boy turned around and said to the staff member, "what do you think of this" and indicated to his buttocks, I then saw that his buttock were criss crossed with bruises from the back of his thighs to high on his buttocks, the Staff member laughed and said, "that will teach you not to run away, wont it". I later learned that this boy had run away, he had been brought back by the Police and his punishment consisted of being belted across the bare buttocks with a cane, this was the standard punishment for this and many other much minor offences and I saw many boys over a period of time who had been punished in this manner, and on a number of occasions was subject to like punishments for minor infringements of the rules.

I remember at a later occasion three older boys had run away. When they left they stole some food supplies and push bikes owned by other boys, they were later caught by some of the older boys when they returned to steal more food. I still have vivid recollections of the punishment meted out to these boys.

We were all assembled in the gymnasium where we were told to form up in a line in the shape of a horse shoe, the three boys being punished were instructed to remove their clothing and we were told what was going to happen, if we did not want to take part we were permitted to drop out, but still were compelled to watch, (I was among the few who dropped out), each of the boys to be punished was then told to get on to his hands and knees and they had to scuttle across the floor in this fashion to where the line began, as they did this they were lashed with a rattan cane across their buttocks, as they reached the start of the line they had to crawl between the legs of the other boys and were unmercifully bashed and kicked, some of the boys involved in this were so small they were carried along on the backs of their victims. I vividly recall seeing some of the older boys grabbing their victims by the hair and pulling their head up and smashing them in the face with their fists. When they reached the end of the line they had to remain on their hands and knees and were flogged back to the start.

One of these boys was, I remember a very shy aboriginal, and about two days later was admitted to a local Hospital for some treatment, I do not remember ever knowing what this was for. One of the others was, I believe it fair to say, was of a low I.Q., the other I have no memories of except he was one of those who had spent his entire life in care.

Another instance, which I feel I should relate, is that of a young girl, probably aged about 7 or 8 years. I think from memory that she had caused some damage to her clothing, and the punishment inflicted was to have her hair shaved off, and she was compelled to wear a sugar bag as a dress all day for a period of time, (how long I do not remember), she even wore it to school, which was a public school some distance from the institution, and the children had to walk along public streets to get to this school. It would be difficult to imagine the trauma, that this child was compelled to suffer, or the effect it would have had on her in later life.

When we were at Swan, I was once given a book as a gift from a member of my family, a member of the staff found me with this book and took it from me and put it in the library, as I considered it to be mine, I took it again, and again it was taken from me by the staff member, eventually he got tired of me removing this book from the library, so he took it from me and put it somewhere else, I never did recover that book and for many years bore a hatred for that staff member.

While on the subject of that library, while it was, I suppose for the benefit of the children, it was rare that we were ever permitted to use it, it was virtually a 'show piece' for the public to see and admire, those of us who had a need for some place to do their home work of an evening were at times allowed to use it for this purpose, and as much as I loved to read, I do not believe I was ever able to read a book throughout.

And while speaking of a "show case", there was a period of time when I was given work to do in what was known as the Kindergarten, that area reserved for the

younger children, many of these being of a pre school age, these children were woken at 6am each day of the week, Sunday excepted when it was 7am, they dressed and then went outside to wait for breakfast at 7am, this was summer and winter alike, and I remember seeing these children waiting outside on bitterly cold mornings as they were kept outside while their living area was cleaned up and made presentable. There was an area here for the children as a playroom, there were many toys here and I often over heard visitors admiring the lovely toys they children had to play with. They were for show and for show alone; the children were never permitted to play with these.

The more I sit and think about this, the more I am remembering, but I cannot commit it all to paper as it would take me far to long, and I do want to get this off to you, however, before I close there are some observations I would like to make.

The first of these is that I am very disappointed that I did not become aware of this inquiry, as I would have gladly travelled to Sydney to give evidence in this matter. The fact that the inquiry has closed, I suppose excludes anything I say as being of little value and probably will never be taken into consideration.

My next observation is that, while I have no doubt such an inquiry is advertised in some areas of the media, but these area areas which are not generally perused by the general public, and therefore, many people such as myself would not become aware of it.

Thirdly, I would point out to you, that for the main part, the victims, (and I see myself and others as victims in this matter) are for the most part reluctant to come forward and talk about these matter, generally they prefer to put it behind themselves and get on with their lives, as to many of us it is a very painful experience to go through with, and that those who have something to protect, such as the churches who conducted these institutions, and the Government authorities will not want to be open to any criticism, or to make any reparation to their victims.

For myself, I want nothing from these organizations, except an assurance that children in this country will never be subject to the treatment which so many of our children were subjected to. I also sincerely believe that those people who were responsible for the treatment of those children accepted it for being the only way, children had few, if any rights, and the general idea was that children should be seen and never heard.

Yours faithfully,



Syd Davis

15/7/04