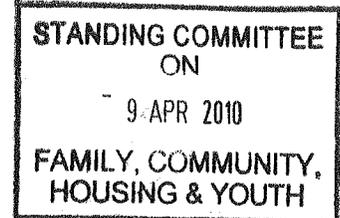


The Secretary  
House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing & Youth  
Parliament House  
Canberra  
ACT 2600

24 February 2010

Dear Secretary



Inquiry into Impact of Violence on Young Australians

Thank-you for your willingness to receive this submission.

My contribution is limited because of the fact that I have only recently become aware of the Inquiry. I hold some research material on the subject, although I assume you have the most recent research at your disposal. Therefore, I make my submissions chiefly on the basis of personal experience – bearing in mind that Human Rights are Individual Rights – a fact often, it seems, overlooked by policy-makers and electioneers. I refer to each of the Terms of Reference as TR followed by the relevant number. I elect to make submissions with respect to TR1, TR2, TR3 and TR4.

SUMMARY

**TR1** All Australians are/have been 'young', although not necessarily young Australians i.e. there is a large non-native population in Australia. I make this obvious point because 'violence' is a phenomenon almost-universally bred in the home. Thus, many adult Australians are / have been subjected to violence in childhood and youth (I use the terms interchangeably for this purpose) – and it is a commonplace of research in this field that an abused child is more likely than a not-abused child to resort to violence her/himself. It should be noted that not all abused children become abusers – for some, fortunate ones, the experience of violence impels them to break-free of the syndrome in adulthood (and earlier).

By 'abused' I mean a child either the victim/object of violence, or party to violence as a result of membership of a community or family where prohibitions

on use of violence have failed or are non-existent.

Hence, an Inquiry such as the present one must, necessarily, take into account the adults who comprise the social environment of the child/youth upon whom this conduct impacts.

I offer examples from my own childhood/youth: with respect to living with a traumatized, untreated war veteran father; a consequently depressed, traumatized mother; and – decades later, drawn from my experiences as counsel (and stepmother) in a remote Community.

In each case the effect upon the child may be summarized as: anxiety and acute powerlessness.

**TR2** The time to pussyfoot around the links between alcohol abuse and youth violence and violence to youth must, surely, be past.

If that is true, then the links to illicit drugs use must be even more clearly accepted and condemned, as conduct which links violence and any sort of proscribed drug/use merely breeds contempt for Law in the young – who see that drugs/alcohol abuse are commonplace in this society, and along with that level of general acceptance goes a diverse range of illegal activities – from dealing drugs and drink-driving, to covert collusions about dealing, growing, manufacturing and supply, lying and perjury, as well as physical violence, fighting and the illegal use of weapons, and coercion of young people in 'the sins of the fathers[mothers]' ie as in when parents resort to youth to provide their drugs to them.

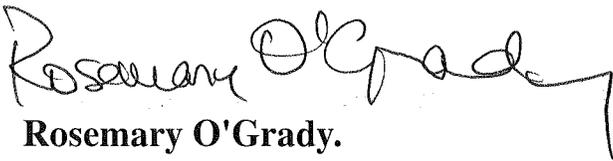
**TR3** The cruel power-relationships and gender prejudices of the schoolyard, too often neglected or tolerated in schools and homes (the 2009 Xavier College scandal), breed, and are intended to breed, a generation, or a class of rough, disrespectful and inegalitarian young people who are expected to demonstrate their capacity for making their way in a tough, that is, a market-driven world. The concepts of courtesy, and gentleness/kindness, let alone compassion, though often given hypocritical lip-service, is disappearing fast in this increasingly materialistic society. We live in an age of values-deficit.

**TR 4** Statistics lie. Any number of populist speakers will say that 'we' never had it so good. Yet so-called employment has never been as insecure, free secular, government-funded (sic) schools have never been so expensive, casual work has never been so pervasive, infrastructure (roads, rail, utilities etc) has never been under so much pressure/ nor so neglected – the result of decades of neglect – and

the gap between rich and poor never so wide. Youth see dwindling opportunities and widespread indifference and broken electoral promises. So does the population at large. A seething sense of frustration is abroad, and the current epidemic of knife assaults is one indicator of this. Opportunity is not decided upon merit but upon wealth, connection, influence and patronage – we have become a culture/society of men(sic) not Laws. Inequality thrives in such an environment – which is an historical phenomenon in this society. Inequality breeds violence – as is, and has been for most of our history, evident in every schoolyard and playing-field. But, whereas, in the past, common values – however crudely-drawn – have put a brake upon tolerance of such conduct – our now racially-culturally diverse, rich society has to look hard to discover what are its common values. Youth is confused. Confusion breeds frustration. This breeds violence.

Thank-you for your attention to this serious subject, and for allowing me the opportunity to make these rather hurried, and fraught observations to you.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rosemary O'Grady". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Rosemary O'Grady.

Lawyer & writer

## SUBMISSIONS

**TR 1 Violence entered my life, at home, one Sunday morning before Church when my father, a veteran of World War II, arrived at our home in company with an old shipmate with whom he had spent the previous day at the races, playing cards and drinking, in town. We lived on Olivers Hill south of Frankston, Victoria, at the time (early 1950s), and had no car so that if my father missed the last train from Flinders Street, he would stop overnight in town, then catch an early train down or be given a lift. Arriving as my mother, sister and I were waiting for a lift to Church, my father introduced his chum, a coarse sort of man who took advantage of the occasion to kiss me, penetrating me by sticking his tongue into my throat. The sense of violation I experienced at age seven was compounded by a sudden realization that my father not only had failed to prevent this from happening to me – but had actually brought the man who did it into our family circle. It seemed clear to me that the old shipmate was more important to my father than any damage he might have inflicted upon the child. Though I repressed this memory for years, my relationship with my father deteriorated, and, in my adolescence, became violent, as his own undiagnosed, untreated, war trauma – we would now say 'post-traumatic stress disorder' – deepened, and he became increasingly alienated from his confused family. Over many years I learnt that traumatized adults breed traumatized children and adolescents. Many years later, after trying to 'cover-up' the violence which came into our family with the sequelae of WWII, with attendant business – failures and the incapacity of the veterans' or any general public health services to recognize and treat mental ill-health, I began to compare notes with others of my generation, only to discover that mine was not at all an isolated experience. There were many Australian families, if the results of my enquiries were reliable, which became toxic environments because of the return of a war-traumatized serviceman.**

**Help was not readily-available. Police nowadays, I understand, are more likely to have had some training in dealing with family violence – but this is a recent phenomenon and in the first decades after WWII Police were reluctant to attend, to 'interfere' in family violence, so my mother, whose parents were, by then, dead, and whose only brother had died in 1941 flying for the RAAF, had no recourse to help. This became a factor further isolating the family, and my mother was soon engaged in a lifelong struggle against depression – a battle she fought bravely.**

Many years later, in South Australia and Western Australia, I recognized some similar environments amongst the remote communities of least-assimilated Aboriginal peoples: poor impulse-control amongst people ( not always men/boys – women are often the prime fighters in such settlements) , failed money-management, stress upon families because of delinquency among parents, hence – neglect of the physical, let alone the emotional needs of youth and children. The desire to escape follows and youth become 'lost' . <sup>1</sup>

In 1975, two years before my first assignments in remote Australia, I joined the research staff of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, (RCHR) based in Sydney. With Anne Deveson I shared the 'reference' for Family Violence – Anne Deveson undertook the larger task of reporting on Child Abuse, I was assigned the Spousal Violence ('wife bashing') limb of the task. I was also assigned to provide the social research element to Jane Matthews' brief to report on Rape.

The extent and pervasiveness of violence inside Australian households and communities shocked even the experienced researchers among the staff. Yet this dangerous and repellant aspect of Australian culture was all but buried in the years after the RCHR was prematurely terminated by a federal administration needing to make budget cuts. The work of that RCHR, carried out through 1976 with great dedication by staff determined not to have their research die, incomplete, and buried in the Archives, has never been adequately assimilated into policy and implementation – as is the fate of many Royal Commissions, you might say. Stupidly it has been duplicated and re-invented by subsequent administrations which produce fresh samples of the same sorts of recommendations – and the circumstances of despair among those about whom the so-called policies are being made, by paid professionals of one sort or another, never change. Or, rather, never improve. Generations grow up, reported-on but unassisted. Money is spent fostering the academic reputations of grantees who report on their 'studies' of the afflicted – while the studied are left to find their own way out of the morass.

Also at the RCHR I was handed the brief to report on 'Aboriginals' and contact with the Redfern community was made, and submissions were being received on that TR when the life of the RCHR was truncated. In the archives of the RCHR are submissions and draft reports on issues of Housing, Alcohol and Petrol Abuse, Education and Employment of indigenous communities – by-passed because of budgetary imperatives, 'though converted into public awareness by the books written by Anne Deveson. Even after the passage of 30 years I commend these to your Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Mowanjum youth 'About Us' – [www.facesofmowanjum.com](http://www.facesofmowanjum.com)

It fell out that, by 1987, ten years after leaving Sydney, I had re-trained and was in Derby WA when I was approached by a group of 'Elders' – traditional landowners of the North-West Kimberley asking me to advise them on their legal entitlements to land. So began an association lasting several years, in which I carried forward their common law claim to land, in the High Court and WA Supreme Court. The issue became politicised when the Kimberley Land Council wanted to control the action, an attempt strongly resisted by the claimants ('Young people don't tell older people what to do'). After some years of persecution I was driven away from the region by violence enacted upon me by young people and children, under direction from adults, officials and NGO staff. Proof of this assertion is contained in affidavits lodged through the 1990s in the Supreme Court of WA in *Ejai's* case <sup>2</sup> The relevance, here, is the use to which some adults are prepared to put disadvantaged, under-educated, fearful young people in an environment where prohibitions against use of force are rarely observed under influence of alcohol and drugs. I returned, in September 1994, from a journey to the High Court in Canberra, to find the house my clients and I had rented as office and residential premises, thoroughly vandalized. Damage amounting to \$20,000 + was caused by a violent rampage by drunk young women and several hungry children, at the behest of the enemies to the claim – local 'community leaders' and staff of the well-funded Kimberley Land Council. The children involved in this crime were traced, and one, a girl of about 14 years, was eventually charged. Police did not effect this detection. Police were reluctant to make an arrest, having previously informed me that they could not ensure my safety in the region.

Use of children and ignorant young adults to effect crimes sponsored by persons in positions of power seems, to me, to be one of the worst types of violence our contemporary society permits to be visited upon young people. It is a Dickensian situation – making Fagins of us all who fail to prevent it.

TR 2 It is commonplace, now, to wake to the morning news and hear that overnight more Motor Vehicle Accidents, deaths, maimings, knifings, assaults, rapes and killings have occurred – often linked to use/abuse of drugs and alcohol. The criminal courts stink with the secretions of accused persons sweating-out their substances in the cells and charged with the consequences of actions they don't remember.

There are massive gulfs in a society in which so many are prepared to throw away life – their own or that of another. In Aboriginal communities one sees how

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2 CIV 1744 / 1993 Supreme Court of Western Australia

lack of respect for elders seen to be irrelevant failures in the 'money society' leads to young people refusing, point blank, to accept their roles within their communities. The grants-system which allows for money to flow into the hands of some 'administrators' and 'leaders' at the expense of the rest of a community's members, exacerbates the internal unease of communities in which there is little grasp of money ( though a good grasp of writing submissions for grants) and no grasp of financial or social risk. The ancient task of child-rearing for apprehension of risk has been displaced – and Aboriginal youth today have little understanding of the skills they need to avoid the frustrations of coping with white society. They feel, almost universally, trapped – and the desire to escape often is acted-out by recourse to drugs and alcohol. I have just published a short novel describing the environment of such a society (*The Long Day*)<sup>3</sup> which is not for sale but shall be placed into major libraries.

Frustration, the absence of meaningful work or roles, the intense materialism of consumer society breeding selfishness and disregard for the existence of others, let alone equal rights – all drive youth towards the escapism of mood-altering substances, and to violence. That social conduct can be altered may be seen by observing the improved behaviour of spectator crowds at sports venues when these are heavily-monitored for anti-social behaviour. Provided there is a desired alternative (e.g. to see the match or to be present in the crowd) ways can be found to impose a recognizable form of authority or order, without which no society, or organism, can survive.

TR 3 On the subject of bullying I am sure you must have many submissions. My own view is that it is widespread and increasing viz. Road rage, amongst other phenomena.

At Xavier College, Kew, Victoria, there have been incidents of violence made public last year and, scandalously, dismissed by parents of boys at the school as harmless toughening-up behaviour, a necessary preparation for life.

This sort of reaction behaviour identifies delinquent parents. I know of bullying at schools, including Xavier, over decades and generations – always covered-up and dismissed. The disastrous consequences of bullying, of the feelings of rejection and isolation which bullying causes, of suicide and, not least, of the creation of another person (the Victim) now socialized into using violence upon others, is costly to a society and to individuals. Delinquent parents should be denied the benefits of membership of a school or communal society. Until they

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3 O'Grady, Rosemary *The Long Day* Self-published- 2010.

are willing to endorse non-violent forms of order and socialization, parents of abusing children and youth should be penalized by expulsion from the relevant community/society. Rejection is an effective form of behaviour-modification. Young people deprived of a peer group soon seek another – we are herd animals. The lesson of the sports arenas and New Year's Eve 'grog-free events' may be learnt.

Yet, I wonder. In May 2009, as a volunteer worker at Radio 3MBS FM in Melbourne, I was party to a so-called 'mediation' conducted by a lawyer/Board-member to resolve a difference between me and another volunteer. The mediator was not impartial, was introduced as 'here to represent the Board' (a breach of the rules of Mediation) and was, herself, abusive, interrupting proceedings to take sides and to belittle the terms of the complaint. This is the conduct of a trained, experienced professional operating, purportedly, in her field (Law). If such a person can be so blind to the requirements of fairness and proper procedure, what hope is there for the mass of society, not so-schooled? We call ourselves a nation of the Fair-Go. I think it's a misnomer. I think we are a nation of bullies. Kick when you see a head!

TR 4 It follows from what we know about alcohol abuse in remote communities that poverty is fuel to the desire to escape the responsibilities of slogging through life with no hope of escape. It is dreadful to recall that it was 'the right to drink' that was something of a *cause celebre* amongst supporters of Aboriginal rights, at least in South Australia where I lived at the time – in the 1960s and 1970s. As with equal pay in the pastoral industry – equal rights led to disaster. This is not to deny that equality must be a pillar of a free society – but it does demonstrate that blanket solutions from 'white society' are not necessarily in the best interests of people in remote communities. Different, better solutions need to be developed – and perhaps, as a result of the 'Intervention' this might occur. I doubt our commitment to finding these solutions – all society is feeling disempowered at present – as governments have failed so dismally to maintain the infrastructure which underpins, or ought to underpin, our lives: utilities, transport, health & schools. Fewer 'events' (sources of grog and fighting) and better budgetary management of the proper concerns of government – is something many adults would like to see. Governments are failing.

People who are 'Out' as they say in the bush, people who lack money (or acceptance) for whatever they need let alone want, as Aborigines always do perceive themselves by comparison with 'whites' – are chronically frustrated.

Though violence is not a prerogative of the poor, rich people have the means to distance themselves from the effects of their violence and to hide the consequences. Poor people do not. Hence, for so many centuries, men could conceal from the world their abuse of women in the home – women had no rights to property. Access to paid employment is a key to change in grog/drug abuse – yet prospects for improvement in labour -participation, especially for the under-educated, are bleak in current world economies. Frustration mounts, and with it violence, as we see this week in Athens. The disinhibiting effects of grog/drugs can be used to evil effect by sponsors of discord, of violence, and the will of those disadvantaged or thwarted by poverty can be easily directed to ill.

At present in this society it is, increasingly, only money which provides status and power. The ability to empower without, necessarily, having to rely on money, might be a key to victory in the battle against the destructive effects of violence resulting from powerlessness and frustration. But this will require a change on the part of all society. It will require a sacrifice – something not popular in contemporary, materialistic 'communities' , and a common will.

Thank-you for your attention.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rosemary O'Grady". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the left of a small, faint mark that resembles a checkmark or the number "5".

ROSEMARY O'GRADY