

RIGHT TO THE VERY END, THE CHURCH WASN'T LISTENING

Final royal commission hearings revealed the ugly truth of indifference to victims

CHRISSIE FOSTER

It is difficult to stop crying.

A child sexual abuse expert from the US, Bruce Perry, simply picked a random example. He spoke via video link to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; he was one of 36 experts in the field who gave evidence last week at the final public hearing of the royal commission, titled Case Study 57: Nature, Cause and Impact of Child Sexual Abuse. Perry's example was of "a little five-year-old child and somebody is raping you", and he talked of what it does to the young mind.

They were painful words to hear because that is what happened to our little five-year-old

Emma and, not long after, to our six-year-old Katie. To hear what their infant minds had to deal with was crushing—a dreadful add-on to the vision of rape by the priest, which already haunted us.

It was like a knife to the heart.

That priest was Kevin O'Donnell; he was 66 years older than Emma; he was our parish priest, with access to the primary school and its 300 children where I, as a Catholic, sent our girls. He went to prison in 1995 for 14 months for sexually assaulting children (rape charges were dropped in a plea bargain). I believe that from 1958 until he was arrested, he sexually assaulted at least 100 children.

Memories haunted our girls.

Emma took her life aged 26 after a traumatic teenage and young adult life filled with despair, self-harming and drug addiction. Katie began binge drinking and was hit by a car while drunk. She spent 12 months in hospital and now, 18 years later, still receives 24-hour care, as she always will. Childhood sexual abuse was the cause and self-destructive behaviour was the impact.

Four weeks before came Case Study 50, titled Catholic Church in Australia, a three-week hearing during which Australia's archbishops gave disturbing testimony.

In his evidence, on three occasions Hobart Archbishop Julian Porteous said the reason they did not act to stop child sexual abuse was because "nobody understood the seriousness of the effects of sexual abuse on children". This common, if absurd, excuse has been used by the hierarchy, both here and overseas, since 1994. In using it, they admit knowing about

the crimes. And not stopping them. Crimes that attracted the death penalty until 1961.

Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge stated: "I have no right to go to a priest, who is not an employee of mine, and say, 'Excuse me, are you in a sexual relationship?' " What if that "sexual relationship" was with a child?

When, on a panel of five archbishops, one described the forced, often violent, rape of thousands of children as "misbehaving", not one of them said a word. God almighty, what is wrong with these sanctimonious men of religion? What do they need to make them understand? Another \$450 million royal commission?

I once handed my most precious treasure, my three children, to the Catholic Church for their primary school education and at that school was the pedophile O'Donnell. The archbishop of Melbourne, Frank Little, knew about O'Donnell's crimes by then.

Evidence before the royal commission has told us that in 1986, the year before Emma started school, Little received a letter from a nun informing him that O'Donnell had sexually assaulted a boy over several years.

We have lost count of how many victims have taken their lives

Little did nothing — an act of criminal neglect.

This was not the only time Little put his priests before the safety of Catholic children. In 1978 a magistrate and a barrister approached him about a boy in their parish who had been sexually assaulted by priest Bill Baker. The archbishop yelled at the two men to leave his office. But he acted: days later he transferred Baker to another parish, where his crimes

were not known. As adults, some of his victims went to police. Baker was jailed for a few of his crimes and then lived on a generous church pension.

Further royal commission evidence shows the Catholic hierarchy was told in 1958 that O'Donnell was raping children. They did nothing and he raped others freely for another 34 years until retiring with an honorary title from the church.

Can today's archbishops be trusted with the safety and lives of your children?

We don't have to look far for the answer.

Last year some parents in Melbourne tried to remove from their parish a priest after newspapers reported that the church had made a \$75,000 payout to a victim of his sexual abuse. The royal commission has established that the maximum of \$75,000 is only awarded in the very worst cases. Tellingly, the church sided with the priest, who

denied the abuse, against the parents. Eventually, he was transferred. His new parishioners complained. He was moved again. His present location is unknown.

We have lost count of how many victims of priests have taken their lives. Of course, the crimes devastate parents and grandparents of victims, siblings, spouses and children of victims, and loving friends. Emma's closest friend, Lu, took her own life five months after Emma.

Where were the church hierarchy representatives at this final royal commission hearing? There was much they stood to learn about the damage their colleagues had done to the 4445 victims in their care. They might have better understood these blighted lives, perhaps even developed some empathy for them. But no. They stayed away. All of them.

They didn't care then and they don't care now.

My husband, Anthony, and I

have attended 108 days of royal commission hearings and seen many other days of evidence via webcast. We are grateful to the royal commission for seeking truth and justice about these crimes. Without it, victims would still be fighting a losing battle against a powerful and once influential institution.

The royal commission will release its findings on December 15 but these will go nowhere unless politicians act on them. We hope they vote for the safety and protection of voiceless, innocent children and not cave in to the untrustworthy churches and their manipulative lawyers and lobbyists.

Implementing the recommendations will help make Australia the safest country in the world for children.

Who doesn't want that?

Chrissie Foster is the author of Hell on the Way to Heaven with Paul Kennedy.

HANDY HOME FOR EVIL AND IDIOTS

The worst of our digital age is just keystrokes away

GRAHAM RICHARDSON



There's no doubt that the internet has presented society with great advantages. Knowledge is an invaluable commodity and the capacity of any individual to Google anything or anybody is a wonderful development for those lucky enough to be living in this era.

But the internet brings with it a downside that can be terrifying. It can be a haven for pedophiles and terrorists. Just think how many times you have heard or read about teenagers being groomed by evil men.

If you are sick enough you can watch executions as well. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State use the internet to frighten some and recruit the gullible.

Cyber-bullying is a huge problem. Particularly when bullies use the internet to trash people's reputations and the targets are still young enough to be at school. Vicious assaults are recorded on mobile phones and the images are disseminated to all and sundry.

We have all read with alarm about the alleged rape of a 15-year-old girl at a Sydney party when she was so drunk she was not aware what was happening. She did not know she had been assaulted until mobile phone footage of the incident was posted on social media.

The trolls who inhabit this grubby section of the internet gain considerable courage from the reality that horrible accusations, which may have no basis in truth whatsoever, can be posted anonymously. You can only wonder how much this has been contributing to growing youth suicide numbers.

The cruelty that lives at the core of so many people with malice running through their veins never ceases to shock and amaze me. The internet can and does provide a platform on which those with ill-will can strut their ugly stuff.

Twitter is another refuge in which idiots flourish. As soon as my words in yesterday's edition of *The Australian* were online, they went to work. I wrote about Tony Abbott, whom I have long regarded as a friend. In an article that the PM would regard as hostile, I wrote of Abbott's successful new career as a "smiling assassin". I also noted that he was a decent person who had performed so many good, charitable works over so many years. This detonated an atomic explosion of idiocy. According to some of the twitterati, I had sold out to Rupert Murdoch who directs what I can write. No one at News Corp does. My columns are printed verbatim to reinforce that freedom. Other idiots reckoned I had ratted on the Labor Party by praising Abbott. To use a well-worn phrase, some of my best friends are Liberals. As a member of the ALP for more than 50 years, a long-time official and senator

for more than a decade, I should not have to justify my actions to anyone.

I was a failure on radio in the late 1990s because I felt obliged to defend anything the Labor Party supported. But it was stupid of me to carry on publicly as if I were still a member of caucus. These days I write and say what I think even when I must criticise Labor.

To the idiots I raise my middle finger and will have absolutely no regrets if this costs me some followers on Twitter. I hope you can all forgive me for that personal gripe and now I can get back to business.

It is not too difficult to find references to the power of Newspoll. Malcolm Turnbull used the fact that Abbott had lost 30 Newspolls in a row as a trigger to begin the push to oust him. The publication of each Newspoll is so eagerly awaited that half the polities in Canberra are ringing around the night before to see if someone will leak the result.

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So much focus is placed on Newspoll these days that other polls find it hard to get much of a run. No other poll can create instant depression or delight quite like Newspoll can.

Politicians and journalists alike will be watching for the day the number of Newspolls showing a Coalition loss matches the number Turnbull used as an excuse to challenge a first-term elected prime minister. What delicious irony it would be if the same tactic were used to sink yet another one-election-win prime minister.

Even a cursory glance over the last Newspoll would suggest that Turnbull's problems are worsening. First, the two-party preferred percentage of 53 per cent to 47 per cent would make the smarter members of the Liberal caucus shake with fear. The gap has been too wide for too long. This would suggest that the electorate has indeed stopped listening and the PM's position is probably terminal.

The Liberal caucus is a strange beast. The factional groupings come down to this: 20 per cent Right, 30 per cent moderate, and the rest cannot be pigeonholed. This makes kicking off a challenge a much harder task than it would be with Labor. Picking a winner would be well-nigh impossible but it appears that Julie Bishop, Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton would be the starters, with Bishop a nose in front when the gates are opened.

Of course, I expect Labor to win the next election. It is conventional wisdom to believe that governments lose elections rather than oppositions winning them. While that may be true, the opposition and its leader must remain mistake-free for a very long time. The oft-maligned Bill Shorten has done a pretty good job apart from the 50 per cent renewable energy target, which he has in any event neutered by making it an aspiration rather than a policy. I suspect he has done well enough to collect the top job.

WE HAVE EMBOLDENED ASSAD TO UNLEASH NEW HORRORS

Syria's President is poised to finish this war on his terms

DARA CONDUIT

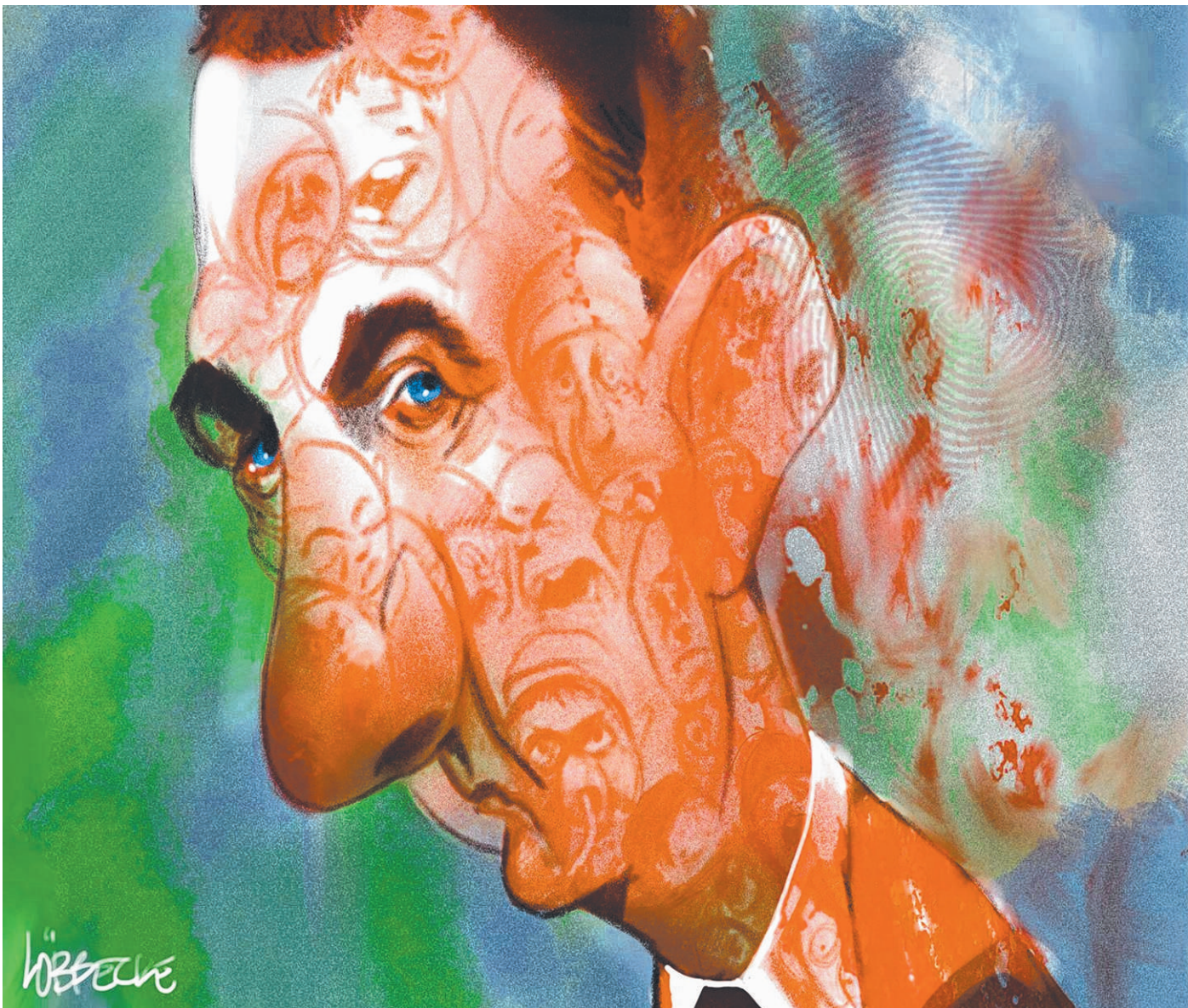
The world watched in horror this week as the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Syria's Idlib province unfolded, killing dozens of civilians. As the wounded lay waiting for assistance in the province's few remaining hospitals, the Syrian regime played its next hand, bombarding one of the medical facilities still left to treat the injured.

Such attacks have become all too common in Syria. Since 2011, President Bashar al-Assad has made mockery of the Geneva Convention, killing tens of thousands of civilians through chemical weapons use, besiegement and starvation, torture, forced disappearances and mass executions.

Hollow condemnation from the international community and threats of war crimes prosecutions did little to stem the tide of rights abuses, even when it looked like the regime's fall was imminent. US President Donald Trump has condemned the attack and threatened unilateral US action in Syria, although the opportunity has long passed for the US to take decisive action.

The regime's scorched-earth strategy has mostly served its purpose: Assad's position is today stronger than at any point in the conflict. His regime now controls all major population centres in western Syria. With the marginalisation of the moderate opposition and empowerment of jihadists, the tide of international opinion has also been rapidly turning in the regime's favour.

Just last month, the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, said it was time to "pick and choose your battles ... our priority is no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out". In fact, despite the brutality, Assad has increasingly been seen as Syria's least-worst



option, representing an opportunity for an expedient end to the conflict along the lines of "better the devil you know". The incentives for restraint decline with every step that the regime takes towards its pyrrhic victory.

The Khan Sheikhoun attack underscores that Syria's least-worst option is no recipe for peace. The softening of international opinion and the thrill of victory will give Assad the green light to continue his crusade. Indeed, Assad is now one of the great sur-

vivors of Arab politics, having weathered the uprisings that felled his counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as six years of internecine civil war. If the depletion of the Syrian Arab Army, the death of almost 500,000 citizens and the regime's near-defeat at the hands of an opposition backed by the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar did not convince Damascus of the need for restraint, victory surely will not.

The Khan Sheikhoun attack was anything but the last gasp of

an ailing regime. It was a signal of defiance that showed the world that Assad fears no one.

Assad's empowerment represents a dangerous trend, given that the war is not yet over. The regime may have wrested back control of Aleppo City in December, but anti-government forces still control all of Idlib province, and pockets of Hama, Aleppo, Damascus and Deraa provinces. Almost two million civilians live in opposition-controlled Idlib province alone. Assad pledged last June to "liber-

ate every inch of Syria" and he has little reason to reassess this goal. Having repeatedly called the international community's bluff on international norms, the final chapter of the regime's war is now under way. Emboldened by a compliant international community and the smell of victory, Assad will continue his campaign, whatever the cost.

Although the scale of the Khan Sheikhoun attack finally attracted Trump's attention, the international community has few cards

left to play in the conflict. Any decisive military options disappeared when the Russian Air Force entered the conflict in September 2015, and the Syrian opposition is today in bad shape.

Any attempt to rebuild the opposition to unseat Assad would take significant resources, time, and perhaps a miracle. Time is certainly not on the international community's side. Having outfoxed its opponents, the Syrian regime feels sure-footed and is not in the mood to be lectured. In fact, Syria's Central Bank governor Adib Mayaleh said in an interview

The international community has few cards left to play in the conflict

in February that the EU, which has been a consistent critic of the regime, would be permitted to play no role in Syrian reconstruction unless it apologised to the government. In short: the international assistance that Syria so desperately needs for reconstruction will only be accepted without strings. That Syria feels in a position to make such demands, despite its record of abuses and economic devastation, speaks volumes about the regime's confidence. Indeed, the international community has been rendered a mere onlooker, and unless it acts now, it will be forced to look on as an emboldened, brutal Assad finishes this war on his own terms.

The tragedy of Khan Sheikhoun therefore extends well beyond its immediate victims, setting a bleak precedent for millions of others. The events represented not a much-needed watershed moment in the conflict that would lead to peace, but a sign of the tragedy that is still to unfold.

Dara Conduit is an associate research fellow at the Middle East Studies Forum at Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation.

SUPREMELY CONFIDENT LABOR JUST SKATING OVER THE TRUTH

Unchallenged Treasury spokesman gives a hint of how the Shorten team might rule

DAVID CROWE

POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT



Chris Bowen offered an expert display of political messaging this week when he tore into Scott Morrison over company tax cuts. The Labor Treasury spokesman had the perfect argument to throw the government on the back foot over a Senate deal that is meant to be an economic masterstroke.

What the Treasurer portrayed as a mountain, Bowen called a molehill. Both were playing tricks with perspective but the Labor frontbencher showed more skill with the painbruster. The way he dismissed the company tax cuts is a lesson for all.

"We know that the benefit from the government's own figures of the full \$50 billion package was 1 per cent increase in the size of the economy in 20 years' time and \$2 a day wage increase in 20 years' time," Bowen said.

"The impact of the smaller

package which the government managed to pass will be much smaller than that — you will need a microscope to find the economic dividend."

Short, sharp and lethal. Bowen not only ridiculed the economic gains but issued a challenge to Morrison to reveal the truth. He called on the government to produce the Treasury modelling to prove the benefits from last Friday's agreement to cut company tax rates for employers with up to \$50 million in annual turnover.

The government now looks evasive. It has no incentive to model half its policy when it is determined (after a display of nerves a few weeks ago) to stick to the full plan.

For all its chest-thumping, the awkward reality is that its Senate victory does not do enough for the economy. If there is one thing economists agree on, it is that the big gains come from the big companies that make the biggest investments.

But that doesn't make Bowen right. What matters most is whether the total reform package — a cut in the company tax rate

from 30c to 25c in the dollar for all companies over 10 years — gives the economy a boost. Is it worth voting for at the next election?

This remains the big policy contrast between Morrison and Bowen on economic growth, and it is why the Labor spin needs to be questioned.

Bowen's most devastating line was to contrast the \$50bn cost with the \$2 gain. He made the return look pathetic — until you consider what the numbers mean across the economy.

Independent Economics director Chris Murphy, who advised Treasury on the reforms, rightly says the 10-year hit to revenue should be compared with the 10-year gain in wages.

How does this add up? The \$2 wage increase is based on Treasury modelling that shows a full-time worker on average wages would be \$750 better off every year because their employer would do better. That is \$7500 over 10 years. It is not so easy to dismiss when put that way.

Australia has about eight million full-time workers. Bowen may think \$2 a day is a measly dividend but it works out as \$60bn over a decade when all those workers pool their gains. This does not include the part-time and casual workers who will also benefit.

This goes back to a detailed Treasury paper from last May concluding that the full tax reform will lift real wages for all workers by 1.1

per cent — a small fraction, once again, but a fraction that means big money when workers receive \$722bn a year across the economy.

The timing is another matter. Just as the hit to revenue starts small and builds up over time, the economic growth is slow to show up. The entire reform only sacrifices \$680m in tax revenue this year, so it is hardly an economic bonanza in the short term. Even so, Bowen spins too fast and too hard to suggest the growth takes 20 years to arrive.

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Treasury assumes a much faster dividend than that. So does Murphy, who says the gains "develop gradually" but do not wait until 2037. This is borne out elsewhere. Treasury modellers in Britain estimated in 2013 that about half the economic gains from their cut (from 30 to 28 per cent) came in the first five years.

This is what Labor used to believe. Bowen once argued the economic gains made company tax cuts worth pursuing. Bill Shorten said the same. Wayne Swan said this when producing Treasury

analysis in 2010 that used the same assumptions applied today.

While Labor now says the time is wrong for more tax cuts, it is in no position to rubbish the dividends.

University of Melbourne professor John Freebairn and Griffith University associate professor Brett Freudenberg say there will be an economic gain from the deal struck last Friday. Grattan Institute economist Jim Minifie estimates a 0.2 per cent increase in national income — a piddling amount as a percentage, but worth about \$3bn a year.

To compare apples with apples once again, that means \$30bn more for all Australians over a decade from the half-a-policy tax cut costing \$24bn over 10 years. Minifie says the gains start before the first 10 years are up. These are only estimates, like the Treasury figures, but they are essential to weighing up the costs and benefits.

Labor has made some bold calls from opposition. Bowen has led the debate on superannuation taxes, negative gearing and capital gains tax, tempting Morrison to follow him on each policy. Yet he is much weaker on tax policy because he argues so vigorously against his own opinions from just a few years ago.

He may rule out a tax cut, but how else does he plan to give the economy a jolt? How else will he lift salaries other than by mandating the minimum wage?

Bowen delivered some of the sharpest political lines of the past week — a masterclass, if you like, in how to convince average workers that a \$60bn boost to their wages over 10 years is actually worthless. He was too glib for his own good. He did ordinary workers no favours.

This is a Labor problem right now. Supremely confident in their media skills, its spokesmen skate over the truth in the sure knowledge they will not get caught.

Ten years ago, Peter Costello would have pounced on loose language from a Labor shadow treasurer. His press secretary would have printed an A4 fact-sheet within hours to put the Treasury side of the story to the press gallery. That did not happen this week.

Morrison may want to check whether it happens at all.

Labor advisers have a predictable defence: "We're not the government." Yes, governments usually warrant more scrutiny than oppositions, and there is no shortage of attention on Morrison right now. But if the polls are any guide, Bowen will be the treasurer in a Labor government soon enough.

That is why this week is a lesson to everyone. The Labor tactics hint at how it might run things if and when it takes charge: as a slick and superficial government, quick with a soundbite but slow with a solution.