MICHAEL CORRY'S LETTER TO THE IRISH TIMES 19 MAY 2005

Madam,

The skewed view of evidence referred to by Mary Raftery at the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Irish Times, 12 May) pales in significance compared to the activities of the Residential Institutions Redress Board. A place of secrecy, exclusion and bewilderment.

I have given evidence to the board on three occasions on behalf of three patients, all victims of layers of abuse, in particular sexual. Two of these have been under my care for over 10 years. All will bring their pain and suffering to the grave.

I was not allowed to be present when they gave their evidence, nor indeed were their partners, a friend, an advocate, no one of personal significance.

They were alone. Alone in attempting to articulate their exposure to regimes of unbridled rape and violence, which lasted for years, at the hands of sadistic, sexual perverts answerable to no one. Alone in telling about how their chance of a normal life was diminished from the beginning. About how they learned to place no value on themselves, and with their lives totally derailed following their release at 16 years old, drifted from one crisis to another for the rest of their lives.

One patient was left alone, on the verge of a panic attack due to the intensity of his fear, to tell the board of a past littered with criminal behaviour, prison records, substance misuse, dysfunctional relationships, mistrust of authority, and family breakdown.

I found the discomfort of waiting in a side room to give evidence, aware of my patients' fears and worries, unbearable. They dreaded getting a panic attack, a flashback to an incident of abuse, a rush of uncontrollable anger that would alienate the chairman and jeopardise the outcome.

In giving my sworn evidence I felt under time pressure, and worse, that I was an unwelcome irritation slowing down the proceedings. An atmosphere of minimisation prevailed. It was impossible to present a complete picture.

The "board" consisted solely of a judge and a medical doctor. On two occasions that doctor, having had no experience of working with traumatised or abused children, let alone a qualification in psychiatry, was nonetheless there for the purpose of contributing to a judgment on the compensation deemed appropriate for each victim

Not being a court, it is held in secret, away from the eyes of the community, and no perpetrator of a crime is ever sentenced to a punishment.

No apologies can be offered as no one is there representing the religious orders responsible. Justice for the victim is not the purpose, only financial compensation, which is capped to a maximum of €300,000. (To date the average award paid out to 2,555 victims has been €78,000.)

The award is conditional on them signing a secrecy agreement and a waiver on taking further legal action. If the victims disclose the amount they were awarded or discuss the facts of their case in public, they face criminalisation.

The wronged now accused of a crime! They can be fined up to €3,000 and can face a summary jail sentence of six months. After a second disclosure, they face a fine not exceeding €25,000 and a two-year jail sentence. Why the secrecy? It's certainly not for the benefit of the victim. There is emerging evidence that the Redress Board re-traumatises victims.

One patient of mine used this analogy. "An adult, man or woman, abuses a child. It is their 'secret'. To make sure the 'secret' is kept the adult will give the child money or sweets. They buy silence. By making secrecy a condition upon payment, the board is doing exactly what an abuser does to a child."

The elements of restorative justice which are required for the restitution of balance and healing are transparency instead of secrecy, formal apologies, the punishment of the wrongdoers, and supreme efforts to compensate for damage done.

The Redress Board embodies none of these. Its role makes a mockery of the legal system, and of the Goddess Themis, whose scales are the symbols of Right and Justice. It is my firm belief that the Redress Board contravenes the most basic of human and civil rights. In short, it represents a crime against humanity.

It should be abolished immediately and replaced by an open forum where the victim is not only properly monetarily compensated, but where they can have their perpetrators named, and the scales of justice balanced.

Yours, etc,
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