

NATIONAL REDRESS SCHEME — BRONTE GLASS

Statement

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [6.21 pm]: I rise to bring to the attention of government, members and the public an appalling set of circumstances involving Ms Bronte Glass, who joins us in the public gallery tonight. Bronte is a survivor of that most unimaginable and heinous of crimes—child sexual abuse. I have read the very detailed and incredibly disturbing documentation that Bronte provided to me. It was incredibly disturbing and very, very difficult to read. I cannot imagine what she and other survivors have been through and how challenging it is for them to come forward and relive some of those awful and dark times.

Members may wonder why I am talking about Bronte's story here today. These events occurred many years ago, in the 1970s and 1980s; a period during which Bronte was a ward of the state. They are not recent occurrences, but they are a part of Bronte's life and, sadly, as for many other survivors, it is a similar story of abuse, neglect and systemic failures of multiple agencies. I am not here to talk about the failures that led to the abuse that Bronte suffered, but to the failures of those agencies to adequately address those problems through the Redress process. I want to talk more specifically about the appalling and disgraceful failure of current government agencies in relation to Bronte's case.

To do that, I will provide an overview of her situation. I am sure members will agree that what has happened to Bronte on her journey through the Redress scheme should not happen to anyone. I speak on this issue today so that others do not have to endure the disgraceful treatment Bronte has had to endure in the past year or so. Bronte participated in the government's Redress WA scheme and was awarded an ex gratia payment through that process. This was acknowledged in a letter from the Premier at the time, Colin Barnett. Subsequent to this process, the National Redress Scheme was established and Bronte made an application to that scheme in 2019. I will not read through that application. As I said, the details in it are harrowing. They were unimaginable abuses that no-one should have to suffer and something that I certainly cannot comprehend.

Bronte's application to the National Redress Scheme was successful. On 4 May 2020, she was advised of an offer from the Redress scheme and the letter gave her several options. The letter to Bronte stated, in part —

There are three ways in which you can respond to this offer, as follows:

1. You can accept one, two or all three parts of the offer;
2. You can ask for a review of the offer; or
3. You can decline the offer.

You must notify the Scheme by **6 October 2020** of your decision.

Bronte subsequently accepted all three parts of the offer. Those components were set out in a letter to Bronte on 14 April, which states —

Your offer of redress is:

- a redress payment of ... as acknowledgement of the wrong you experienced
- access to a counselling and psychological payment of ...
- access to a direct personal response on behalf of the Department of Communities

You can accept one, two or all three of the components of redress.

Bronte accepted all three components of the Redress offer. It is the third component that I want to focus my remarks on tonight, and that is "access to a direct personal response on behalf of the Department of Communities". In relation to this, Bronte requested a written and verbal apology from the Department of Communities. I have here a very detailed document that Bronte has provided to me. Unfortunately, it is a letter of complaint to the National Redress Scheme about the failures of the various agencies to deliver that direct personal response appropriately. I will outline some of the key aspects of the time line. I will not read everything that is in this document, obviously. I want to go through some of the key issues.

On 21 October 2020, Bronte received a phone call from a staffer at the Office of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime within the Department of Justice. The time line states —

- When I applied for the National Redress Scheme, I requested a written and verbal apology from the Department of Community Services Western Australia.
- On the 21st of October 2020 ... from the Office of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime ... called me and arranged a time to deliver my apology.

On 9 November 2020 a meeting was set up, at which, apparently, that apology would be delivered. During this meeting, one of the staff members there was quite invasive in asking questions about Bronte's application and for the details of that application, which was not obviously the point of this particular meeting. Bronte had to basically relive her story of abuse, which is unacceptable. At one point, this person also said, "You should be happy with your Redress money." That is not acceptable. This is not, and never has been, about money; it was about a reasonable apology and response from the appropriate department.

The other issue of course is that it was the Department of Justice that Bronte was sitting in front of. She was advised by a staffer at this office that "written apologies are just generic letters stamped by the Department of Justice and they are not from the institution responsible for the abuse". It was at that point Bronte realised she was not actually going to get an apology from the Department of Communities despite that being what she requested and accepted. Obviously that has had a profound impact on Bronte since then. Bronte has had to endure a number of other issues throughout this process that have still not been resolved. In the end, Bronte sought support from Relationships Australia to move forward with this complaint process.

I want to go through some of the impacts that Bronte has provided to me. Part of the time line states —

- The way I was treated by VOC has re-traumatised me. What I went through is more than I've been through in 20 years, and I can't stop thinking about the way I was treated. It's always in my head.
- I had no choice or power to make decisions. I was continually ignored when I raised concerns about the conduct of VOC staff, and my voice was silenced.
- It's really made me feel helpless. It's like I've been raped all over again. No one cared.
- I thought I was done with fighting for my right to be heard and for the abuse to be acknowledged. But instead, I got caught in a web between these people.
- I shouldn't have to fight to be treated with respect, and I shouldn't have to fight for my apology.
- ...
- If any of the old people that go through Redress have to put up with this, it will kill them.
- I don't want anybody to go through what I experienced.
- I just want people to be accountable for their actions.

I do not think that is too much to ask for. I do not think it is too much to ask that these departments deliver a direct personal response and an apology with empathy, and that they are provided with appropriately trained and skilled staff in order to do that. It is an indictment on those departments, and ultimately their ministers, that such a profoundly important process as this appears to be nothing more than a box-ticking exercise, with no genuine concern for what survivors have been through.

I will not name the two people in that department—I could, but I do not think that is fair. The Minister for Community Services would be well aware of the people involved in this particular case. What I would like to see on behalf of Bronte is that the relevant ministers, the Attorney General, and the Minister for Community Services in particular, hear from Bronte to understand what she has been through, and fix the mess so that no-one else will have to go through this. No-one should have to go through what Bronte has been through. I call on those ministers to meet with Bronte as soon as possible to address the issues she has raised and make sure that the direct personal response process is fit for purpose and that the right people are delivering those direct personal responses.