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IN VICTORIA. ANOTHER FORGOTTEN GENERATION IN THE MAKING

A national apology may one day be due to the children of today

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ONLY two weeks ago, the Prime Minister apologised to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants for what he described as an “ugly chapter” in our nation’s history. He said sorry several times, for the physical suffering, the injustices, and “the absolute tragedy of childhoods lost”.

In a ceremony that reduced many to tears, Kevin Rudd resolved that this overdue apology should be a “turning point in our nation’s story”.

Exactly 10 days later, the Victorian ombudsman described another “ugly chapter”: the disturbing and deeply ironic failures of that state’s child protection system. “The cases that shame us all” was the headline across two pages of the *Herald Sun*. Some of the children already had their own headlines: “The little girl we failed” and “Why wasn’t she saved?”

Some of the case studies in the report defy belief. The ombudsman described the Victorian department’s failure to intervene when it was reported that two children were living with their grandfather, “a convicted sex offender”. It took 18 days to refer this to front-line child protection workers, who in turn took no immediate action. The children were eventually found with the sex offender 48 days after the first referral. The ombudsman states there were several such cases, but he has not “included their details, as the facts are too disturbing”.

The ombudsman found evidence that many other children did not receive a “timely response”. Other children who were abused received no response at all, with almost a quarter of all cases unallocated. The regional variations are staggering: in Gippsland there were more unallocated than allocated cases, with almost 60 per cent having no child protection

worker. Even this figure, the report states, “under represents the true number” because cases unallocated for fewer than four days are not included.

Even the definition of child abuse varies according to where the child lives, with one doctor reporting that in some parts of the state the response will be that “we’re not considering bruising to be particularly worrying” any more. The result, the ombudsman reports, is a “system focused on case closure rather than the best interests of the children”.

He states that “it is not defensible” that risk to a child is “based on geographic location”.

This report takes us beyond departmental neglect and carelessness into a world where children are abused by the very system designed to protect them. A senior worker told the ombudsman that data is manipulated to make it appear that a child has been seen when all that really happened was a telephone call to the family.

Deep in the report, there are stories of the silencing of professionals, the death of advocacy. One member of a community service organisation described it as “a totally unaccountable system”.

Even the responses to the death of a child were deeply flawed: “possibly” 12 children known to child protection and “believed to have been victims of homicide” were not subject to child death reviews. Some of the department’s own staff reported that the reviews that took place were of “little value”. Opportunities to learn from cases where children “come close to death” are also lost, according to the report.

The ombudsman repeatedly exposes the lack of transparency and public accountability that we identified a year ago in *The Australian* (November 18, 2008).

Child abuse, as we wrote, requires secrecy. It is ironic that child protection services also conspire to hide their failures.

There are many further ironies. On the same day as the ombudsman’s report was made public, the Child Safety Commissioner announced that he had completed

his report into the death of Hayley, who “tragically died from head injuries”. Barely three pages long, the announcement makes no mention of her age, or how she died, because he was merely asked to provide a “systems report”. Nevertheless, a “\$77 million government funding boost” is mentioned five times.

Coincidentally, the next day, the minister issued eight media releases, all mentioning the increased budget, called a “\$77.2 million child protection workforce plan”. It is difficult to imagine a clearer demonstration of the inadequacy of the reviews of child deaths and the limited role of the commissioner. The ombudsman’s report stresses that additional resources alone will never be sufficient.

Rudd apologised two weeks ago to adults who were traumatised and silenced as children. Careless adults had re-worked the language so that children could be placed in orphanages even though they had parents, and in homes akin to prisons, in the hands of abusive strangers. Children were lost in a system lacking transparency and accountability.

At the very time he apologised, it is clear there were hundreds if not thousands of children being traumatised and silenced, whose abuse and neglect did not merit the attention of child protection workers, and whose severity of bruising depended on the location of the child rather than the location of the bruises.

The protection of children, the Prime Minister said, is “the sacred duty of us all”. Unfortunately, as the Victorian ombudsman has shown, it is a duty that governments still fail to fulfil. When they become adults, will today’s children receive an apology for their childhoods lost?

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