

EXTRACT FROM *CARDINAL PELL, THE MEDIA-PILE ON & COLLECTIVE GUILT* (CONNOR COURT, 2021) BY GERARD HENDERSON
Pages 350-352

Cardinal Pell's "It Wasn't of Much Interest" Moment

George Pell stumbled only once during his four days (it was late night and early morning in Rome) in the witness box on the occasion of his third – and final – appearance before the Royal Commission. Pell's comment that Ridsdale's offending "wasn't of much interest" has been used against him. However, reference to the transcript indicates that Pell's statement was not what his critics made it out to be.

Let's go to the transcript where Gail Furness is cross-examining Pell about Ridsdale's offending when parish priest at Inglewood in 1975 – and whether Pell was aware of this some two decades later. The exchange took place on 1 March 2016 – Pell's second day in the witness box:

Gail Furness: Is it the case in 1993, or after that year, you understood that he [Ridsdale] had been committing offences for which he was now convicted and sentenced – is that what you understood in 1993 or thereafter?

George Pell: I did.

Gail Furness: That's a different question from the one I asked you, Cardinal. It was whether you had knowledge that it was common knowledge at Inglewood at that time.

George Pell: I did not know that it was common knowledge at Inglewood at that time because, if I'd known that, I would have known that there were offences. *Gail Furness:* Did you subsequently –

George Pell: Possible offences.

Gail Furness: Did you subsequently know not that he offended at Inglewood – leave that to one side – but that it was common knowledge of his interfering with children at Inglewood?

George Pell: I - I couldn't say that I ever knew that everyone knew. I knew a number of people did. I was – I didn't know whether it was common knowledge or whether it wasn't. It's a sad story and it wasn't of much interest to me.

Gail Furness: What wasn't of much interest to you, Cardinal?

George Pell: The suffering, of course, was real and I very much regret that, but I had no reason to turn my mind to the extent of the evils that Ridsdale had perpetrated....

Pell has told me that he had intended to say that the “prurient details” of Ridsdale’s crimes was something he did not want to focus on. But he didn’t say this – and the comment was misinterpreted. Moreover, Pell’s critics in this instance overlooked the time frame involved.

As the transcript demonstrates, Furness asked Pell what he knew “in 1993 or thereafter” about Ridsdale’s offending in 1975 in Inglewood. In 1975 Pell, as a relatively junior priest of the Ballarat diocese, had no authority over Ridsdale.

On this occasion, Pell’s language was loose. What he intended to say was that, when an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne in 1993, he had no reason to focus on the details of the crimes of a Ballarat priest in Inglewood in 1975, over whom he was never in a position of authority.

On Thursday 3 March 2016, Pell’s last day in the Royal Commission witness box, he was asked about his comment of two days earlier. The response was as follows:

Gail Furness: You said on Tuesday...that Father Ridsdale interfering with children at Inglewood was “a sad story and it wasn’t of much interest to me”. Do you remember saying that?”

George Pell: I remember messing up this sequence completely. I regret the choice of words. I was very confused, I responded poorly. Just previous to this exchange, we were talking about ’93-’94. Then it swung over to the incidents in ’74-’75. It was badly expressed. I – in ’93 I was a Melbourne official considering something that happened in Inglewood. I have never enjoyed reading the accounts of these sufferings and I tried to do that only when it was professionally and absolutely appropriate, because the behaviour is abhorrent and painful to read about.

In its final report, the Royal Commission made no adverse findings with respect to Pell’s comment cited above – but it has been used frequently by his critics, including Louise Milligan.