

Philip Dalidakis MP

Member of the Victorian Legislative Council for Southern Metropolitan



"I am passionate about providing **opportunity for all** and ensuring that our society provides not just a safety net but a **springboard to life.**"

Royal Commission into Family Violence

By: Online Form

28 May 2015

Dear Commissioners

SUBMISSION SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION, VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT

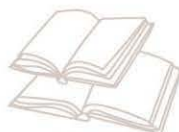
I welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. This is an important initiative of the Andrews Labor Government and its creation fulfils a commitment given by the then Opposition Leader, Daniel Andrews, in May 2014.

Members of the Victorian Parliament, of all parties, should be taking a close interest in the work of the Royal Commission, and particularly in its recommendations. This is because it will fall to us to turn those recommendations, insofar as they deal with matters of state law, into legislation, and to see that legislation effectively implemented.

Parliamentarians Against Family Violence was launched at the federal level following an initiative by Tim Watts, MHR for Gellibrand, in October 2014. Shortly after my election to Parliament I initiated a similar group in the Victorian Parliament, co-chaired by myself and Mr Murray Thompson MLA. Victorian Parliamentarians Against Family Violence will be working to raise awareness of this issue among our colleagues and in our electorates, now and beyond the Royal Commission, to support the work of the



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Royal Commission, and to build bipartisan support for implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission through legislation.

My concern about this issue has been heightened by the recent release of the NSW Coroner's Court report on deaths due to family violence. This report found that 75% of all child homicides, 48% of all adult female homicides, and 17% of all adult male homicides in NSW are the result of family violence. In the ten years 2000 to 2010, 108 women in NSW were killed by their current or former male intimate partner. In the same period, 53 children were killed by a parent, half of the victims being aged under two years. In nearly all such cases, the child was killed by a father who was also a perpetrator of family violence, or a mother who was a victim of family violence. These deaths represent, of course, only the tip of a very large iceberg of family violence.

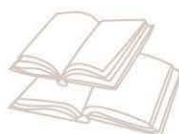
As the Commission is no doubt aware, in 2011 the Council of Australian Governments, on an initiative of the then federal government, launched a "National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children." The plan included a "Three-Year Action Plan."

This was a commendable initiative. But I felt then, and I feel even more strongly in retrospect, that while the plan was strong on describing the problem and on setting aspirational goals, it was weak on describing specific policy steps to turn those goals into realities. Possibly this was the unavoidable outcome of a process designed to produce a document that would meet the approval of nine Australian governments.

I hope the Royal Commission, which is under no obligation to produce recommendations pleasing to one government, let alone nine, will be able to avoid repeating this mistake. We do not need more



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descriptions of the problem, more statements of good intentions, or more aspirational goals without clear pathways for attaining them.

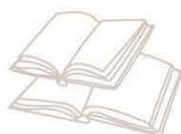
As a Parliamentarian, I would like to see the Royal Commission show boldness, determination and courage in identifying the factors that have led to the rising incidence of family violence in our communities. I would then like to see the Royal Commission make clear, concise and specific recommendations for legislative and administrative changes that will address the problem.

I would also like to see the Royal Commission focus primarily on a strategy for *preventing* family violence, rather than on the question of *responses to* family violence. I don't doubt that there are many matters relating to the legal and law enforcement response to family violence or to the provision of services to those who have suffered from family violence which the Royal Commission will choose to investigate and make recommendations on. But just as we would not need to build new hospitals if we were better at preventing preventable illnesses, so we would not need to invest in services to respond to family violence if we were better at preventing it.

The NSW Coroner's Court report makes it clear that a key element of prevention must be encouraging reporting by family members. The report says: "in every case of intimate partner homicide someone outside the relationship was aware of the abuse. To be clear, this was usually not that the abuse had been reported by the victim, but that friends or family had seen clear signs of violence – bruises, bleeding and other injuries." It is evident that if those who were aware of these situations had reported them, and if those reports had been acted on, many lives could have been saved.



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I hope the Royal Commission will begin by having a really thorough investigation into the causes of family violence and of the increase in its incidence, giving a hearing to every point of view, starting with no preconceptions, and respecting nobody's sacred cows.

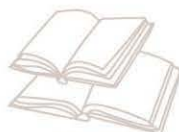
Families do not exist in a vacuum. They are part of a wider society and wider economy. Changes in Australian families, and in patterns of behaviour within them, reflect the very deep and far-reaching changes in Australian society over the past 50 years. These include changes in relations between the genders, in Australia's social and ethnic makeup, in women's participation in the workforce, in family law, in attitudes to marriage, divorce and child-rearing, in the theory and practice of education, in religious belief and observance, in laws relating to alcohol, drugs, gambling and pornography, in the treatment of and attitudes to mental illness, in the depiction of violence in mass media, and no doubt in many other areas, including the recent rise of social media and its powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour.

All these factors should be considered, and those who have expertise in these fields should be encouraged to contribute to the Royal Commission's work. Those who have strong opinions on these subjects should be given an opportunity to express them.

It is true to say that, since most family violence is perpetrated by men, the solution must be for men to take responsibility for their own (and each other's) behaviour. However, it can only be part of the solution. Men are themselves the products of families, of a process of socialisation, of the education system, of the beliefs and attitudes of the society in which they live.



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There is a large body of research on the social and economic factors that create an increased likelihood of family violence. According to this research (mostly from the United States), family violence is heavily concentrated among young, non-White, low-income and low-education families, particularly where there is alcohol and drug abuse and a history of mental illness. All these factors are mutually reinforcing and tend to be self-replicating within families over generations.

It would seem to follow from this that if the incidence of family violence in Victoria is increasing, it is mainly because the social and economic factors that predispose individuals and families to family violence are themselves increasing – that increased family violence is the product of growing income inequality, of lack of opportunity for social advancement, of dysfunctional schools, of increased drug and alcohol use and/or of increased untreated mental illness.

The NSW Coroner's Court report observes:

"What makes this report so terribly distressing is not the numbers, as shocking as they are. It's the case studies. They are a litany of intergenerational violence, substance abuse, mental health issues and trauma inflicted on so many people beyond just the one who was killed. Over and over again you see the pattern of women subjected not just to violence, but also financial abuse, enforced isolation, stalking, having their phones and emails and bank accounts constantly monitored and restricted. And too many children frightened and helpless in the face of violence committed by and against people they love."

I think it is simplistic, however, to see the issue of family violence purely as a socio-economic one, and still less as an ethnic one. There is plenty of evidence that family violence occur in families of every ethnicity and income level, and that the perpetrators are not all young, poor or socially disadvantaged.



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It may well be that upper-income families are more likely to conceal family violence, whereas violence in lower-income families is more likely to be public and visible. I hope the Royal Commission will keep an open mind on this question and investigate the incidence of family violence in middle and upper-income families.

Whatever view one takes on the causes of family violence, it is insufficient, in my view, to pose the issue simply as one of personal responsibility, important though that certainly is. Family violence is not solely the product of moral failure by individual men. It is the product of social failure: the failure to translate rising overall prosperity into a society which offers prosperity, opportunity and security to all its members. It is also a failure of our education system and media to establish respect for women and abhorrence of personal violence as core values in our society.

I and my fellow members of the Victorian Parliament stand ready to assist the work of the Royal Commission in any way we can. We look forward to seeing the Royal Commission's findings and its specific recommendations, which we can then translate into effective legislation.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Philip Dalidakis MP

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Co-chair, Victorian Parliamentarians Against Family Violence



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