

Inquiry into the Conditions at Weeroona Girls' Home, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania

1965 – 1965

Details

The Public Service Commissioner's Inquiry into the Conditions at Weeroona Girls' Home took place in 1965. It concerned 14 allegations against the Principal. The Commissioner upheld eight. Following an appeal, five more were dropped. The Principal was transferred to a clerical position in the Housing Department.

The Chief Secretary, Brian Miller, ordered the Inquiry on 3 July after Kevin Lyons, MHA for Braddon, reported 14 allegations made by two staff members against the Principal of Weeroona. Lyons released the allegations to the press on 13 July. It generated considerable interest. The Public Service Commissioner, JH Jillett, conducted the Inquiry. His report was tabled in Parliament on 7 September 1965. It upheld eight of the allegations. The Principal appealed the findings and the Public Service Appeals Board, dropped a further five. However, it supported the Public Service Commissioner's finding that the Principal was 'temperamentally unsuited' to his job. That is why he was moved.

One of the allegations concerned the overuse of the secure unit. The Public Service Appeals Board partially upheld it in that they believed that the conditions were 'improper' and 'unsatisfactory' but that the Principal had not overused the unit. Yet Jillett had found that one girl spent most of four months there, including one month in solitary confinement. Other girls stayed there for up to seven days with only bread, butter, and water for meals. They had nothing to do, inadequate toilet facilities, and almost no daily exercise.

The Board upheld two other allegations. These were the Principal's use of improper language when speaking to the girls and his visits to their dormitories at night without a female member of staff.

To address the situation, in addition to the Principal's transfer to a clerical position, the Public Service Commissioner recommended establishing a visiting committee and implementing the standing orders for the secure unit.

Tension at Weeroona during the investigation became so severe that discipline broke down and it had to be closed temporarily while the Director of the Social Welfare Department looked for new staff.

Meanwhile, Lyons received fresh allegations about Weeroona, many of them predating the Principal's appointment. Most of them related to the secure unit and included extensive use of solitary confinement, sometimes without lighting, the taunting of girls by staff, beatings, physical weakness caused by the diet of bread, butter, and water, and orders to drug the girls to keep them quiet. One girl had set fire to her bedding and another had tried to hang herself. Lack of staff meant that the girls were often alone in solitary confinement, especially at night. Staff at the home who were concerned by the situation were afraid to come forward in case of reprisals, including the loss of their jobs.

Lyons pressed for a Board of Inquiry of three people chaired by a magistrate. Firstly, it would investigate the management of Weeroona since its opening. Secondly, it would consider the administration of the *Child Welfare Act*. In particular, Lyons believed that the Act had been breached because it stipulated that children under 16 could not be imprisoned. Lyons also believed that if Weeroona had been mismanaged, other homes run by the government probably were too.

Following a debate of 10 hours and 50 minutes, Lyons lost the motion by two votes.

On 4 November, alleging that the Director of Social Welfare, GC Smith, had misled Parliament over the use of the secure unit, he called successfully for a Select Committee. It reported on 24 November.

More info

Chronology

- **Inquiry into the Conditions at Weeroona Girls' Home, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania (1965 – 1965)**
 - Select Committee Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Tasmania (1965)

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania \(1973 - 1974\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Child Welfare Act 1960, Tasmania \(1960 - 2003\)](#)

Kevin Lyons, MHA, believed that the Child Welfare Act had been breached at Weeroona.

Related Organisations

- [Public Service Commissioner \(1918 - 1973\)](#)

The Public Service Commissioner produced the Report of the Public Service Commissioner into allegations concerning conditions and treatment of inmates at Weeroona Girls' Home and the decision and report of the Public Service Appeal Board (1965)
- [Public Service Appeals Board \(1958 - 1984\)](#)

The Report of the Public Service Commissioner into allegations concerning conditions and treatment of inmates at Weeroona Girls' Home and the decision and report of the Public Service Appeal Board includes a decision by the Public Service Appeals Board.
- [Weeroona Girls' Training Centre \(1959 - 1979\)](#)

The Report of the Public Service Commissioner concerned Weeroona Girls' Training Centre.

Resources

- Swain, Shurlee, [History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children](#), October 2014
- *Weeroona Inquiry: MHA urges statement to the public*, The Mercury, 15 July 1965
- *Girls' home allegations: complete statement promised*, The Mercury, 16 July 1965
- *Information on home*, The Mercury, 17 July 1965
- *Budget and Weeroona mean political fireworks*, The Mercury, 28 August 1965
- *Weeroona closed at present*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *Weeroona Home reports: excisions made in interest of public and girls involved*, The Mercury, 8 September 1965
- *Weeroona - crimes against society - Mr Lyons*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Support for appeal for a full inquiry*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965
- *Mr Fagan's view: two sides to character*, The Mercury, 1 October 1965

- *It was tactics and a Bible*, The Mercury, 2 October 1965
 - *Weeroona secure units report this week*, The Mercury, 23 November 1965
 - *Minister made 'honest error on Weeroona'*, The Mercury, 24 November 1965
 - *Weeroona Girls Home - accuracy and/or veracity of answer to question asked in the House of Assembly*, 1965
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