

Investigation into Ashley Home for Boys, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania

1951 – 1951

Details

The Public Service Commissioner's Investigation into Ashley Home for Boys began on 16 October 1951. The government had established it to investigate allegations against Ashley made by its former recreation officer. The Public Service Commissioner reported on 30 October 1951.

Following the recommendation of the Inquiry into the Control and Management of Ashley Boys Home (1951), the government appointed Mr James WHC Klein as a counsellor at Ashley on 16 April 1951. Klein was a Dutch migrant, former newspaper editor, and member of the Dutch Resistance during World War Two. His exact job description is not clear but an important part of it was to organise recreation for the boys. On 16 September, he resigned so that he could make allegations against Ashley to the press, stating that he hoped that would improve conditions there. He had to resign because, as a public servant, he could not make allegations against the Home. Klein made seven allegations in all. He justified his action by stating that Ashley was:

50 years behind the times to Australian as well as to European standards...I feel strongly that a stranger should not criticize a government institution of this state, but I feel it is still more strongly as my duty on behalf of the young human beings concerned to publish some facts about Ashley Home for Boys at Deloraine.

One of Klein's claims was that boys were held in solitary confinement in unfurnished cells. At the weekend they could be in solitary confinement for 48 hours with only a short period of exercise.

Klein believed that Ashley offered little in the way of rehabilitation. The staff had no training. Recreation time was wasted with the boys just going to bed if there was nothing to do. In addition, the staff did not keep case histories. Klein wrote:

There are no case histories at the disposal of Ashley Home. Names, ages, denominations, the cases for which the boys were committed, etc are known: but there are no reports giving sufficient information on the past, or on the (mostly shocking) home conditions of the boys.

So the very material which is essential for an insight into the boys' psychological structure, which should be the basis for an effective individual and group readjustment treatment, is missing.

Klein also said that boys were not committed to Ashley for a set limit of time. If they could not be returned home because of problems there, they just stayed at Ashley.

During the short time that Klein was at Ashley, thirteen of the 50 boys there, aged between 10 and 18, ran away. He wrote: 'If even little children run away on dark, cold nights, without overcoats, without food, without money, they cannot be too happy!'

The Attorney-General, Roy Fagan (a member of the Inquiry into the Control and Management of Ashley) claimed that Klein's allegations could not be believed because he made them in 'a fit of pique' when he wanted to change the conditions of his position and was not allowed to do so. In particular, Klein had wanted to keep case histories of the boys. Fagan's claim caused a protest from a group of clergy known as the Deloraine Ministers' Fraternal, who visited boys in cells at Ashley. Mr JE Pedley, a Deloraine resident, wrote a letter to the Launceston *Examiner* that also supported Klein:

One has only to talk to Ashley boys and hear the praise they have for the help given them in the few weeks that Mr Klein was there to appreciate the decency of the man.

In addition to Klein's allegations, Pedley claimed that the Chief Secretary still allowed 'floggings' at Ashley as long as another official witnessed them.

The government gave in and asked the Public Service Commissioner, Mr BJ Thompson, to conduct an inquiry. It began on 16 October 1951 with hearings held at Ashley and in Launceston. Klein, one of the members of the Deloraine Ministers Fraternal, the Superintendent of Ashley, and members of staff gave evidence. Pedley did not come forward. The hearings were closed to the public. Thompson only investigated the allegations that boys were locked in cells and that they were flogged.

Thompson reported on 30 October 1951. He found that the use of the word 'floggings' was a 'gross distortion of the facts'. Boys were only caned as a last resort following an investigation by the Superintendent, and in the presence of another officer. He concluded:

In the circumstances, I can find no fault with this form of punishment as a deterrent against these misdemeanours, because discipline in the home must be maintained.

Thompson also found that solitary confinement as it was 'generally understood' did not happen. Boys were confined to 'cubicles', not 'cells'. The lighting was good. There was no furniture in case the boys broke it or used it to harm themselves. They left the cells (or cubicles) to wash, attend parade, work, go to school, and wash their clothes but were placed in them for meals and leisure time. Ashley staff had abolished solitary confinement for three years up to April 1951 but reintroduced it because some boys had become 'difficult and 'defiant'.

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Inquiry into the Control and Management of Ashley Boys' Home, State of Tasmania \(1951 - 1953\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Public Service Commissioner \(1918 - 1973\)](#)
- [Ashley Home for Boys \(1926 - 1999\)](#)

Resources

- Swain, Shurlee, [*History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children*](#), October 2014
 - [*Letters to the Editor: Ashley Home*](#), The Mercury, 6 October 1951
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