

QUESTION: Does the panel think George Pell should be removed from his position in the Church because of his lack of action over the reported sexual abuse?

TONY JONES: Alan Jones, start with you?

ALAN JONES: Well, I think the look, the first thing is that what the Royal Commission is about is something that would unnerve, disgust and disappoint all Australians, and it's almost too grotesque to even define. Where George Pell fits into this - I think there has been a fairly unfortunate focus on Pell in the sense that he was 28 years of age in 1969 when all this happened and there is a presumption in the way in which this has been conducted that Pell was then the cardinal and therefore should have done something. Now, I'm not a Catholic but people in the Catholic Church know that a priest really doesn't have a lot of say, and that was borne out last year in the comments made by the Channel Ten journalist Paul Bongiorno who was a Catholic priest and he was in the same seminary as Ridsdale in the same dormitory. They all slept in a group together. And he made the very pertinent observation he had no idea any of this was going on and there was never any suggestion when Ridsdale came in that night that he had been out doing the kind of things that is was subsequently established he had to do. Paul Bongiorno's explanation was accepted. Pell's hasn't been and so I think that he was the first person in either government or the church to do anything about it. The first person he attacked was that fellow Searson, who had behaved abominably and he told him he would not get a ministry anywhere in the Church. He should resign or be sacked but, of course, Pell had to refer that to the Vatican and the Vatican over ruled Pell or, to quote the evidence he cited, "The Vatican beat me", or words to that effect. So, you know, Pell then instituted change within the church, sought compensation and so on. I mean, the fact - it's a bit of a Lindy Chamberlain here. I mean Lindy Chamberlain was guilty because she didn't cry.

Pell is this great big man of quiet manner but very strong limited personality, limited capacity to engage and people see him as aggressive and diffident but I do think we have to remember that - I hope they don't ask us what we were doing at 28 years of age. I can't even remember what I did last Monday.

JOSH ZEPPS: Well, we weren't covering up rapists when we were 28 years old. We weren't covering up rapists?

ALAN JONES: I think the point that - Josh, I think the point that Bongiorno made is that he was there in the same seminary as this bloke and ...(indistinct)... knew nothing.

JOSH ZEPPS: Alan, it's so disingenuous to imply that the power structures within the church are just sort of accidental and don't serve the people who are in power.

ALAN JONES: He wasn't responsible for the power structures. He wasn't responsible for the power structures in '69. He is now.

TONY JONES: Just a quick follow up, Alan Jones, what do you think about his evidence? You talk about his diffidence. It seemed to go, to a lot of people, a bit further than diffidence when he said of Gerald Ridsdale's crimes, "It was a sad story and not

much interest to me”?

ALAN JONES: Yeah. Well, I think he has acknowledged it's an appalling choice of words. I think -

I don't know I'm not here to defend Pell. I'm simply saying I presume that what Pell was - and he's sought subsequently to explain that was - that at no time was he was aware that Ridsdale was guilty of this heinous behaviour and, therefore, Ridsdale was of no interest to him. I mean, Ridsdale was of no interest to a lot of people and, I mean, the fact that all this can go on, and that's the issue, in the Church and nothing at the time was done about it, that's the real concern.

TONY JONES: All right. Let's hear from our other panellists. Penny Wong?

PENNY WONG: Well, I mean, it's been a the Royal Commission has been a very good thing to happen but really been very distressing, I think, for many Australians, particularly those who are survivors of abuse. I think on Pell, I suppose, you know, the obvious answer is the Royal Commission has to do its work and make its findings and you wouldn't want to prejudge that. What I can say is when I watched aspects of the evidence, including the answer that you've just given, I thought it would be very difficult if you were a survivor to forgive that.

TONY JONES: Mia Freedman?

MIA FREEDMAN: I think that, as Penny said, you know, what happens to Pell from here and the findings of the Royal Commission are best left to them but I was struck, as I think anyone with an ounce of humanity was struck, by the absolute lack of compassion, empathy, understanding, sensitivity, humanity shown by Pell when he spoke about things that were so heinous as to almost defy comprehension and I think that, for survivors, we expect from our religious leaders some leadership, some empathy and some understanding, and I think that it was just quite flabbergasting to see his arrogance and his complete lack of understanding of the real pain, devastation and, in many cases, loss of life that have been caused by what happened.

TONY JONES: Michaelia Cash, what do you think and we'll go to the question, as well, which is: do you think he should lose his job or be removed from his position?

MICHAELIA CASH: In relation to that, that has obviously got nothing to do with us as a panel here. But I am a Catholic and I have obviously spoken to a lot of my fellow Catholic friends. I think, despite what you've said, Alan, in terms of Pell was only 28 at the time, what we've all seen over the last few weeks, over the last few years is, as Mia said, it was that complete lack of empathy. Jesus, at the end of the day, was someone who had compassion and who had empathy. I would expect nothing less from the leaders of our church, especially for those victims in verbalising what they went through, to at least show them compassion and empathy and I think why there is currently so much criticism of George Pell is because, despite what he may or may not have known, it is the way that he has approached the victims of the Royal Commission and he hasn't, I don't believe, reached out to them and said, "I feel your pain", as Jesus would have. He has just completely been totally almost there is just nothing there and I think that has

played against him.

PENNY WONG: And isn't one of the issues also more generally is not just the lack of compassion and empathy which people perceive and feel, there is a sense of avoidance of responsibility.

MICHAELIA CASH: Same thing, yes.

PENNY WONG: And, you know, that no one ever says, "Yes, we were you know, even though we did not perpetrate, we are responsible for failing to protect children." You know, and people are waiting. People are waiting for that.

ALAN JONES: I don't think any decent, reasonable person disagrees with any of that. I'm just simply saying Archbishop Little was the Catholic archbishop then and, of course he, as the evidence has indicated, covered up all of this stuff, protected people, kept on moving them around from parish to parish. When Little then was replaced by Pell and Pell became the Archbishop of Melbourne, Pell immediately did something about it and I think that seems to be overlooked. I agree that the way in which he goes about it and the reaching out stuff is something he seems uncomfortable with but I think once he replaced Archbishop Little, who had covered up all of that stuff within the Church, there was some action taken within the Church, albeit belatedly.

JOSH ZEPPS: Yeah, I think we can focus until the cows come home on the exact qualities or problems with Archbishop Pell. I think more relevant is that he is part of an institution which systematically protects child rapists and has a long history of doing so. I've interviewed - so on HuffPost Live, I interviewed Marci Hamilton who was - who is the lawyer in the United States who is taking the Vatican to court to try to seek justice for the victims of child rape in the church and one point she makes is imagine if this wasn't a religious institution. Imagine this was a childcare - this was 'Boys Are Us', the international childcare chain and it had created such a legal system that all of the people who were actually in charge of its childcare centres weren't employed by the head office. So you had plausible legal deniability and people could say, "Well, I mean, how could Pell possibly have known? He's not really an employee", and the CEO, when the whole scandal breaks and it turns out that there have been millions of people raped around the world in this organisation, the CEO says, "Oh, yeah. Well, although the people who actually run the individual units wear our uniform, abide by our instruction manual, take instructions from head office, hire and fire who we say they should hire and fire, we're not legally responsible for anything that they do". I mean, that place would be shut down in a heartbeat. All of its leaders would be in jail and the only way they've been able to get out of it legally is because they've structured the Church in such a way that they are not legally culpable. But I tell you what, if there is a higher court, which the church seems to believe in, you would imagine that Cardinal Pell is going to have his day.