

Impact Statement on the Effects of Workplace Bullying in the Victorian  
Government's Adult Migrant Education Sector

I started teaching English to adult migrants at a Victorian Government agency in my 30's with perfect health except for hayfever allergies. My family were self-reliant and hardworking. None had ever been on government benefits. A number are extremely successful in the highest professional fields. My employment record was solid with outstanding references from Australia and overseas. I had never been bullied at school or in any other workplace. I was a high academic achiever and completed a Master of Education Degree after-hours while teaching.

I was manifestly good at the work, as attested by extensive objective, hard evidence from legions of adult migrants. I never had one student complaint in 20 years. I was twice nominated for Australian of the Year for services to migrant education, and received the Victorian Government's Multicultural Excellence Award. I never had any warnings on poor performance; rather glowing management appraisal. I was given the greatest teaching and non-teaching workload of all staff for over a decade.

I emerged after 20 years with every area of my life damaged or destroyed by bullying. It was started by one person but ultimately defended by the entire state apparatus.

My experience is if you are bullied in Victoria, you are comprehensively dehumanised, degraded and lose your rights.

That includes a so-called employer's investigation in which I was interrogated across 6 months in 2004 by private investigators, now ex-police, with no apparent training in bullying at all, let alone in education or other female dominated workplaces.

They tape-recorded me like I was a criminal, supposedly as part of a "grievance" procedure. A report manipulated the WorkSafe definition of bullying by removing a key word: "repeated." It was riddled with errors of fact and assumption.

A report states that as I was unwell, they could help the employer resolve my matter via their own network – this from a supposedly "independent" investigator.

When the bullying continued and was again reported, a second, concurrent "investigation" by the same firm of ex-police was ordered with even more tape-recorded interrogations and error-ridden reports.

WorkSafe demands you report bullying but does not provide any safeguards against retaliatory escalation.

After years of severe bullying, the ex-police were the final straw. The ex-police were paid a total of \$230,000 by this state employer under "an arrangement." My health was crushed and I ended up in the WorkCover system where I ended up losing everything I had ever worked for.

I did not want WorkCover; I had never wanted it. I wanted to work just as I had always done. Far from helping me to achieve some modicum of dignity, justice and health, the system utterly destroyed everything that could have been restored to health, hope and productivity.

In reversal of all stated policies, it took a productive, hardworking person and caused them to lose their employment and employability, offering no help whatsoever. There could be no more amateurish or destructive process than the way bullying is treated.

This is the reality of bullying in Victoria. It is like something out of a Kafka novel or Stalinist Russia. Yet it occurred in the sector publicly associated with human rights, and alongside the Government's anti-bullying policies. All proved window dressing and a dangerous sham which give the false illusion of protection.

We know child abuse causes brain damage. We know domestic abuse results in battered women's (or partner's) syndrome. Yet, the Government system perpetuates the destructive, dangerous fallacy that workplace abuse can be dealt with via the destructiveness of the so-called restorative justice system where the most empowered, resourced and moneyed party will "win."

It does not provide even a hit of justice or help; it amounts to dangerous cruelty and it could not be more injurious.

Not surprisingly, Victoria has at least nine work-related suicides a year and an unknown total toll by workplace bullying in terms of other suicides, accidents, family breakdown, addiction and so on.

Outcomes of the bullying I experienced include:

- Strong health transformed to serious impairment
- Self-reliance transformed to dependence
- Employment transformed to unemployment
- At least \$400,000 in lost salary and superannuation
  
- Loss of my much loved employment, via violent expulsion in a fake redundancy on the crucial cusp of retirement. I was rung at home the day after my father's funeral and told I had lost my job of 20 years. No valid, verifiable reason has ever been given.
- I understand this was vicious retaliation for reporting bullying as WorkSafe required.
- Lack of due process without even the mandatory appeal other teachers had as my health was so badly affected by the bullying. This was a breach of Equal Opportunity legislation although two Board Members were closely aligned to the human rights and equal opportunity sector

- Apparently if you report bullying, you will be so savagely attacked, your character, your work record and your employment will all be trashed so your colleagues learn not to follow suit
- Being cheated of a dignified, secure and satisfying retirement, the ultimate kick in the teeth after a lifetime's contribution to state education
- The waste of my hard-earned qualifications, experience and skills; the waste to the taxpayer of funding high level training
- Being made to look and feel like roadkill with gloating by the bullying perpetrators and public humiliation in front of hundreds of former colleagues who saw that the employer "got away with it" - including the fake redundancy
- I had to leave Melbourne to escape the memories, with nightmares that recur to this day
- A loss of confidence in the medical profession owing to cruel and unprofessional conduct of some encountered in this experience. Only one had any real understanding. A number seemed to think it was a joke or worthy of contempt, much as domestic violence has been treated in the past.
- Loss of faith in my Government to do the right thing, and loss of faith in its general competence due to the incompetence and bad faith demonstrated by its agencies and watchdogs

I had 200 pages of records and incidents, including a broken swivel chair placed at my desk with its seat removed being placed at my desk, leaving only the central metal shaft. A senior teacher said, "Stick that up your ...". Management said it was not bullying as it has to happen in the same form over and over to be bullying!!

No WorkSafe, WorkCover or employer-paid investigators would look at my records.

Finally, a senior doctor "evaluated" my injury asking such questions as:

"Do you colour your hair?"

"Do you colour it yourself or do you go to a salon?"

It is barely conceivable that well-educated, hardworking people are treated in such an amateurish, degrading manner.

Along the way, a barrister said to me of the bullying, "This sort of thing does not happen to people like you. Look at your vocational and educational achievements. No judge will believe this, no way known."

In fact, research shows high achievers are targeted for bullying. When our professionals across the board are so poor equipped to understand bullying, injustice is guaranteed.

The impact on others includes:

- Irreparable worry and pain to elderly parents. A shocking thing to inflict on people at the time of life when parents would be in most need of support.
- Heartbreak for family and friends who cannot understand as our society is not educated on bullying and the injuries it causes, especially the way it is carried out to overwhelms the senses so that the victim withdraws into seclusion and exhaustion from being a happy, socially engaged person
- Trauma for migrant students who were shocked to see a much loved and respected teacher so badly mistreated and hunted out
- I was told a Buddhist monk refugee wrote on the whiteboard, “[My name], our teacher and in our hearts,” and collapsed, crying.
- A South American woman told me that she thought only her country did “disappearances” and now she finds Australia does too.
- Many students commented on the mistreatment and bullying they saw. This was their first insight into an Australian workplace and educational organisation, a Victorian Government agency funded by the Commonwealth. The Government was making speeches on Australian values while this modelled the opposite.

I maintain the bullying (described in the confidential and public submissions) accorded with the following Red Cross definition:

- “Torture: intentional infliction of severe suffering or pain for a specific purpose  
ie, as punishment for reporting bullying;
- Cruel or inhuman treatment: no specific purpose, significant level of suffering or pain inflicted  
ie recorded in 200 pages of incidents and patterns of mistreatment including being forced to do work others were paid for;
- Outrages upon personal dignity: no specific purpose, significant level of humiliation or degradation  
ie as per gratuitous, fallacious character assassination and sexually and otherwise degrading treatment.

Meanwhile, Victoria boasts of being the first state to have a Charter of Human Rights.

Agencies such as WorkCover, the HROEC and the Ombudsman and politicians such as Premier Ted Baillieu, then my local member, failed to help despite obvious need.

Opposition Leader, Daniel Andrews, has ignored correspondence. None cared or took bullying seriously. All showed contempt.

Ted Baillieu would not even ask the Ombudsman for an independent review, although he had called for “an independent and impartial” investigation into bullying of a woman in the police union in 2006.

The Board presiding over this at my workplace featured people with senior Australian honours and awards, and human rights luminaries. They all refused to even communicate. None could have cared less about the destruction the bullying has wrought. I saw only hypocrisy, not human rights. The gratuitous cruelty and dehumanisation were no less marked than in regimes Australia’s refugees have fled from.

With such high levels of bullying in the Victorian public sector, I believe no awards should be given unless there is airtight proof of lack of bullying in their jurisdiction.

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I agree with survivors of mass atrocities: it’s not so much the depraved sadists who, in the dead of night, stick out most in memory. In their actions, there is some sort of logic: the depraved are acting out depravities.

How others can stand by is a very different matter. Of them, there are only unanswered questions.

“How could you?”

“How could you watch and do nothing or, worse still, give false or evasive witness?”

“How could you tritely say, ‘I don’t want to get involved’ although you know you have witnessed a crime against humanity?”

“How could you flatter and embolden the perpetrators with your silence?”

What happens to people today will happen to people’s children and grandchildren tomorrow but self-preservation in this moment is all people in a fraught and fractured environment care about. Thus every atrocity in history has been facilitated by those in power who allowed and/or modelled it and those peers who watched on, their silence forming consent.

This occurred in my state, where my family and I had worked hard and paid taxes, and lived lawfully. My state has anti-bullying policies and laws that were worse than useless. The employer’s code of conduct and the state’s mental health precepts and policies were treated with contempt. The only concern was to protect the employer against liability, thereby protecting perpetrators, and using any dirty tricks and further abuse of power to achieve that.

There was no concern whatsoever for the victim. There was no upper limit on the abuse inflicted in the years of bullying or in the so-called restorative system.

There was no concern whatsoever for anyone else vicariously or indirectly harmed by any of this. The loss of a good teacher to the Victorian taxpayers was not even a consideration.

The only thing that mattered to the Government agencies was getting the Government employer off the hook by ensuring the victim was forced to take the full brunt.

The lesson I take from this is that if you do the right thing and do not bully anyone but simply work hard and well, you are treated like a fool and you and those close to you can pay a heavy price in perpetuity.

In this terrible system, all resources are deployed to defend those who perpetrate or allow the wrong doing, even when it is blatant bullying well exceeding the WorkCover definition.

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