

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry: Government ministers believed abuse was down to 'rogue individuals'

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Government ministers 'led to believe child abuse was down to rogue individuals'

A former MSP has said government ministers were led to believe the sexual abuse of children in care was not a systemic failure and therefore did not justify a public inquiry.

Peter Peacock, who served as **Education** Minister from 2003 to 2006 and was an MSP from 1999 to 2011, gave evidence to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry on Wednesday.

Mr Peacock said ministers on the Scottish Executive – now named the Scottish Government – were led to believe it was “rogue individuals” carrying out the abuse, in a briefing note at a meeting in September 2003.

The latest phase of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry is exploring reasons why calls between August 2002 to December 2014 for a public inquiry to be held were resisted by ministers.

Ministers were told in a memo from senior civil servant Colin MacLean in May 2003: “The pressure for the (Scottish) Executive to act has not been intense.

“Aside from the (Daly) petition and two stories in The Sunday Mail, there has not been widespread Parliament or public interest.

“Noticeably, cross-party interest hasn’t been taken up and The Sunday Mail received less than 20 responses to a request for stories.”

It added: “The criminal convictions have been isolated and there is no evidence emerged of widespread abuse.

“It would therefore be feasible to do nothing.

“We do not recommend a full inquiry as allegations are not substantial enough to justify.”

Mr Peacock said: “In rereading this (statement), I was asking myself this question of systemic failure and whether that referred to it being systemic in one institution so everybody in that situation was abusing, or was it a systemic failure across the entirety of care?

“We took it as an individual institution – it was systemic in that institution.

“You could also say there was no systemic failure but a failure in the supervision of a system which allowed abuse.

“By standards of today, I thought it was more in terms of a systemic failure of supervision.”

Mr Peacock added: “It was not presenting itself as organised abuse – rather it was presenting itself as rogue individuals in institutions, rather than in every institution across the state.

“This was reinforced by the nature of the cases coming forward, and by the particular actions being taken in civil **courts**.

“It was presenting as rogue individuals as part of institutions, so it wasn’t happening everywhere.”

Prosecutor James Peoples QC asked Mr Peacock: “So what appears to be said (in the 2003 memo) is that the problem of abuse was not a widespread problem?”

The former government minister replied: “It presented itself as individuals acting alone, as problems sporadically arising and not part of a pattern.”

The QC then asked: “Did you think you were being told it was not a widespread problem and not a very serious allegation?”

Mr Peacock replied: “I don’t think I’d accept we didn’t see it as serious but on the first point, we believed it was not happening everywhere, in large numbers – but in a very sporadic way.

“We weren’t under any illusion that the abuse was not more widespread – we would be naïve to think that no more cases than those (in court) would surface. We thought it was more widespread.”

Judge Lady Smith, who is hearing the inquiry, noted that when the ministers decided against having an inquiry, some criminal convictions for abuse had already been taking place and up to 300 more cases were then being investigated.

Lady Smith asked: “There were 300 cases, convictions taking place – how many more did you need to think there was enough weight for an inquiry?”

Mr Peacock replied: “These are matters of judgment.

“On balance, we felt it didn’t warrant a public inquiry.

“But that was our view – other people might judge differently.”

He agreed that the view ministers took for the reason for an inquiry might have been “too narrow”.

Mr Peacock said: “We now understand an awful lot more. Our judgment was all in the work we were doing to address systemic inequality. We weren’t convinced that inquiry would add to care now.”

Mr Peoples said: “You might, on reflection, think that focus was too narrow on the part of officials or ministers. That it would help improve the current system. Whereas the petition from survivors said an inquiry would help them to get closure, get answers and move on.”

Mr Peacock replied: “The key point is that when we got this petition, the first thing we think about is is this still happening? Are children still being abused in institutional care?

“If we were concerned about that, then that might be the reason for the inquiry and we didn’t have concerns about that. That was a prime consideration.”

However, Mr Peacock disputed claims that an inquiry was not held due to financial concerns.

Mr Peoples asked: “You say cost was not an active consideration. But when the Saville inquiry is mentioned (in the memo), and the point is being made about the cost of the inquiry – to some extent it must have been raised in discussions?”

Mr Peacock responded: “Maybe active was the wrong word – it wasn’t a major consideration.

“I had been the **finance** minister for three years prior to this. A cost of £30 million for an inquiry was not an issue.

“We were not, at that time, short of money, back in those days. The money would have been found, and in those days it would not have been difficult to find.”