

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PAEDOPHILE

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The trouble is that men and women who like or fantasise about having sex with children don't look like monsters. They look just like the neighbours; and they might be.

On 27th July 2005 a court in a French town called Angers jailed 65 women and men for sexually abusing, exploiting and prostituting 45 children aged between 6 months and 16 years, many their own children and grandchildren. The details were dreadful and don't need to be repeated but more shocking was their ordinariness; and that nobody noticed the goings on of sub-society of venality, cruelty and sexual addiction in these ordinary flats, in a 'state housing' development, in this common or garden neighbourhood.

There were warning signs, though police and social workers and friends didn't pick up on them until one brave child made a formal rape complaint: disturbed children, hordes of 'visitors' and, worse, known sex offenders consorting with children. One frequent customer had been convicted twice, which was why he liked wearing a mask. Another was jailed in 1991 for raping his son, and would get 28 years for doing the same to three grandchildren. The son, who had facilitated much of the abuse to in his flat, got 18 years. Nearly half of the accused were women, which defenestrated my assumptions about 'caring' mothers: one used to collect the fees and smoke while the kids screamed as they were serviced in another room in her flat.

Most disturbing of all: nearly all those convicted had themselves been abused as children.

We don't know how many paedophiles there are, because society 'hates' them and they cover it up, rather well, it appears. In June 2005 New Zealander Graham Capill, a former police prosecutor and, until 2003, leader of the Christian Heritage Party, a 'family' oriented political group that

campaigned for traditional family values and against child abuse, went to jail for nine years for raping and other gross sexual offences against three little girls under 12. His was a rather longer sentence than he expected after expressing public contrition for his hypocrisy, partly because shortly before sentencing he told supporters by email that one victim had consented to their 'relationship', which the judge took a dim view of.

We also don't know how many paedophiles there are, or who they are, because paedophiles think there is nothing wrong with what they do; because it depends on whether they're caught, and because there is no incentive for a paedophile to look for help, if there is any, or successful 'treatment'.

One who has, apparently tried, was released from prison on the 28th July. He was Western Australia's 'worst' paedophile and had spent more than 37 years in Perth prisons for a series of sexual offences against boys. Robert Excell, now 66 years old, had never taken Australian citizenship, and was transported back to England the next day, where he wasn't made particularly welcome, and where he hadn't lived since he was 10.

More than fifty years ago under the Fairbridge Farm Scheme the British government sent thousands of 'orphans' like Robert Excell out to Australia, where many of them endured years of forced labour, physical abuse, and neglect including the pain of believing they were unwanted and unloved. A few had the added trauma of sexual abuse. Excell got the lot, which goes some way to explain, though it doesn't excuse, how he came to sodomise a 7 year old boy in 1965, was jailed and paroled; then raped a 9 year old, and four months after he was paroled again in 1977 raped a boy of 13; in 1982 was charged with sexually assaulting two 'youths' (but not convicted) and in 1998 charged again (but not convicted) with 14 counts of sexual penetration of a 19 year old inmate of jail where he was taking part in a sex-offender treatment program. No charges were laid, either, after a young former prisoner made new claims this year: police said the evidence wasn't likely to lead to conviction.

Many child sex offences are not prosecuted, because the children don't make credible witnesses. It is very hard to give compelling evidence of traumatic events that took place years before especially, as in our legal system, when the recollection of a child must be tested under cross examination, in the interests of justice to the accused and their entitlement to seek to set up a reasonable doubt. The result of participation in a criminal trial can be catastrophic for any vulnerable witness, especially a child. It has been overlooked in the case of the accuser of pop star, Michael Jackson's sex abuse show trial, earlier this year. A 15 year old cancer survivor, whose mother behaved like a madwoman in court, whose childish dreams, disappointments and personality were used against him, whether or not he was telling 'the truth', this witness was painfully, publicly disbelieved and humiliated. Public humiliation over sexual matters is as bad as it gets for any teenage boy's self-identity, sexuality and self-worth. 'Truthful' or liar, he was a victim. If he was telling lies, he was put up to it, and that was not his fault. His integrity and dignity was apparently the sacrifice Jackson's prosecutor was prepared to make to address his career pursuit of the pop star. On any view, this child shared a particular quality with his acquitted attacker: a dreadful childhood, in which each of their interests as children were subordinated to those of the adults who should have protected them, and put them first.

There are paedophiles among us. Some of them are known, some have been convicted but, we may well suspect, most have not. Paedophiles – not just 'child sex offenders' – are dangerous to pre-pubescent children because they are erotically preoccupied with children; because they see nothing 'wrong' in what they do or fantasise about doing, because their perceptions of relationships between adults and children and sexual normalcy are warped - there is powerful evidence from prisoner studies that many of them developed their sexual norms through their own sexual exploitation as children themselves. About twenty percent of sexually abused boys are thought to go on to become child sex abusers themselves. Which individuals don't, of course, and why, is the unanswerable question.

The one question we must answer is whether, and if so how, we can protect children properly from sexual exploitation, and it is an urgent question, now, given the apparently unstoppable flood of child pornography and trafficking.

One way would be to know how to 'cure' adults whose sexual preoccupation with children has been disclosed; but I've done a lot of sleuthing for hard evidence of programs that work, and I haven't found it. What I have found are individual success stories of men and women who have developed some internal locus of control over their urges. But it all depends on incentive, supports, services and money to pay for them. And that isn't good enough, unless we only want to protect rich men's kids.

It's evident that Australian paedophiles who want to avoid re-offending won't get much help in prisons, where they are the lowest and most vulnerable of the low, and driven into each another's company. Australian jails either don't have treatment facilities or long-term programs: Robert Excell's 'progress', for the WA Attorney General accepted he was a much lower risk now, was after years of intensive psychotherapy arranged and paid for by his remarkable wife which, she believes, changed his sexual orientation.

It's also obvious that Excell was unusual in seeking treatment. Most paedophiles either see nothing wrong with their sexual interest in children: it was fixed too early in their psychosocial development: or seek treatment for the wrong reasons – after they're caught. Most, too, bail out once therapy becomes confrontational. The early stages of self-pity, self-excuse and Uriah Heep humility are much more comfortable than the horror of feeling their victims' torment.

Most feel 'powerless' over their urges and look for an external cure, such as chemical or other castration. Those who have not re-offended have taken responsibility for changing the circumstances that may contribute to their offending – such as access to children, occupations that give them power

over compliant parents, the use drugs or alcohol. But the abiding success story seems to be coercion, and supervision. Most known paedophiles do not do anything about offending, without a reason – the dangers of a criminal prosecution - or without supervision, both from within their circle of friends and family, and by society. In other words, a recovering paedophile needs enduring ‘normal’ relationships, but these are precisely what we feel we cannot safely offer.

Psychiatric treatment or counselling is part of safeguarding treatment. Most paedophiles don't want to look at the negative feelings that lie behind those titillating fantasies which if reiterated take away all inhibitions. It is genuinely hard to empathise with a victim, which is the only way to attain a proper sense of guilt rather than the narcissistic self-pity usually presented to a court.

The best way to protect children from paedophiles is to protect children from being sexually exploited, both girls and boys. We know that the transition from a sexually abused child victim to a sexual victimiser is direct, and relatively common in a prison population. We should also know, and act on, the fact that all children will accept their early sexual experiences as ‘normal’, especially if they have been well prepared or groomed, and that they confuse love and attention and sexual pleasure with self-worth. Our child protection programs need to be much more sophisticated and effective: parents need to have a really clear idea about how paedophiles weasel themselves into their confidence and groom their children, and not turn their faces away. Children need to be really well taught about sexual boundaries early and consistently, and listened to. Adult professionals need to know how to listen to children, even when they are not talking to them.

The French victims are being ‘treated’ and no doubt fostered in loving homes, but their futures are bleak. Robert Excell has been sent to the UK with just his wife, not the extended support system that might have reduced his chances of re-offending: they are, quite simply, very high. Effective treatment for him is not going to be promoted by being front-page news in British tabloids and

vigilante groups. He will not have the behavioural supervision and support he would need for a long, long time.

What hope is there, for a theoretically intelligent, insightful, remorseful paedophile who knows that they may still present a risk to children and doesn't want to do it? None, if we simply reject them. Unending self-disgust and rejection is a passport to repetition. Should we jail them indefinitely, to protect our kids? But what sense does it make to house 'ordinary' child sex addicts with equally ordinary thieves, murderers, drunk drivers and inside trainers, or subject them to a pointless regime of petty rules, surveillance and useless occupations. If they can't be cured, and can't be made safe because we can't confront changing our attitudes to children, hugely improving the education of parents and effectively early intervention before a child is hurt; then we have to find a humane way to segregate those who are dangerous to children: civilised, if segregated communities, and reasons for living apart, if there are those who cannot live safely among us.