




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MACALISTER

Record of Proceedings, 26 May 2022

PRIVATE MEMBERS' STATEMENT

Member for Macalister, Absence

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (3.59 pm): I rise to make a statement to the House. I thank the House for their indulgence for what will be the hardest contribution I have ever had to make, or will make, in this place.

It has not likely escaped the notice of too many members' attention that over the past 12 months I have changed somewhat, and I thank members on both sides of the House who have taken the time to check in on me. I feel I owe an explanation to my colleagues, members of this House, my electorate and the wider community. I make this statement to the House not because it is easy, but because it is hard. If more statements like this were made more regularly by people with platforms like this, then perhaps for the next person it will not be so hard.

Over the past six months I have been a member of the Mental Health Select Committee. This has been very important work, and I thank all members from both sides of the House for their contribution to the committee's inquiry. In advance of the tabling of the report next month, I would like to thank all of the submitters and contributors to the inquiry for sharing their experiences. I must admit that, while I sought to be involved in this inquiry, I went into it with a level of trepidation. The story of many of the contributors to the inquiry is also mine.

I have referred to my mental health in this House a number of times. In my first speech I made reference to the Army's mental health unit and the assistance I received as an outpatient following a particularly harrowing and tragic military training incident. A diagnosis of PTSD and anxiety adjustment disorder is certainly not uncommon after a lifetime of uniformed service. I admit that I have been comfortable with people believing that this may be the source of my most recent anxiety, but the reality is far harder to understand.

A mental health illness and its recovery is not a linear process. It is not a matter of getting a diagnosis, seeking a treatment and taking steps to recovery. It is all over the shop. Yes, I do have PTSD, but it is not something that can be cured by any number of therapies or medication. It is something you cope with; something you manage. Hopefully, those coping strategies are helpful and healthy. Over my lifetime I have used some fairly robust and positive coping strategies to deal with my PTSD, but sometimes they have a limit. For me, that was reached in the last 12 months.

It is no coincidence that the last 12 months have seen a massive national discussion on the safety of women and children in their workplaces and homes. We have heard from so many survivors, so many advocates and so many champions for those who no longer have a voice. No matter their platform and no matter their status, the more stories we hear and the more uncomfortable we make people feel, the greater the chance for change. Here today I am going to use my platform, my voice, and I am going to make you all very uncomfortable.

I am a survivor of childhood sexual assault. From the age of five I was repeatedly raped and abused when those who were responsible for my supervision after school were derelict in their duty. I was left in the care of a group of older teenagers. I still vividly remember the first and second time this occurred to me, but mercifully after that it is a blur. Most afternoons I was shopped around the neighbourhood to other teenagers, often in exchange for a can of soft drink. I could not tell you how many perpetrators were involved; I could not even quantify for how long it lasted. All I know is that my family's relatively nomadic lifestyle and structure meant that we were on the move again, saving me from this. At that time, if I was old enough to understand such things I might have thought that happenstance had saved me from an unsavoury episode, something that could be compartmentalised and kept under lock and key. It would be unfathomable to consider that the worst for me was yet to come.

I have since learned that an abused child, a groomed child, is an easy target. It is like walking around with a mark on your head that is only visible to those who seek to look for such things. At the age of nine I would look pure evil in the face for the first time. Courtesy of our church, I came into the company, and under the supervision, of the last person on earth who should ever be granted such a position: a child sex offender who had recently been released for a particularly heinous child sex crime. I cannot say for sure how strong the church thought its powers of redemption were, but they declined to notify my family, with whom he was placed.

Again my hours after school became a personal hell, but I had been through this before and my survival skills kicked in: do not cry, do not move, do not say a word. I cannot quite put into words the things that happened to me or what I was made to do. Some of those things are better locked away. The sense of dread I feel whenever an Argos investigation uncovers new exploitation material never goes away, and I suspect it never will. Luckily for me, my family was on the move again and I was unknowingly saved yet again. I understood that what had happened to me was not quite right and that something was wrong, but it would not be until a few years later that I would realise what had actually happened and how serious it was.

It just happened to coincide with my early teenage years, when I would do just about anything to avoid standing out and drawing attention to myself. I wish I had had the courage to tell my parents, my friends—anyone—any of this at the time, but on reflection I was just not strong enough. Few people ever are. I made it my mission to be a person who fits in and does everything society expects of a normal person with a normal childhood: finish school, go to uni, be a positive contributing member of society, wear a uniform, get a job, get married and have a family. I did all of those things in an attempt to be the most normal appearing person I could. It is emotionally exhausting to put on a facade, to wear a mask, to hide who you are and where you have come from.

I was chased by demons to achieve all of these things, but you can only run for so long. When I could not metaphorically run anymore, I started to actually run. My exhaustion reached its limit and my facade cracked last year. Things, memories and feelings that I had meticulously tucked away and locked in a box deep down kept threatening to come to the surface. The panic and anxiety that came with that were in many instances quite debilitating. I felt like my skin was inside out. I felt raw and exposed walking around. I was highly agitated. My ability to keep something under lock and key for 40 years was over, and I had to find other coping strategies. Admittedly, not all were healthy.

A lifetime of being introspective meant that I knew I needed help, and I sought it where I could from my GP, a counsellor, a psychologist, friends and colleagues. I knew what I had to do and I went about it in my usual methodical fashion, but recovery is not linear. I might have the strength to acknowledge and confront my past, but my ability to live with this and maintain the facade of a normal life is not so easy. I do not get closure; the only perpetrator I can name is long dead. There were clearly times when I went backwards. This acknowledgment of my past, this collapse of my facade and this recovery has cost me my family unit and my marriage.

Earlier this year I did hit rock bottom. It just became too hard to keep it all in. I was tired—so very tired. Rock bottom for me looked like walking out of the PA Hospital barefoot with what was left of my prescription medication; it was giving the answers I knew I had to give to avoid being admitted to a mental health unit. My children had found me unresponsive. Paramedics and police were called to my home. I was resuscitated; I was transported. For the unbearable stress this placed on my family late that night I am truly sorry. To my son, who had to call for help, I am also so very sorry I put you in that position.

My recovery, my way forward, is to be authentic—to let go of the facade, those coping strategies, which are more about outward appearance than inner truth. I need to be true to myself in order to be my best self. That does mean acknowledging my past truthfully and fully. I know that the guilt and shame

that I have bottled up for many decades is not rational and that it was not my fault, but nothing that happened to me can be explained in a rational world. Guilt and shame fester and grow in the shadows, in the locked box where I kept everything. To get past this I must bring it into the light.

I know that I am not my past, that my trauma does not define me, yadda yadda yadda, but I stand here and I decide to make this public. Why do I shine a light on this most uncomfortable topic for me? Because I will recover loudly so others do not die quietly, because we feel powerless when those we love become victims of sexual assault, when those who mean the world to us will not reach out, because we the larger community do not talk about these things. I will talk about these things so maybe someone else will not wait 40 years to talk about these things, so maybe someone else's rock bottom just does not happen.

I want to assure my electorate and my community—many of whom have raised concerns about my welfare—that my work in the electorate and advocating for you has not wavered in the past 12 months. In fact, my ability to continue working for my community during the past 12 months has given me the focus I needed while working my way through this. I am more determined than ever to continue to contribute as a member of this government. More than ever before, I am aware of the importance of having people with lived experience such as mine in the room when decisions are made and when questions are asked. I have a voice in here and I will use it to give a voice to those who are not yet brave enough to.

I acknowledge that my recovery is not done. I know that in standing up here today it will inevitably have ramifications for my own wellbeing in the short term, and I still have my family and children to think about. With that in mind, I will be seeking a leave of absence from the House in due course. I know I need to take time to rebalance and spend with my family at this time. I thank everyone in advance for your consideration of my family's privacy during this time. I thank the House and members for your indulgence this afternoon.