

Long struggle to expose evil abuse of children in the Illawarra

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PETER NEWELL

November 17,
2012

This story was originally published in 2012. When the sun's first rays creep over the horizon this morning and gently kiss, warm and illuminate the Illawarra coastline, they may be on a special mission. First, they will touch the Pacific Ocean, and then its foaming surf and the beaches on to which it cascades. Seconds later they will make landfall, bringing the birth of another day to all, and to two places in particular - the Bulli and Lakeside Kanahooka cemeteries. There lie at rest two special souls and, after political events this week, their headstones deserve to be bathed in sunshine. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised at all if both these grave sites seem to have a particular sparkle about them today - a sort of celestial salute to good men, if you like. Bulli is the resting place of the earthly remains of Peter Hugh Cullen, former Illawarra Mercury editor and, I'm proud to say, my mate. At Kanahooka rests Father Maurie Crocker, a man of great courage who saw evil flourishing and felt it his duty to do something about it while others turned a blind eye. Although no longer here, years ago each played his own particular role in this week's announcement by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard of a wide-ranging royal commission into paedophilia across the country. It has been a long time coming, but I am sure each of them would cheer its arrival with gusto. Peter and Maurie tackled this evil abuse of children in the Illawarra, and its cover-up, when it was not fashionable in some circles to expose such matters - back in 1993. I was the Mercury's general manager at the time, having been its editor previously with Peter as my deputy, so our relationship was close. While some people cheered from the rooftops as these evils were revealed, others damned Peter in particular and the Mercury generally for soiling its pages with such stuff. I well remember going to get my eyes tested one day and copping a broadside from a local medico who informed me that his wife would "not have the filthy rag in the house". This story began long before 1993, with unsubstantiated reports of child sexual abuse in some of the local corridors of power. It was extremely hard to pin down. The break came when Father Crocker, a former lay teacher in New Zealand, a professional boxer and career soldier before being ordained a priest at age 42, came to the Mercury with another priest. They spoke to Peter Cullen. Father Crocker informed Peter of statements by three young men that they had been molested over some years by a local Christian brother and a priest. Cullen assigned a journalist named Brett Martin to investigate the allegations, and another fine journalist in Lisa Carty took up the reins as things developed down the track, enveloping two former Wollongong lord mayors - one later a local state MP - a Wollongong City Council alderman and other clergy. The number of young men with serious allegations of abuse grew to seven. They complained that their attempts to seek redress through the local church hierarchy, headed at the time by Bishop William Murray, had led to nothing. They felt they were being ignored and a blind eye turned to their complaints of widespread sexual abuse. There was talk of a local

senior police officer running interference, but that was never substantiated. The Mercury investigated this matter for four months, taking statutory declarations from each of the complainants, before publishing the first of many reports. As events unfolded: Peter Cullen, having endured two heart bypass operations, died at his Woonona home on December 28, 2000, aged only 61. I'm sure he somehow knew what was ahead, having written a list of his brothers' and sisters' telephone numbers to make sure he called them on Christmas Day. For those who screamed "newspaper sensationalism" at the time, and some who to this day may harbour such views, I say this: Yes, it was sensational. Yes, they were gripping newspaper reports. Yes, there were terrible consequences to it all. But, chances are, these reports never would have come into being - and an even wider scandal exposed - had these young men been listened to and treated with care and respect in the first place. I had seen this "shoot the messenger" environment before. In the early 1980s, hit by the world steel downturn, the Port Kembla Steelworks laid off workers by the thousand - and the Mercury reported it. Some accused us of promoting "doom and gloom" - one large advertiser even withdrew his ads for a while with the comment: "You're hurting me, so I'm going to hurt you". I guess we were supposed to ignore it all. The easiest option for an investigative newspaper editor is not to publish something. To publish takes a conscious decision after weighing the evidence on all sides, knowing full well it may bring you into personal conflict and make life more difficult. I often used to quote an old American newspaperman from years ago who quipped: "The mission of a modern newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." In this particular environment, that was probably not far off the mark. This whole affair did not come easy to Peter Cullen nor Maurie Crocker, an ordained priest and servant of the Lord. Peter was a Catholic, having been educated at Maitland Marist Brothers in the Hunter Valley. His sister is a nun; two brothers were ordained priests at stages of their lives. His two children were attending Catholic schools at the time, as were, or had, four of mine. Some people pitted him as the devil himself, others as the angel Gabriel. Some were in permanent denial. Some were totally paranoid. Before I delivered the eulogy at Peter's funeral, I received a message that the priest with responsibility for the church demanded to read beforehand what I intended saying. Apparently he was concerned that I was going to rail against the church on such an occasion. I sent a two-word message back, the first of four letters and the second of three. He must have taken my advice because I heard no more - and of course I had never contemplated realising his fears on such an occasion. Whatever anybody thought, Peter Cullen and Maurie Crocker certainly knew right from wrong. Apart from their own ethics and beliefs, they also may have been aware of the famous quote that evil will always flourish while good men do nothing. Or perhaps the statement given by Frere Bartholome de las Casas at an inquiry before the Papal Delegate in 16th-century Spain who said: "When truth goes forward, it is often fragile and alone; falsehood, on the other hand, can have many helpers." This affair of course went beyond the church, just as Julia Gillard's new royal commission will have a wide-ranging brief. In time, the church assigned Bishop Phillip Wilson (now Archbishop of Adelaide) to the Wollongong Diocese to begin the healing process. In his first weeks, Peter and I had a pleasant and positive lunch with him in a small Corrimal St restaurant, now bulldozed for unit development. I

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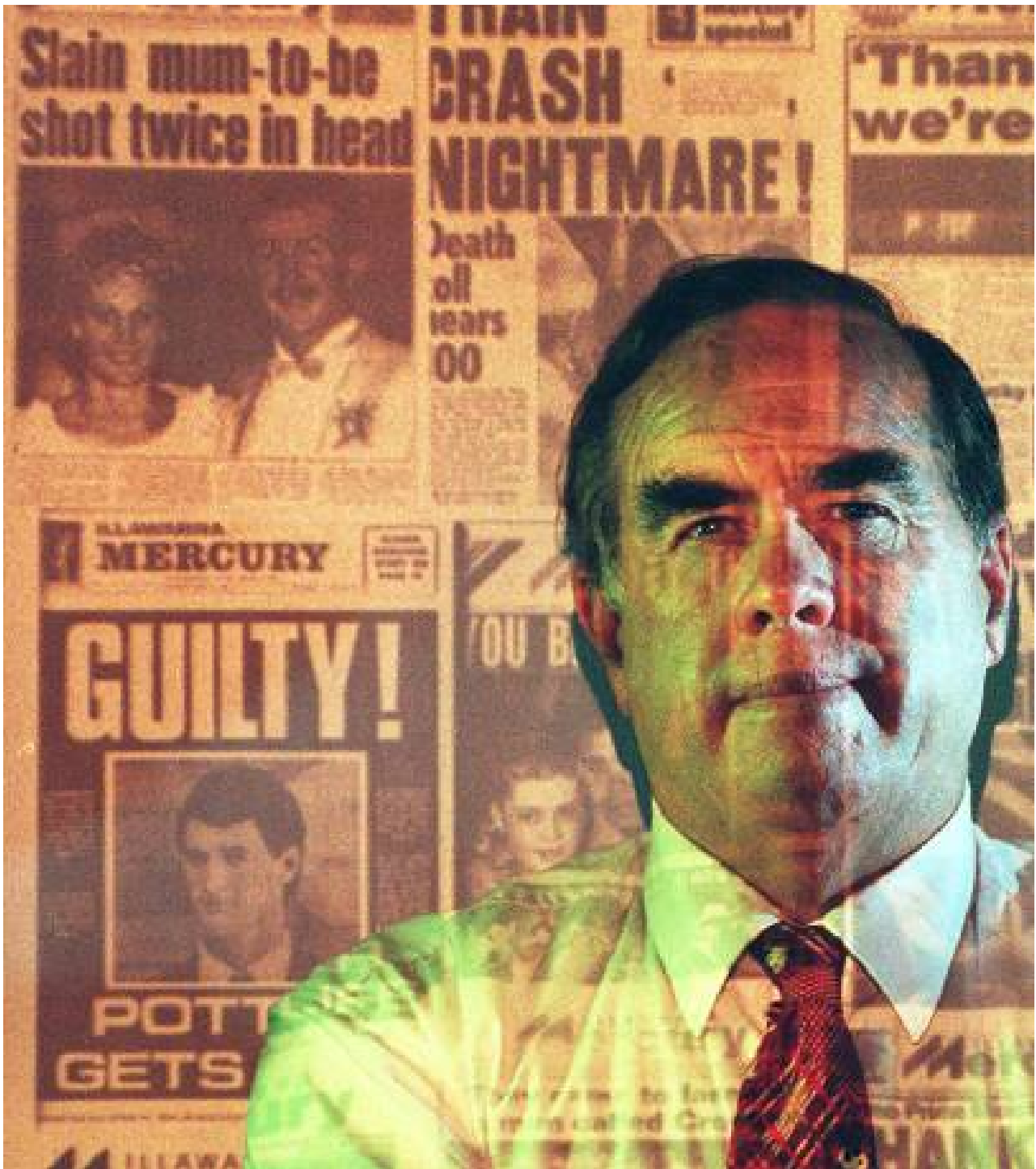
A man of great courage: the late Father Maurie Crocker.
This story was originally published in 2012.

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The late Peter Cullen, former Mercury editor, in his office with many of his front-page stories.

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Frank Arkell is all smiles at the launch of his campaign to become lord mayor again in 1995. He was killed before his first appearance in court on sex charges.

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molested over some years by a local Christian brother and a priest. Cullen assigned a journalist named Brett Martin to investigate the allegations, and another fine journalist in Lisa Carty took up the reins as things developed down the track, enveloping two former Wollongong lord mayors - one later a local state MP - a Wollongong City Council alderman and other clergy.

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Former parish priest of Edmund Rice, Father Peter Comensoli (front), served 18 months' jail for sex abuse offences.



Former mayor Tony Bevan was virtually branded the Mr Big of paedophile operations by the Wood Royal Commission.

- Parish priest Father **Peter Comensoli** was jailed for abusing boys.

- College principal Brother **Michael Evans**, transferred from Wollongong to oversee a building project on the North Coast, committed suicide the night before detectives were to interview him.
- Former Wollongong lord mayor and then MP **Frank Arkell** was murdered by a deranged young man 10 weeks before he was to have appeared in court on sex charges involving young males.
- Former mayor **Tony Bevan** also was alleged to be a paedophile, running a rival network to that cultivated by Arkell and his associates.
- Wollongong City Council alderman **Brian Tobin** was found dead in the Illawarra escarpment bushland. There were no suspicious circumstances.
- A church-run youth refuge was revealed as a procurement and pick-up point for child abusers.
- To cap it all, Father Crocker, ostracised by some clergy for having the courage to speak up, ended his own life.



Former Edmund Rice principal Brother Michael Evans committed suicide in Rockhampton in 1996.





Wollongong City Council alderman Brian Tobin killed himself just two hours after being interviewed by investigators from the Wood Royal Commission paedophile team in 1996.

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