

# The Saturday Paper

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## NEWS

In the final week of the Tasmanian election campaign, it has been revealed the state's deputy premier was given a briefing note on a paedophile police officer days before the senior sergeant was honoured with an official funeral.

By *Nick Feik*.

## Tasmanian deputy premier was told about paedophile police officer



Tasmania Police Inspector Paul Reynolds in 2006. CREDIT: AAP IMAGE / DALE CUMMING

On September 17, 2018, the then Tasmania Police commissioner Darren Hine provided a briefing note to then police minister Michael Ferguson. It was titled “Death of serving police officer” and pertained to the upcoming funeral of Paul “Beau” Reynolds, who had died by his own hand four days earlier.

Revealed in a “right-to-information” release, the note was to inform Ferguson – now deputy premier and treasurer – that Senior Sergeant Reynolds had been under investigation by Tasmania Police Professional Standards for child sex abuse offences.

“On the evening of Wednesday 12 September 2018, Tasmania Police Professional Standards conducted a search under warrant at the residence of Senior Sergeant Paul Reynolds. The search was a result of recently received information that raised concerns about the nature of Senior Sergeant Reynolds’ relationship with a number of male youths,” the note said.

“The information included that there may have been an exchange of photographs of intimate body parts (using the ‘Snapchat’ social media application) between Senior Sergeant Reynolds and the youths.”

When the brief was prepared, Tasmania Police had already assembled a mass of evidence and interviewed five of his alleged victims, who gave graphic accounts of Reynolds’ alleged crimes. Reynolds took his own life the day after the raid.

Two days after the ministerial briefing note, the official police funeral proceeded.

Commissioner Hine stepped up to the lectern at Launceston’s Church of the Apostles and spoke about the highlights of the senior sergeant’s 38-year career “all over the state” and the many skills “Beau” had put “to good use wherever he served”.

“His loss will be deeply felt across Tasmania Police,” Hine said. At the end of the solemn service, hundreds of police in full ceremonial uniform formed a guard of honour along the blocked-off street outside, where Reynolds’ coffin was escorted by a motorcycle cortege. The Launceston *Examiner* reported Reynolds was “remembered as ‘a wonderful father, husband and a very fine police officer’ ”.

It was four years until most of Paul Reynolds’ police colleagues – and the public – would learn of his alleged crimes. Under police minister Ferguson and his successor, the current speaker of the House of Assembly, Mark Shelton, the Reynolds case lay unexposed until a coronial inquest in late 2022.

The coroner’s report was part of an investigation into four unrelated deaths by suicide of Tasmanian police officers, and the section about the Reynolds case makes for alarming and distressing reading. Detailing the week prior to Reynolds’ death, it describes a police investigation that left little room for doubt about his crimes but raised many questions as to how they could have gone undetected for so long.

*“[He] used football as an initial conversation-starter with teenage boys, progressing to grooming, explicit messaging in the form of text and photos and in some instances, physical sexual abuse.”*

One officer told the inquest “Senior Sergeant Reynolds was widely reputed in the Deloraine area to be a paedophile”. The inquest heard that interviews and evidence found on Reynolds’ phone and in messages constituted “clear evidence to support allegations that Senior Sergeant Reynolds had solicited and/or procured child exploitation material from youths under the age of 17 years, namely images depicting them naked and/or exposing their penises”.

There was evidence Reynolds sexually assaulted children and was “procuring (that is, grooming) boys under the age of 17 years to have unlawful sexual intercourse with another person or to engage in an unlawful sexual act”.

It was also alleged Reynolds was stealing money from his mother, who suffered from dementia, for gambling, gifts, travel and other entertainment. The report suggested he stole \$150,000 over four years.

Another matter, which remains unexplored in detail to this day, relates to messages Reynolds sent to an acquaintance referred to as “X”, allegedly a methamphetamine user with criminal associates, requesting money in the weeks before he died. Wrote the coroner: “There is evidence of a message on 4 September 2018 in which Senior Sergeant Reynolds tells X he requires \$50,000 urgently. On 10 September, Senior Sergeant Reynolds makes a further request of X for money, saying in a text message that he needs ‘a lot of coin and quick’.”

Professional Standards was aware of these messages when his house was raided. A few days later, the police commissioner was delivering his eulogy. The Professional Standards investigation was closed.

The details of the briefing note provided to the now deputy premier were revealed a week before the Tasmanian state election as a result of a “right-to-information” request by state Greens leader Rosalie Woodruff. It is the latest abuse scandal to hit the Rockliff Liberal government after a recent independent commission of inquiry spent more than two years exposing malfeasance and systemic cover-ups of child sexual abuse in Tasmanian government institutions.

The commission exposed the case of James Griffin, a paedophile who had worked in the children’s ward of the Launceston General Hospital for 18 years, abusing countless victims despite numerous complaints and allegations about him to police, child protection and hospital management. (Griffin also took his own life before facing justice.)

The commission investigated the mass abuse of children at the Ashley Youth Detention Centre, which remains open despite hundreds of accounts of crimes against children across decades. Out-of-home care and state schools were also investigated, the

net result being hundreds of damning findings and recommendations.

The commission also examined the case of Paul Reynolds and found Tasmania Police had been informed as early as 2008 of allegations regarding his inappropriate relations with boys.

Wrote the commission: “We heard that in 2008, police officers from an interstate police force were delivering training to Tasmania Police officers in Tasmania. After the first day of training concluded, at drinks at the Tasmania Police Academy bar, an interstate police officer alleged that a conversation occurred suggesting that then Inspector Reynolds was ‘a paedophile’.”

Two Tasmanian officers reportedly gave examples of concerning behaviour. “One Inspector reportedly said he had visited Inspector Reynolds’ home and saw him with a 15-year-old boy between his legs, giving him a massage. Another Inspector reportedly said his wife had been approached by people in the community concerned about Inspector Reynolds’ behaviour around young boys...

“Shortly after, Darren Hine, then Deputy Commissioner, Tasmania Police, wrote to the Inspectors who had reportedly described the concerning behaviours, asking them to respond to the interstate police officer’s report. Both Inspectors replied to the Deputy Commissioner suggesting there had been a misinterpretation of comments.”

An internal investigation found, with “no other evidence available” apart from the account of an interstate police officer, the matter should be closed. It was – and Reynolds would continue to abuse children for a further 10 years.

The commission quoted an anonymous submission it had received: “Why is it that Paul Reynolds was given a full police send off when he was under investigation before he killed himself? What impact has this public heroism had and will have on the alleged victims and their families?” The commissioners added, “We share these questions. We can only imagine how distressing this would have been.”

Tasmania Police, now led by Commissioner Donna Adams, acknowledged the decision to hold a police funeral was wrong, and “the 2008 investigation was not managed to the standard expected by the community. The Commission found that the approach to the investigation was inadequate, and Tasmania Police agrees with this.”

In October last year, Tasmania Police announced an independent inquiry into Reynolds’ alleged crimes, to be run by Regina Weiss and completed in June this year.

The Weiss review’s interim report, published in January, said “it was clear from the outset of this Independent Review that Paul Reynolds’ position as a police officer coupled with his involvement in sport through coaching and in administrative roles provided him with an ideal platform to groom and sexually abuse young males”.

At the time of his death Reynolds was a senior sergeant — the officer in charge of Prosecution Services in Devonport – and president of the Northern Tasmanian Football Association.

“One emerging theme raised by numerous former and current serving police officers was the lack of transparency regarding Paul Reynolds’ alleged criminal conduct at the time of his death,” wrote Weiss. “Participants expressed disappointment at learning of the reason for his suicide for the first time five years after his death, via the coronial report. Participants voiced their dismay at having attended a full police funeral for Paul Reynolds when it was known that he was under investigation for criminal conduct towards young males.”

The Weiss interim report outlined some of the problems experienced by victim-survivors in reporting these crimes: “‘Who would believe me?’ was the view of one victim-survivor from over 30 years ago, whereas another historical victim-survivor said ‘I wouldn’t even have known who I could report to. Who polices the police?’ ”

Weiss’s final report is expected to examine Reynolds’ alleged crimes against dozens of victims, at least. “Private sessions have revealed that in the 1980s, Paul Reynolds used his position as a basketball umpire on Tasmania’s west coast to groom and sexually abuse his victims and in later years, through rural football clubs in Tasmania’s north-west ... [He] used football as an initial conversation-starter with teenage boys, progressing to grooming, explicit messaging in the form of text and photos and in some instances, physical sexual abuse.”

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One controversial case to which Reynolds has already been linked is the 2015 death of 15-year-old Eden Westbrook, whose family dispute the police finding that she died by suicide and believe evidence has been mishandled. Reynolds “provided regular oversight and direction during the investigation period”, according to the coronial report.

Speaking to the ABC this week, Deputy Premier Michael Ferguson was not able to say when he read the ministerial briefing note on Reynolds. “But my usual practice,” he said, “is to sign such a note immediately after I have done so.”

In this case, the note was signed three weeks after it was received. Ferguson implied the timing of the release – during the election campaign – was driven by political motivations designed to damage his reputation.

Greens leader Rosalie Woodruff denies she sat on the story for political purposes, pointing out that her party sent the documents to the ABC shortly after they received them late last year, with the hope they would lead to national television coverage. Ultimately this didn’t happen and the ABC broke the story online locally a week prior to the election.

Tasmania Police uploaded the documents to its official Disclosure Log on Tuesday, months late.

Upper House independent Meg Webb said it was “virtually impossible to believe” and “highly concerning” that Ferguson’s office didn’t bring a briefing note of such sensitivity and consequence to his attention. Furthermore, when he did read it, “he apparently did nothing”.

“Knowing the allegations against Reynolds were about longstanding behaviours, and that specific investigation of his alleged crimes was closed after his death, did Mr Ferguson initiate any form of investigation into how a serving police officer may have remained undetected as a child sex abuser over such a long period and whether there were any failures of oversight or process within the department that allowed it to occur?”

*Lifeline 13 11 14*

*This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on March 23, 2024 as "Tasmanian deputy premier was told about paedophile police officer".*

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