

Lindt Café siege opening remarks

This is the opening of the inquest into the deaths of Katrina Dawson, Tori Johnson and Man Haron Monis.

In a moment I will hear applications for leave to appear and then I'll ask Senior Counsel Assisting to outline some of what we have learnt to date and explain how we plan to move forward towards a comprehensive report addressing all of the issues raised by these terrible events that are properly within a coroner's jurisdiction.

First, I wish to express my condolences to the families and friends of those who died. Unexpected and violent deaths inevitably cause severe distress to those close to the deceased. The protracted nature of the siege; its morbid suspense and the explosive climax must have made manifold the grief of the families of the hostages who died. To them I offer my most deep sympathy.

Rarely have such horrifying events unfolded so publicly. Overlaying the intense personal suffering on display were fearsome themes calling up wider, more far-reaching threats that understandably terrified many, even among those who only saw it from afar.

Justifiably, then, these events have precipitated an outpouring of emotion: anguish, anger, resentment and even despair. We, those charged with responsibility for investigating the events, acknowledge the validity of those emotions but we cannot give vent to them if we are to effectively serve our purpose.

All of those who work in this court complex – the clerks, the counsellors, the coroners, the police, the mortuary technicians and the pathologists - on a daily basis steady themselves in the face of intense grief so that they can help those more directly affected. I know I can trust all of the professionals who come here to participate in this inquest to do likewise.

I raise this to caution those unfamiliar with our processes not to assume that when we appear dispassionate we are unconcerned; if we seem clinical, do not conclude we are uncaring; if we are focused on matters forensic, do not fear we have forgotten your grief or how intensively personal it remains. If we are

to answer the hard questions rightly posed of us by these events we will need to rely on our reason and keep our emotions in check.

As I said, in a moment Mr Gormly will outline some of the questions we will strive to answer. We are being ably assisted by a crack team of detectives and other experts whose dedication to the huge task at hand I gratefully acknowledge. We have cast the net wide but our jurisdiction is limited by statute. And indeed there are some questions that may remain unresolved because the only person who knew the answers is beyond reach.

It may be necessary to balance competing interests. For example, on-going security concerns may have to take precedence over the public's interest in knowing everything about certain aspects of the events. Timing is also an issue from that perspective.

Coronial investigations sometimes take a long time to complete: an inquest within a year of the death is prompt. This case is different: not that the deaths of Katrina Dawson or Tori Johnson are inherently more significant than other tragedies that come before this court - many of them also befall innocent people unfairly robbed of their future. However, the circumstances in which these deaths occurred raise issues relevant to the actual security and sense of security of the wider population and that demands a speedy response.

Conversely, we must protect the families and the hostages from the further harm that could flow from forcing them to re-visit the tragic events too soon. We also need to ensure that rushing doesn't degrade the quality of the evidence brought before the court. The desire for urgent answers must be weighed against the time it takes to ensure the evidence is the best available and the most reliable.

Further, we need to allow all those with sufficient interest to contribute to these processes.

While balancing those competing interests, we will hear this case as soon as possible, bringing brackets of evidence to court on discrete topics as they become available.

I hasten to add, prioritising this case will not cause others to be delayed. I gratefully acknowledge the Attorney-General's assurance that extra resources will be made available to ensure other matters I would have heard had it not been for this case will be brought before an additional coroner if that becomes necessary.

And finally, I want to assure everyone that we will do all within our power to undertake a comprehensive investigation that is rigorous, independent and searching. It will strive to establish what happened, why it happened, and whether it could have been prevented or responded to more effectively? Would any reforms reduce the likelihood of a recurrence? These are the questions that will engage us for many months to come. They will be definitively answered if the evidence permits.

I will now ask senior counsel assisting to place his appearance on the record and invite applications for leave to appear from those seeking it.