Reportage:
**Buried in the labyrinth**

Reporter:
**Margaret Simons**

This is a story about the habits of mistrust that grow between citizens and government in a media-lubricated democracy.

It is also a story about failure. Whether it is my failure or the failure of others, I am not so sure. Perhaps it is broader – about a system failing as it trips over its own checks and balances, in a headlong rush to protect its own and create cardboard cut-out heroes and victims.

For most of the last two years I have been confused, angry and frustrated about this. For much of the time I wondered what this story was really all about and today, writing this, I am none the wiser. I have learned nothing, but my faith in progress, in the sweet and efficacious nature of attempts at understanding, has been thwarted. Somewhere, behind the impenetrable wall of government caution, I sense a human story. Someone who might want to explain, or say sorry, or who may hate me. Someone who may be suffering because of me. We will never meet. They know I exist, but I will never know their names. It seems, after all, that the Victorian Government has nothing to say to me. The spin doctors drafted answers to my questions. Those answers went to the Minister. They were signed off by him, I was told, but who knows with what deletions. Whatever remained went to the State Government Media Unit, and the result of that has been a decision to give me no answers – to release nothing. The Government has nothing to say for itself. Or is that they don’t trust me to hear their story, let alone tell it fairly?

“Do you think it is a cover up?” the Channel Nine journalist asked me last July at the door to the tribunal.

“Who knows?” was the only accurate answer, which not surprisingly did not make it to air. I should have been angrier, more hysterical, to make the six o’clock news. Perhaps it has been a cover up, or perhaps the whole thing had got bogged down in habits of defensiveness. But I am leaping ahead. It is best, as in all emotional cases, to start plainly and with the facts.

On July 13, 2005, the Victorian Government sent one of Australia’s worst paedophiles to live in a house at 137 Kent Street Flemington – just a few hundred metres from the home I shared with my husband and two children. Ever since, I have been trying to find out why.
I am not a vigilante. I am not obsessed with this case. When it was at its height, when the journalists were massing around me on the steps of the court, I felt the pressure to assume a role. They needed me to be “Outraged of Flemington”, but I felt not so much outraged as questing.

The reporters asked me why I hadn’t bought a crowd, with placards. The answer was because I didn’t want to be like that.

If someone from government had said at the outset: Let’s sit down and talk about this. Let us explain. I would have gladly dropped the legal battle. Now I feel naïve for thinking that was ever likely to happen.

Instead, I have been knocking up against the courts, against my own profession of journalism, and against the bureaucracy. Now, nearly two years later, there must surely be some lesson to draw from all this.

Brian Keith Jones, formerly known as Brendon John Megson, was first jailed in 1981 for abducting and sexually abusing six boys. He shaved their heads and dressed them in women’s clothing, which is why the media began to call him Mr Baldy – a name that has stuck. More recently he has tried to change his name to Shaun Paddick, but the Victorian Government (in a blaze of publicity) announced that this would be prevented. The name was obviously a nasty joke, a reference to his crimes. Perhaps from this we should understand that Jones is not repentant. There are, in fact, several reasons to think that this is the case.

Before he was paroled in 1989, Jones made some tapes for paedophile friends outside, who were awaiting his release. They were seized by the authorities. In them, Jones was planning his next offences: “I know what my idea would be, is getting a young … woman who may have two little children or something like that, only real bubbies or something, and put her into slavery and make her watch as the children are brought up as our own.”

He even wanted to use his accomplice’s children: “I hope you don’t mind, when I come home, and if Andrew wants me to, you’ll let me play around with him and love him too.” Sure enough, when he was released, Jones carried out his plans. This time his victims were two brothers, aged six and nine. He went back to jail in 1993, sentenced to fourteen years. With no parole, he was due for release in August 2005.

Able of his impending release, the State Government had drafted a law specifically designed to allow serious sexual offenders to be monitored following their release. The Serious Sex Offenders Monitoring Act was known in government as the Mr Baldy Bill, but although it seemed to be part of the solution, as 2005 rolled around it presented the bureaucrats with a problem. If Jones was to be monitored long term, then this would have been included in his parole conditions – and the date for his release, unmonitored and without parole – was in early August. By mid-2005, there was a race on to get Jones paroled subject to supervision, and to find him somewhere to live – before his sentence expired.
In March, it was reported that a house identified for Jones by Corrections Victoria had been rejected after an “environmental scan” detected two young boys living next door. A spokeswoman for the Corrections Commissioner said this proved the system was working. “We don’t see it as a stuff up at all, we see it as the opposite – the system working.”

The next thing anyone heard was in early July, when it was reported that Jones had been paroled and was about to be released.

We didn’t know it, but the house they had chosen was just around the corner from us.

The house is one of those semi-detached pokey 1920s numbers so common in the inner suburbs – brown feature brick and creamy render. I used to walk past it every day. I even know its internal layout because once its neighbouring twin was available for rent and we checked it out. There is a pocket handkerchief front yard, a porch, a front door that opens directly on to a living room large enough for two lounge chairs and no more, then a corridor with a bedroom off to one side, the kitchen and bathroom at the back.

Nobody wants a paedophile for a neighbour. Who knows how many of us have just that, without knowing and without any media fuss? How many other threats are there to our children, undetected and unreported, in the average street? I don’t like moral panic, and I don’t like hysteria, but there was a particular reason why this house, so close to my dear children, was spectacularly unsuitable.

Every weekday morning, the walking bus for the primary school meets directly outside.

The walking bus is in itself a scheme born out of moral panic. Children are no longer allowed to walk to school by themselves because of all the fearsome things in the street – and yet they must walk, for fear that they will grow obese through too little exercise. Therefore, councils and schools set up walking buses, and parents like me volunteer to “drive” them on a roster system. Each morning at 8.30, the children gather outside the house that was chosen for the paedophile. My son, who is in the paedophile’s target demographic, used to climb on the low brick fence in front of the house if I didn’t stop him. So tiny is the distance from fence to house that he could almost knock on the door without leaving the sidewalk.

The children and the rostered parents gather, wait for about ten minutes, then set off for school. In the afternoon, the process is reversed and once again groups of up to a dozen primary school children linger for about a quarter of an hour within arm’s reach of the door of that house.

Psychologists have told the Victorian Country Court that, when in jail, Jones refused to cooperate with counselling, or to discuss his childhood. Who knows what
there was to be uncovered? Who knows what is in this man’s mind? Is it even right to wonder? Certainly I do not pretend to understand. All the professionals who have assessed him have said that, given a chance, he will most probably reoffend. Nobody who knows him regards him as safe. The only clues to his mental state are claims by the court-appointed psychiatrists that media publicity causes him stress. He loses sleep, is frightened and angry, and has “diminished mood”. Such feelings are likely to increase the chances of him reoffending, and so publicity is held to be against the public interest. It is said to be in the public interest to keep Mr Baldy’s doings and whereabouts quiet.

Assuming the psychiatrists are right, I may well be part of the problem – and you too, for reading this.

But I keep going. Did the Government know about the walking bus? Did it try to find out? Did it knowingly place a paedophile in this house despite the fact that it was a meeting place for our children? These are the things I have been trying to find out.

I was working in Adelaide for the first two weeks of July 2005. The kids were at home with my husband, who was juggling madly to keep the household running. I arrived home, travel weary, on the evening of the fifteenth. My husband picked me up from the airport and, as he shouldered my bag, asked me if I remembered that Mr Baldy was to be released.

“Yeah. So?”

“What’s the worst place they could put him if they were going to put him in our suburb?”

I looked at him with screwed-up face. Then he told me. Kid central, as we call it. The corner where the walking bus meets.

I didn’t believe him. Then I felt sick.

Two days before, the Corrections Commissioner, Kelvin Anderson, had gone on ABC Radio and announced that Jones had been released under the strictest parole conditions ever imposed on an offender. The supervision was constant, he said. Jones would not be able to leave his new home without supervision.

The next day, The Age and The Herald Sun had reported “sources” as saying that Jones was “electronically tagged”. Later that day, someone had tipped off The Herald Sun about where Jones was, and they found him. The reporter and photographer arrived at the house just as the walking bus met. They photographed the children meeting, and then they got photos of Jones putting out his wheelie bin. One of the mothers – a friend of mine – asked the reporter not to put her child’s photo in the paper. They said they would obscure the children’s faces. The walking bus left.
That left the reporters with Jones. They asked him whether he had anything to say to his victims. Of course, he didn’t answer them. He put his head in his hands and ran inside, and telephoned the staff of the Office of Corrections, who came and whisked him away.

The next day – the one on which I arrived home – the story was all over the front page. My friend’s children were in the photograph, clearly identifiable despite the pixilation over their faces. “The media abused my children,” my friend said later. “Bloody journalists.” Then, remembering my occupation, she added, “Sorry”. The paper had also got the name of the suburb wrong. They said it was Ascot Vale. We knew it was Flemington.

By the time the children gathered to go to school on the fifteenth, the first vigilantes had gathered. None of them was from our neighbourhood. They were people with pinched and florid faces – the angry crowd from central casting. They shouted and screamed and threatened to throw stones. They frightened the children more than Jones had had a chance to do. For the second time that week, the walking bus departed in fear.

In The Age, the Minister for Corrections, Tim Holding, was quoted as saying that Jones was banned from any contact with children, subject to a curfew and could not leave his home unsupervised. The Premier, Steve Bracks, was asked whether he would be happy to have Jones living next door. He said: “Yes I am confident that every precaution has been taken to protect the community and that Jones is subject to the strictest parole conditions ever imposed in Victoria.” We were safe, he said. We could trust the system.

But Bracks didn’t know the house. He didn’t know the orientation of front door to street, and that Jones would not have had to leave his house to talk to our children. The Premier did not know about the walking bus.

That night, lying awake, I thought about what might have happened. If I had seen Jones standing on his porch, I would have wished him good morning and chatted to him. The children would have seen me do this. What then if, one day, they were on that street corner on their own, and the nice man in the little house invited them in?

All this had been prevented by The Herald Sun, the same newspaper that had photographed my friend’s children, and the same newspaper that had brought the vigilantes – who, even as I lay awake that night, could be heard chanting in the street, holding their vigil at a now-empty house.

The next Monday, I drove the walking bus and stood in the schoolyard talking to the parents. We talked carefully, in earshot of the children, about “the temporary resident” and “the problem”. We laughed dryly about Mr Bracks. Trust the system. Huh! That house, of all houses. How could this have happened? We shook our heads and looked at our boots and felt helpless.
I was writing a regular column on the media for The Age at this time, and I decided to write about the rights and wrongs of journalistic exposure. I rang the spokeswoman for the Department of Justice, a woman called Ingrid Svendsen, who I knew quite well. Many years before, we had both been on staff at the paper.

We played telephone tag. Finally we spoke. I was in Geelong, following the union leader Bill Shorten around for one of those fly-on-the-wall profile pieces for The Age. Shorten was talking to union members employed at the Alcoa aluminium smelter. A cluster of women had developed cervical cancer. They were talking about the unseen threat.

I had to interrupt him to take Svendsen’s call, and he tried not to listen in as I tangled with her. How had the house been chosen?

“They would have done environmental scans,” she said.

What kind of scans?

“Whether children lived next door, that kind of thing.”

I told her that children did live next door. There were two of them, both of primary school age. I told her about the walking bus, and the layout of the house in relation to the street.

I asked again what checks had been done and she told me that the exact nature of the checks was confidential.

“Come on, Ingrid!”

“No, really, I can’t say any more. It’s confidential.”

I hung up. Shorten made a face.

I wrote in my column that the media could easily make it impossible to find a place for Jones. Yet “surely, in the face of bureaucratic bungling and resulting public risk, it is part of the duty of journalists to report the facts … As I try to analyse the rights and wrongs, my conflicting qualms and fears, I am left with the nagging, persistent feeling. There is no mistaking it. It is a fundamental gratitude for information. For not being kept in the dark.”

Having drafted the column, I sat down to write about Bill Shorten. I heard later that he didn’t like the profile. I never found out why, but experience has taught me that people hardly ever like profiles. There is always a gap

between how they see themselves and how they have been portrayed. There is always the gap between reality and the way the media package reality.

I wondered whether Brian Keith Jones felt the same way.

On July 25, having finished with Shorten, I lodged a Freedom of Information request with the Department of Justice about Brian Keith Jones. I asked for two
things: the nature and timing of the environmental checks that had been done before Jones came to live among us; and whether there had been any reviews of these checks to assess whether they had been adequate.

If I had been asked whether I was acting as a parent and resident or as a journalist in putting in this request I would have had trouble answering. Of course, if there was a story I would write it. Of course, had I not been a journalist it might never have occurred to me to use Freedom of Information, and I probably wouldn’t have known how.

Yet journalism wasn’t the only motivation. It would have made financial sense for me to go to one of the mainstream media organisations and get them to pay the costs. As a resident, I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to keep control of the way the story was written.

Jones, meanwhile, had been taken to live in a house in the grounds of Ararat jail. In the media, the controversy faded. We were carrying on with our lives, walking past the house. The children talked about Mr Baldy now and then. Since most of us had been circumspect in detailing the exact nature of the threat, they made up stories. Some had read The Herald Sun. Others pieced information together to make their own stories. Once, driving to the swimming pool, I heard my son proclaim to his friend that Mr Baldy ate children. His friend said no, that wasn’t true. Mr Baldy loved children too much. There was a silence while their nine-year-old minds wrapped around that one.

Then they began to talk of other things: homework and footy and cub scouts and, as the months passed, new topics – whether Pluto should have had its status as a planet downgraded, whether it was teasing and bullying to refer to Pluto as a dwarf planet.

We parents talked about it often. We were not angry enough to join the vigilantes. We were not vocal enough for the media. We were not passive enough, though, to be content.

I think we felt, more than anything else, stranded. The vigilantes had moved on to fresh occasions for anger and righteousness. The media had moved on to fresh stories. We were still there, still trying to understand and work out what to think.

That is how it was for the latter part of 2005, as my Freedom of Information request ground through the mills of government.

Freedom of Information is a sunny title for a bureaucratic law. When the legislation was first introduced in Victoria in 1982, I was part of the team of Age journalists who explored its use. We put in big, wide, fishing expeditions of requests. We pursued cases to the courts. We took literally the legislation’s promise: that the presumption was openness, the intention democratic – to build trust between
government and citizen. That was our rhetoric. The truth is probably that we just wanted good stories. Freedom of Information used to be fun.

The ’80s wore on and, as one state government after another fell into the mire of corruption scandals that marked the closing of the decade, Freedom of Information Acts were passed in states as well, but by now Freedom of Information had become manageable, and managed – part of the bureaucratic process rather than outside it. Sometimes, after much trouble and expense, information was released, but the great swathes of disclosure were over. Freedom of Information had become one more move in the slow and cautious dance of democratic government.

There is nothing exciting about Freedom of Information these days. It is a weary process. My request was made on July 22. Ten days later, I got a reply which acknowledged receipt, and informed me that both the Adult Parole Board and Corrections Victoria held relevant documents, but the Adult Parole Board, as an independent statutory body, was not subject to Freedom of Information.

I waited. Freedom of Information requests are meant to be dealt with within forty-five days, but it was September 28 before I got my decision, which was a refusal. The documents were exempt from the Act, it was said, for several reasons. First, they were subject to secrecy provisions in the Corrections Act, which prohibited the disclosure of information given to the Adult Parole Board and the disclosure of personal information about prisoners. Second, they were exempt because they would prejudice the proper administration of the law. Third, they were exempt because they would disclose and prejudice methods and procedures for dealing with breaches and evasions of the law. Fourth, they were exempt because they would divulge information obtained in confidence. Fifth, they were exempt because they would disclose “opinion advice or recommendation” prepared in the course of a deliberative process, and to disclose this would be contrary to the public interest because it would affect the integrity of the Adult Parole Board’s decision-making process by “inhibiting the frankness and candour in communications from officers of Corrections Victoria”. Lastly, release of the information would unreasonably disclose personal information about Jones and his victims.

On October 4, I submitted a request for an internal review – the first step of the appeal process. I did my best, over six pages, to argue why the exemptions didn’t apply. In particular, I emphasised that I did not want personal information about Jones or his victims, nor did I want to prejudice the enforcement of the law. I only wanted to know about the environmental checks.

I posted the letter, and waited. They were meant to reply within fourteen days. That date came and went. I rang the Freedom of Information officers again, and again, and was assured a decision was on the way. Once the fourteen days had expired, I was entitled to take this as a “deemed refusal” and appeal straight to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal (VCAT). I rang and threatened to do this,
but was reassured by a helpful young man – I will not name him, since it would surely cause him trouble – who told me he thought he would be able to make a partial release within days of information he believed would satisfy me. I was cheered by this, and waited some more.

Finally, in November, I rang once more and was told that a decision had been made to refuse me access in total.

Forestalling my explosion, the woman on the end of the phone tipped me off: if I appealed to VCAT that day, before I got the letter from them, it would be an appeal against a “deemed refusal” and I that meant I wouldn’t have to pay a fee. I think I detected sympathy in her voice. She had saved me $200.

The appeal was lodged with VCAT. There was to-ing and fro-ing. The exemptions the Department used changed slightly as the date of the hearing approached. As part of the process, they finally had to provide a list of the documents in dispute. There were ten, most of them emails between officers of Corrections Victoria. There was also a report to the Adult Parole Board, and a discussion paper on the release of Jones, which included a section headed “Organisational Learnings”. I was keen to see that one.

The case was set down for hearing, then adjourned at the Government’s request. I hired a barrister, and again considered going to the mainstream media to help pay her bill; once again, however, I decided to foot the bills and try to keep control.

Finally, on July 19, 2006, more than a year after Jones had been brought to our suburb to live, we had our day in court.

The day before the hearing, I issued a media release. I hoped the publicity might provoke the Government to consider settling. I already knew, thanks to a source, that there had been legal advice to the Government to offer me a partial release of information, which I would have accepted. This advice had been rejected at “the highest levels”.

And so that day I became the subject of the story – the centre of the scrum. I had been acting as both parent and journalist. Now the media wanted me to be only a parent: “Outraged of Flemington”. The night before the hearing, a reporter from The Age rang me, told me that I had written a very clear media release, and said he had been on to Ingrid Svendsen at the Department of Justice, where he had been told that I’d received a partial release of information the previous September. I told him this wasn’t true.

“Ah well, that’s what they say.”

“But it’s not true.”

“Well, it’s not our job to try and decide who’s right and wrong.”
I was struck dumb for a moment. I knew he wasn’t my advocate, but surely he wanted to get the facts straight. I asked him to ring Svendsen again and check the information. He refused, and told me I should be pleased. If the Department was giving out false information, my lawyer would be able to use this against them in court the next day.

“But what about your readers? Don’t you have a duty to give them accurate information?”

I could hear, in his responses, the weary tone of a reporter dealing with a difficult source. We argued it back and forth for a few minutes. There was no point. Nothing was going to get him to pick up that telephone again to check a fact.

I hung up, fuming, and rang Ingrid Svendsen myself. “You will be surprised to hear from me, given we are in court tomorrow,” I said.

“Yes,” her voice was guarded.

I told her the information she was giving out was wrong. She said she would check. Five minutes later, she rang me back to thank me. She was issuing an amended statement. She told me I had “gained brownie points” by letting them know.

Faced with this sign of humanity, I confided in her. I told her that I wasn’t necessarily after the Department. I just wanted to understand. I might not even write the story if I got the information.

“Oh come on,” she said. “If you get a story saying we stuffed up the placement of Mr Baldy, are you honestly saying you wouldn’t write it?”

No, I guess I couldn’t say that. “But I really, really do want to understand. I can’t imagine what a thankless job it must be dealing with someone like that…”

My brownie points had all evaporated.

The next day, I met my barrister in time for a coffee before the start of the hearing. I told her about The Age and its unwillingness to check its facts. She smiled a half-smile of no surprise. The media, she told me were like a stampede. Sometimes they could clear the way for you, but once you set it off you never knew where it would end up.

That stampede was waiting for me on the steps of the court. My barrister was filmed walking in, then asked to go back and do it again. I was asked whether it was a cover-up. The producer of talkback host Neil Mitchell’s program rang me and I was interviewed live on air. Mitchell had the Leader of the Opposition sitting in the studio. He got a free kick: he said he condemned the Government, and supported Ms Simons and the people of Flemington. Of course he did.

I told my barrister, who rolled her eyes. “That will help,” she said. “Not.”
We took our seats. The Department of Justice’s Freedom of Information officer was there, smiling and bobbing at me. Two officers of the Department gave evidence. The first was a small, middle-aged woman with a husky voice and an air of great sincerity. She was like a school teacher – weathered by the realities of the job. I liked her immediately. She answered my barrister’s questions frankly. She agreed that it would have been relevant to know that the walking bus met outside, and that children lived next door, but she also said that too much emphasis was placed, by the media, on where offenders were located, when there were other factors – the monitoring and other security systems – that should be taken into account.

Then her boss was on – the Deputy Commissioner of Corrections Victoria, Paul Delphine. This was the man who had overseen the “environmental scans”. He was a thin, long-nosed man who gave the air of being affronted by the cross-examination process. Had he been aware, my barrister asked, that the walking bus met outside the subject house? He replied that he hadn’t known this until he read my statement. Had he been aware that children lived next door? Not until he read my statement.

They hadn’t known. Nor, it emerged, had they checked with police, or the council, or local schools, or neighbours.

I had part of the answer I was seeking, but then my barrister was stopped from asking more questions, since it was clear that the stuff the Department was trying to suppress was coming out in any case.

The Department’s lawyer asked Delphine if he was confident that the environmental checks had been “rigorous and professional”. “Yes,” he said. “They had been.”

“How do they square those statements?” I asked my lawyer. She shrugged and smiled her smile.

I gave evidence. A statement from another of the parents – the coordinator of the walking bus program – was accepted into evidence, and then it was over. Judge Davis, a small dark woman who never smiled and presided with perfect fairness, would deliver her decision in due course. I went home and got on with my work and my life, and waited some more.

The judgment came down on October 19, 2006. I had lost. Justice Davis said the public interest in the effective operation of the parole system, including public servants being willing to give full and frank reports to the Parole Board, outweighed my “private interest in examining the process by which the property at 137 Kent Street came to be selected in a particular instance”.

Appeals could only be on legal grounds, and Justice Davis’s judgment was watertight. It was also the case, I was told, that a different, less conservative judge might well have come to a different conclusion. It was time to give up.
The parents involved in the walking bus went online and read the judgment, and puzzled over the reasoning, but life was moving on. The house was occupied again – by a mother with children. Our children were getting older. I had moved house, and no longer passed by Kent Street every day. There was every reason to drop it.

But I was hearing things. I got an anonymous telephone call urging me to appeal. I heard through contacts of contacts that the Department had been traumatised by the case, and by the publicity.

Finally, wanting to write this piece, I decided to try once again for dialogue. On January 23 this year, I rang Ingrid Svendsen to find she had gone and I was dealing with a new public relations person, Kate McGrath. I told her I was writing about the case. Would it be possible, I asked, to talk? Would it be possible for them to tell their side of the story – the difficulties of the job. I was after understanding, I said. A reflective essay – not a hatchet job. Could we talk?

She said she would find out. Two days later, she got back. They would not meet me, but if I put in written questions they would try to answer them. I sent an email. I wrote that I hoped for dialogue, not confrontation. “I am hoping we can move past this and towards a position of mutual understanding, if not agreement. I hope this is not too ambitious,” I wrote. I asked for information on the difficulties of the job – the thankless task of finding homes for parolees. I asked them to help me reconcile the fact that they had not known about the walking bus, and the claim that their checks had been rigorous and professional. I asked whether there had been any reviews of the methods and procedures as a result of the Jones case. Finally, I asked whether, during the processing of my Freedom of Information request, they had ever considered negotiating or trying to satisfy my concerns. I said: “My impression of the Department through this affair has been that it ‘bolted down the hatches’ and adopted a combative and defensive posture. I may be wrong about this, but that is how it looked from the outside … How did it look from the Department’s point of view?”

I waited. The answers, I was told, were being drafted. On Wednesday, February 7, I was promised something that day. Thursday dawned with nothing. I was told the answers had to be “signed off” by the Minister, who was busy. Then I was told he had signed off, but they had to go to the media unit. In the meantime, one answer came back – concerning the handling of the Freedom of Information request. It was a bloodless bureaucratic recounting. It told me how many requests the department received and how many were satisfied. It reminded me, as if I didn’t know, that I had lost the VCAT appeal. Finally, it said that Freedom of Information applicants were “encouraged to discuss” their requests with FoI officers, but that they could not negotiate. I fired back a question. At what stage would the Department say I had been encouraged to discuss my request? I never got a reply.

Finally, in the last minutes of the working day of Friday, February 9, I got a telephone call. There would be no response. A decision had been made to give me nothing.
“Why?” I wailed.

The spin doctor was apologetic. It wasn’t her fault. “What is going on?” I asked. “I can’t say anything,” she said.

By the time this is published, it will be about two years since the Victorian Government sent Brian Keith Jones to live on our street.

What do I know now about how this happened? Perhaps somewhere there is a public servant in trouble because they didn’t do the checks adequately, or maybe it is their boss who is in trouble because the procedures for the checks were poor. Or maybe nobody is in trouble because, despite everything, the Department insists that the environmental checks were thorough and rigorous. Perhaps that means the same thing could happen again.

Brian Keith Jones is back in jail. One night at Ararat, he broke the conditions of his supervision order by going for a walk by himself. That gave them the reason they needed to put him back behind bars. That unsupervised walk could have been in our street, among children he might have groomed from his front porch. The media prevented this, yet who can deny that the media – including me – are also part of the problem?

What are we left with? A stack of legal papers, a tribunal judgment, a small pile of newspaper clippings, a hole in the bank account and two children who are still growing and, so far as any parent can ever know, relatively safe.

I think of Jones sometimes and wonder if he thinks of me. He will probably know my name. Even if they didn’t let him read the papers, I know he was consulted about my Freedom of Information request, and opposed me being given any information. This was one of the things weighed in the balance.

The media is like a stampede, and I suppose to him and to the Government I must seem like just one more out-of-control, rampaging heifer, trampling down careful constructions. I must have made their job so much more difficult.

I find Brian Keith Jones’ mind impenetrable to my imaginings. This is also true of the collective mind of government.

Two years on, with the rhythms of suburban life all around me, I don’t know how to feel.

The children still talk sometimes about the bad man who came to live in that house. They ask us where he is now, and we tell them he is in jail and can’t hurt them. Sometimes they ask why he was sent to live amongst us, and these days I say that a dreadful mistake was made, but it has been put right. I cannot tell them that anyone is sorry.