



IN THE CORONERS COURT  
OF VICTORIA  
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: 2020 0646

**FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST**

*Form 37 Rule 60(1)*

*Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008*

Deceased:	Barry Scott Collins
Delivered on:	4 December 2020
Delivered at:	Coroners Court of Victoria, 65 Kavanagh Street, Southbank
Hearing dates:	23 November 2020
Findings of:	Coroner Paresa Antoniadis Spanos
Counsel assisting the Coroner:	Natalie Savva, Coroners Solicitor
Representation	No appearances
Catchwords	Missing person, work stressors, Warrnambool

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page 3
MR COLLINS IS LAST SEEN ALIVE ON 8 DECEMBER 1988	Page 3
PURPOSE OF A CORONIAL INVESTIGATION	Page 4
INVESTIGATION AND SOURCES OF EVIDENCE	Page 5
THE FOCUS OF THE CORONIAL INVESTIGATION AND INQUEST	Page 5
FIRST PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION	Page 6
SECOND PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION	Page 7
THIRD PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION	Page 7
AN INVESTIGATION BY THE WARRNAMBOOL STANDARD	Page 8
A LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENQUIRY INTO THE HICKFORD SIGN	Page 10
THE INQUEST	Page 11
CONCLUSIONS/FINDINGS	Page 12
COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	Page 14
PUBLICATION OF FINDING	Page 15
DISTRIBUTION OF FINDING	Page 15

## INTRODUCTION

1. Mr Collins was married to Jeanette Collins and together, they had three children, Jon Scott Collins, Susan Vera Gall (nee Collins) and Ann Louise Collins.
2. In the early years of their marriage, Mr and Mrs Collins lived in Bendigo while Mr Collins pursued further study and began employment at Bendigo City Council. The family later moved to Benalla before settling in Warrnambool in 1979 where Mr Collins took a job as Deputy City Engineer for Warrnambool City Council (WCC).
3. According to his colleague, Vernon Robson, Mr Collins earned the respect of all the City Councillors, staff and residents for his exceptionally professional attitude, unflagging work ethic and integrity. Mr Collins loved his job and was punctual, detail-oriented and an integral part of the senior management team at the council. His attention to detail rankled some colleagues, but overall Mr Collins was well respected.
4. Mrs Gall described her childhood as a happy and warm one with many camping trips and barbeques as a family. Mr Collins was an involved father who always attended his children's sporting events and encouraged them to strive academically. He involved himself in community organisation such as Apex Australia and the Rotary Club and was on the school council when the family lived in Benalla.
5. It was known that in his spare time Mr Collins would inspect different parts of Warrnambool to ensure that rubbish was being collected, maintenance issues such as potholes or road edges were not going unnoticed and weeds were not growing along key tourist routes.
6. Mr Collins spent his spare time working on the home and garden and maintaining his MG sports car. All three of the Collins children described their parents' marriage as generally harmonious and without financial hardship.
7. Shortly before his disappearance, Mr and Mrs Collins were building three medical suites named the Hickford Clinic, which were close to the local hospital in the hope that the doctors and nurses working there would move in as a revenue stream.
8. Mr Collins did not have a history of mental illness but upon reflection, and with the benefit of hindsight, his immediate family wondered whether he may have suffered from depression. Regardless, Mr Collins never spoke of ending his own life or engaged in morbid conversation.

## MR COLLINS IS LAST SEEN ALIVE ON 8 DECEMBER 1988

9. Mr Collins was last seen alive by his wife at their home shortly after midnight on 8 December 1988. The circumstances surrounding his disappearance will be set out in some detail below.

Suffice for present purposes to say that he has not been seen by his family or anyone who knew him well since that date.

10. Since 8 December 1988, Mr Collins has been the subject of missing persons reports and investigations across several states and his disappearance was reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria on 29 January 2020 as a suspected death.

#### PURPOSE OF A CORONIAL INVESTIGATION.

11. The purpose of a coronial investigation of a *reportable death*<sup>1</sup> is to ascertain, if possible, the identity of the deceased person, the cause of death and the circumstances in which death occurred.<sup>2</sup> For coronial purposes, *death* includes suspected death.<sup>3</sup>
12. The *cause* of death refers to the *medical* cause of death, incorporating where possible the *mode* or *mechanism* of death. For coronial purposes, the *circumstances* in which death occurred refers to the context or background and surrounding circumstances but is confined to those circumstances sufficiently proximate and causally relevant to the death, and not all those circumstances which might form part of a narrative culminating in death.<sup>4</sup>
13. The broader purpose of any coronial investigations is to contribute to the reduction of the number of preventable deaths through the findings of the investigation and the making of recommendations by coroners, generally referred to as the *prevention* role.<sup>5</sup> Coroners are empowered to report to the Attorney-General in relation to a death; to comment on any matter connected with the death they have investigated, including matters of public health or safety and the administration of justice; and to make recommendations to any Minister or public statutory authority on any matter connected with the death, including public health or safety or the administration of justice.<sup>6</sup> These are effectively the vehicles by which the coroner's prevention role can be advanced.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term is exhaustively defined in section 4 of the *Coroners Act 2008* [the Act]. Apart from a jurisdictional nexus with the State of Victoria a reportable death includes deaths that appear to have been unexpected, unnatural or violent or to have resulted, directly or indirectly, from an accident or injury; and, deaths that occur during or following a medical procedure where the death is or may be causally related to the medical procedure and a registered medical practitioner would not, immediately before the procedure, have reasonably expected the death (section 4(2)(a) and (b) of the Act).

<sup>2</sup> Section 67(1).

<sup>3</sup> See the definition of "death" in section 3 of the Act.

<sup>4</sup> This is the effect of the authorities – see for example *Harmsworth v The State Coroner* [1989] VR 989; *Clancy v West* (Unreported 17/08/1994, Supreme Court of Victoria, Harper J.)

<sup>5</sup> The 'prevention' role is now explicitly articulated in the Preamble and purposes of the Act, compared with the *Coroners Act 1985* where this role was generally accepted as 'implicit'.

<sup>6</sup> See sections 72(1), 67(3) and 72(2) regarding reports, comments and recommendations respectively.

<sup>7</sup> See also sections 73(1) and 72(5) which requires publication of coronial findings, comments and recommendations and responses respectively; section 72(3) and (4) which oblige the recipient of a coronial recommendation to respond within three months, specifying a statement of action which has or will be taken in relation to the recommendation.

14. It is important to stress that coroners are not empowered to determine the civil or criminal liability arising from the investigation of a reportable death and are specifically prohibited from including in a finding or comment any statement that a person is, or may be, guilty of an offence.<sup>8</sup>

#### INVESTIGATION AND SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

15. This finding is based on the totality of the material the product of the coronial investigation of Mr Collins' suspected death. That is, the investigation and brief of evidence compiled by Detective Senior Constable Richard Hughes from Warrnambool Criminal Investigation Unit of Victoria Police and his evidence at the inquest.
16. The brief will remain on the coronial file, together with the inquest transcript.<sup>9</sup> In writing this finding, I do not purport to summarise all the material and evidence, but will refer to it only in such detail as is warranted by its forensic significance and in the interests of narrative clarity.

#### THE FOCUS OF THE CORONIAL INVESTIGATION AND INQUEST

17. The coronial investigation of a suspected death differs significantly from most other coronial investigations which commence with the discovery of a deceased person's body or remains. The focus in those cases is on identification of the body or remains, a forensic pathologist's examination and advice to the coroner about the medical cause of death and the circumstances in which the death occurred.
18. Absent a body or remains, the coronial investigation focuses on the last sighting of the deceased; any subsequent contact with family or the authorities; and evidence of proof of life since. In such cases, the coronial investigation is essentially an exercise in proof of death through the absence of evidence that a person has been alive or active via searches and a series of checks of records held by various authorities and data bases.
19. There were three broad phases in the investigation of Mr Collins' disappearance and suspected death – the first in the months immediately following the last contact with his wife on 8 August 1988, the second from 2010 and the third from 2019 until the inquest.

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<sup>8</sup> Section 69(1). However, a coroner may include a statement relating to a notification to the Director of Public Prosecutions if they believe an indictable offence may have been committed in connection with the death. See sections 69 (2) and 49(1).

<sup>9</sup> From the commencement of the *Coroners Act 2008* (the Act), that is 1 November 2009, access to documents held by the Coroners Court of Victoria is governed by section 115 of the Act. Unless otherwise stipulated, all references to legislation that follow are to provisions of the Act.

## FIRST PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION

20. Having not heard from him since he left to go for a walk in the middle of the night, Mrs Collins asked Mr Robson to report Mr Collins to police as a missing person at 7:25am on 8 December 1988. The report was taken by Senior Constable Gregory Creek from Warrnambool Police who informed a senior officer, Senior Sergeant Ian Armstrong of the disappearance. Given Mr Collins' position in the community, Senior Sergeant Armstrong took carriage of the investigation and by 7:55am, the Missing Persons Bureau and senior members Inspector Peter Morriss and Acting Superintendent Neil Patterson had been notified of Mr Collins' disappearance.
21. At 8:00am, all available units were marshalled to search for Mr Collins. The search encompassed both the coastal areas and foot and vehicle patrols of the town precinct and included areas Mr Collins was known to frequent, such as Granny's Grave Beach and the surrounding areas. A friend of Mr Collins' son Jon Collins conducted an aerial search along the coastline as well. No evidence of Mr Collins was ever found on land.
22. Mr Collins' family and friends continued to search in the weeks following his disappearance, but he had simply vanished without a trace.
23. Mr Collins' disappearance was reported on extensively in Australian print and television media in the days, months and years following his disappearance. In 1989, he was featured in the national television shows, "Australia's Most Wanted" and "A Current Affair."
24. As at 15 June 1989 Mr Collins' dental records and x-rays had been obtained. The same year Mr Collins was featured in New Idea magazine, Australia Post magazine and other national publications.
25. Many sightings were reported after each media article but, according to Senior Sergeant Armstrong, they were vague and difficult to follow up. Nevertheless, each sighting was investigated albeit without success. The most encouraging sighting was a report made by a Warrnambool couple on Magnetic Island. Queensland Police were tasked to investigate. While a man named Barry Collins did reside on the island and was receiving mail, it was not Mr Collins.
26. Posters were sent to all police stations in Victoria, interstate missing persons outlets, all psychiatric clinics and hospitals in Victoria and to men's homes and hostels in Victoria via the Salvation Army. The Australian Federal Police were also apprised of Mr Collins' disappearance.

## SECOND PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION

27. On 21 October 2010 Detective Acting Sergeant Brad March was assigned Mr Collin's case by the Belier Task Force (previously known as the Cold Case Unit). Following a conversation with Senior Constable Creek in late November 2010, Detective Acting Sergeant March became aware of a rumour that Mr Collins had left town with, or met up later, with a former resident of Warrnambool. Checks indicated the former resident now resided in Queensland. Marriage and death checks were submitted to the New South Wales and Queensland Births, Deaths and Marriages registries. No marriage or death records for Mr Collins or the resident were located.
28. Detective Acting Sergeant March submitted a request to Medicare Australia for the period 8 December 1988 to November 2010. No claims had been made by Barry Collins during this period. The case was reassigned on 9 February 2011.

## THIRD PHASE OF THE INVESTIGATION

29. Detective Senior Constable Richard Hughes was assigned Mr Collins' case on 11 April 2013. When Detective Senior Constable Hughes was promoted elsewhere on 14 June 2013, the investigation into Mr Collins' disappearance was reallocated to the Warrnambool Crime Investigation Unit. On 21 December 2019, when it was ascertained that no further investigations had been completed, the case was transferred back to Detective Senior Constable Hughes.
30. Having been notified of the circumstances of Mr Collins' disappearance, on 3 February 2020, I asked Detective Senior Constable Hughes to compile a full coronial brief of evidence, including all possible proof of life checks. He undertook a thorough and comprehensive investigation including the product of earlier investigations and more recent proof of life checks as out in the coronial brief of evidence.
31. Under cover of letter Detective Senior Constable Hughes contacted Jeanette and Jon Collins who both agreed to provide statements in their own time as the pain and trauma of Mr Collins' disappearance was still keenly felt. A meeting between Detective Senior Constable Hughes and Jon Collins occurred on 31 January 2020. When asked what might have happened to his father, Jon Collins unhesitatingly volunteered that he thought his father had walked into the sea.
32. Detective Senior Constable Hughes met with Mrs Collins on 12 February 2020 where she told him that she believed her husband was deceased but that they would meet again.
33. Detective Senior Constable Hughes also obtained the following:

- a) Further statements from Mr Robson, who supplied his personal collection of Warrnambool City Council correspondence, his December 1988 witness statement, newspaper articles and copies of several television shows that documented Mr Collins' disappearance, including 'A Current Affair' and 'Outlook'.
  - b) All archived general Victoria Police correspondence and enquiries including printouts of the Victoria Police Interpose and LEAP databases.
  - c) Figures compiled by the Coroners Prevention Unit at the Coroners Court of Victoria with respect to data and frequency of suicides by drowning in the State of Victoria between 2010 and 2020.
34. Significantly, the then editor of the Warrnambool Standard, John Allin, was deceased and was unable to provide his account of contact with Mr Collins and others in relation to the story he was investigating that concerned Mr Collins. Detective Senior Constable Hughes contacted Mr Allin's wife, but she could not recall ever having a conversation with her husband about the lead up to the events of 8 December 1988.
35. Detective Senior Constable Hughes also conducted a range of 'proof of life' checks:
- a) Enquiries with the major Australian banks did not identify any bank accounts in Mr Collins' name.
  - b) Mr Collins was not recorded on the Victorian electoral roll and did not hold a post office or parcel locker with Australia Post or an Australian passport.
  - c) The Department of Home Affairs last recorded Mr Collins as 'onshore' as at 29 June 1987.
  - d) A request was made through the Victoria Police RMSweb system for a Medicare check on Mr Collins to provide any details of Medicare numbers, Pharmaceutical Benefits history and the current address of any person using Mr Collins' name and date of birth. Mr Collins' details had not been used or changed for the period 7 December 1988 to 28 April 2020.

#### AN INVESTIGATION BY THE WARRNAMBOOL STANDARD IN DECEMBER 1988

36. Late in the evening of 1 December 1988, Mr Vernon<sup>10</sup> was telephoned by John Allin, the Editor of the local newspaper, The Warrnambool Standard. Mr Allin said he had been contacted by a person who had provided information to the newspaper regarding a serious

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<sup>10</sup> Mr Vernon at that time was the Town Clerk of Warrnambool City Council.



allegation of impropriety within the Council Building Department. Documents evidencing the alleged impropriety were to be furnished to Mr Allin within the next two or three days.

37. Mr Allin assured Mr Vernon that he was not in the practice of destroying the reputations of public officials and promised that he would not use the “information” until he had seen Mr Vernon to discuss the matter personally. Mr Vernon gave an undertaking that he would cooperate in resolving the allegation but was never contacted again by Mr Allin.
38. At about 4:15pm on 7 December 1988, as Mr Vernon was about to meet with the City Engineer, Don Cooper, an agitated Mr Collins rushed into the office and asked to speak to both of them urgently. Mr Collins said he had been contacted by Mr Allin who accused him of misusing Council funds to pay for a sign at the Hickford Clinic. Furthermore, Mr Allin said he had three documents to prove the fraud. Mr Collins appeared pale, stressed and extremely worried and said that he had never seen the documents before. Mr Allin had invited Mr Collins to put his side of the story to him at 4:45pm that day.
39. Mr Collins explained that shortly before Christmas 1987 when he was about to go on leave, he had approached the Council’s Building Surveyor Colin Hunt to ask that next time he was at Philgrafix<sup>11</sup>, could he arrange for them to formulate a computer layout for a sign for the Hickford Clinic on his behalf. It was to be a private order that Mr Collins would pay for himself. Mr Collins asked Mr Hunt to give him the invoice when it was ready and supplied a piece of timber on which the computer layout for the sign should be routed. When no invoice was forthcoming, Mr Collins assumed that the sign had been made for him by Philgrafix for free as a good will gesture.
40. Mr Collins reiterated that he had never intended that the Council pay for the sign and immediately offered his resignation to protect Mr Hunt in addition to offering to repay the \$21.00 that had been charged to the council. Mr Vernon and Mr Cooper refused to accept Mr Collin’s resignation.
41. A short time later at 4:45pm Mr Vernon telephoned Mr Allin to admonish him for going directly to Mr Collins rather than himself or Mr Cooper and sought assurances that Mr Allin would not print the article until Mr Hunt could be questioned.<sup>12</sup> According to Mr Vernon, Mr Allin refused to delay printing the story as he was under pressure from Council staff who had furnished the photocopied documents<sup>13</sup> to ‘have the full story published’.

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<sup>11</sup> Philgrafix was the firm responsible for providing computerised layout services for the Council.

<sup>12</sup> Mr Hunt was away at conference in Melbourne and was due to return the following day 8 December 1988.

<sup>13</sup> The photocopied documents comprised the work instructions signed by Mr Hunt, a copy of work order 25588 and the processed invoice.

42. At about 5:00pm, the Warrnambool City Council Mayor Toni McCormack telephoned Mr Vernon to say that Mr Allin had contacted her for a comment. As Mr Collins had not yet responded substantively to Mr Allin's allegations, it was agreed that Ms McCormack would accompany him to the newspaper.
43. Ms McCormack, Mr Collins and Mr Cooper attended on Mr Allin. Mr Cooper and Ms McCormack agreed that the Council would be obliged to pursue the matter if further irregularities were identified but they were clear that they had the utmost confidence in Mr Collins and did not expect to find any other issues. As the story turned on Mr Hunt's account, Mr Allin agreed to delay publication until such time as Mr Hunt could be interviewed.
44. According to Ms McCormack, Mr Collins appeared to be in a reasonable frame of mind, however it was evident that he had been deeply rocked by someone questioning his professional integrity. Mr Collins appeared sad and worried but satisfied with the indication that Mr Allin would defer publication.
45. That evening, Mrs Gall and her husband had dinner at the Collins residence. Mrs Collins was keen for Mr Collins to tell their daughter about the events of the day, but he did not wish to. The family spent the rest of the evening excitedly discussing Mr and Mrs Gall's impending move to Darwin until they left at about 8:30pm. Mrs Gall did not recall her father drinking any alcohol that night.
46. At about 12:15am on 8 August 1988, Mr Collins rose from bed and told his wife that he was going for a walk as he could not sleep and would see her later. Mr Collins gave his wife a kiss as he bade her goodbye. Later, in hindsight, she thought this was unusual. Mr Collins had left with the house keys, which also had the car key on it. Without the house key, their front door could not be locked. Mr Collins did not have his wallet or any money and was only wearing a tracksuit and desert boots. His car remained at home.
47. When Mr Collins had not returned by about 5:00am, Mrs Collins and her daughter Ann Collins fetched Mrs Gall and her husband to look for him. The four of them drove around town looking for Mr Collins, including visiting the council offices, which were deserted.

#### A LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENQUIRY INTO THE HICKFORD CLINIC SIGN

48. A local government inquiry was held to determine the circumstances surrounding the ordering of the sign and payment of the invoice. The inquiry found that on 21 December 1987 while ordering other Council signs, Mr Hunt inadvertently filled out the order form so that the Council would be charged for the work. A copy of the original order form was

initialled by the Executive Engineer, Peter Reeve, who was acting Deputy City Engineer at the time.

49. On 23 December 1987 Philgrafix prepared invoice 724, which read “O/N 27588 – Draw Out Sign - \$21.00.” The invoice was received in the Council accounts department and forwarded to the City Engineer’s Department for processing and authorisation. It was returned to the account department signed “O.K. – C Hunt” and was paid. Mr Collins was wholly unaware of these events.
50. In his statement, Mr Hunt observed that the order forms would have been held in the council archives and originated nearly a year before the paperwork was submitted to the Warrnambool Standard.

## THE INQUEST

51. The only witness called at inquest was Detective Senior Constable Hughes who provided an overview of the various efforts made by police to locate Mr Collins since his disappearance in December 1988 and was also asked to provide general information about the manner in which missing persons cases are dealt with by Victoria Police.
52. Detective Senior Constable Hughes explained that in more recent years, if a disappearance is not suspicious, the investigation is within the remit of frontline, uniformed police for the first 30 days. Thereafter, if the person is still missing, the case would be allocated to a detective at the 30-day mark.<sup>14</sup>
53. At the time of Mr Collins’ disappearance, the investigation most likely lay with the local police station and given there was no suggestion of foul play, Detective Senior Constable Hughes understood that the original investigator Senior Sergeant Ian Armstrong felt the responsibility rested with him.
54. From Detective Senior Constable Hughes’ experience, there are many unresolved disappearances like Mr Collins’ sitting with metropolitan and regional crime investigation units, criminal investigation units and at regional country stations. Logically, it follows that there are other families in a similar position to the Collins family, waiting for a resolution of the disappearance of their loved one.
55. Detective Senior Constable Hughes agreed that the Coroners Court depends on external parties, generally Victoria Police, to report deaths. Moreover, while anyone can report a

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<sup>14</sup> Inquest transcript page 11. To be clear, deaths where there does appear to be third party involvement or other suspicious circumstances are referred to the Homicide Squad.

death to the Coroners Court,<sup>15</sup> including family member, in the case of long term missing persons, Victoria Police is the entity best placed to do so; to provide the preliminary information required for the report; and to investigate the disappearance/suspected death and to provide a coronial brief in accordance with the coroner's directions.

56. It is only with a report from an external party that the coronial jurisdiction is activated. Detective Senior Constable Hughes did not understand there to be a specific set of circumstances that would trigger the referral of a missing person to the Coroner and could not precisely explain why it had taken 32 years for a referral to be made in this instance.
57. When questioned about the family's view of what happened to Mr Collins, Detective Senior Constable Hughes stated that Mr Collins never expressly said he was depressed and did not engage in 'morbid talk'. However, with the benefit of hindsight, Jon Collins believed his father may have had undiagnosed depression and Mrs Collins had observed that her husband sometimes had a temper. No major stressors were identified in Mr Collins life at the time of his disappearance, apart from the controversy surrounding the Hickford Clinic sign.
58. With respect to the geographical area in which Mr Collins went missing, Detective Senior Constable Hughes gave evidence that the area is comprised of open ocean with a variety of sea life where it is known that people can disappear without a trace. It was his belief that Mr Collins had likely died around the time of his disappearance in a manner consistent with drowning, as no evidence of him was ever found on land.
59. Mr Robson and Mrs Gall participated in the inquest via Webex and while they were not formally called as witnesses, both were given the opportunity to speak. Mr Robson spoke of the comfort he hoped the Collins family would receive from the proceedings and the effect on the Warrnambool Council staff and the community at large. Mrs Gall spoke of her relief that the matter had finally been brought to a conclusion and of the profound effect that her father's absence had on the whole family, particularly her mother. She also expressed her regret that her father had missed out on so much over the years and had disappeared due to a seemingly minor matter.

## CONCLUSIONS/FINDINGS

60. The standard of proof for coronial finding or fact is the civil standard of proof on the balance of probabilities, with the *Briginshaw* gloss or explication.<sup>16</sup> It is self-evident that a

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<sup>15</sup> See section 12 of the Act.

<sup>16</sup> *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938) 60 C.L.R. 336 esp at 362-363. "The seriousness of an allegation made, the inherent unlikelihood of an occurrence of a given description, or the gravity of the consequences flowing from a particular finding, are considerations which must affect the answer to the question whether the issues had been proved to the

finding that a person who remains have not been found is deceased is a serious matter with significant legal consequences that is not made lightly and requires me to reach a comfortable level of satisfaction as to facts based on the evidence.

61. Having applied that standard to the available evidence, I find that:

- a. Barry Scott Collins, born on 20 April 1939, late of 70 Hickford Parade, Warrnambool, Victoria, is now deceased and has been since about 8 December 1988.
- b. Absent his remains, I am unable to determine the cause of Mr Collins' death.
- c. There is no evidence to support a finding that any third party was involved in Mr Collins' death or that he otherwise died in suspicious circumstances.
- d. While the *possibility* that Mr Collins' died by misadventure while out walking when he found he could not sleep that night cannot be logically excluded, the weight of the available evidence supports a finding that Mr Collins *probably* took his own life.
- e. In the 24 hours immediately before Mr Collins' disappearance he became aware of potential reputational damage that he would likely suffer if The Warrnambool Standard published a story about his having allegedly defrauded Warrnambool Council of \$21 in the circumstances set out above.
- f. While this could be seen by some, even many people, as a relatively trivial matter, Mr Collins was by dint of personality just the sort of person who would be and was deeply troubled by the potential for such a blight on his reputation.
- g. That said, there is nothing in the evidence to support a finding that Mr Allin was doing anything other than pursuing a story about alleged corrupt practice in good faith.
- h. The investigation of Mr Collins' disappearance has failed to uncover any other possible motive or stressor that might have led him to end his own life.

## COMMENTS

Pursuant to section 67(3) of the *Coroners Act 2008*, I make the following comment/s on any matter connected with the death, including matters relating to public health and safety or the administration of justice.

1. The Coroners Court of Victoria, Victoria Police and the broader Victorina community all have a legitimate interest in the investigation of reportable deaths including the suspected deaths of long term missing persons to ascertain whether they have died in suspicious circumstances and whether there are lessons to be learnt from the circumstances in which they died which may contribute to a reduction in the number of preventable deaths.
2. It is self-evident that the families and connections of long-term missing persons deserve as timely and thorough an investigation and resolution as possible. Based on the evidence at inquest, I acknowledge that there have been changes and improvements in the way that Victoria Police undertakes the investigation of long-term missing persons cases such that the significant delay experienced by the Collins family is unlikely to be repeated.

## RECOMMENDATION/S

Pursuant to section 72(2) of the Coroners Act 2008, I make the following recommendation/s to any Minister, public statutory authority or entity on any matter connected with a death, including recommendations relating to public health and safety or the administration of justice.

1. I recommend that the Chief Commissioner of Police considers introducing a system of regular auditing and oversight of the investigation of long-term missing persons cases to ensure that they are being progressed in as timely and thorough manner as possible and that they are referred to the Coroners Court as suspected deaths as soon as it is appropriate to do so.

## PUBLICATION OF FINDING

Pursuant to section 73(1) of the Act, unless otherwise ordered by a coroner, the findings, comments and recommendations made following an inquest must be published on the Internet in accordance with the rules, and I make no such order.

## DISTRIBUTION OF FINDING

I direct that a copy of this finding is provided:

Mrs Jeanette Collins

Mrs Susan Gall

Mr Jon Collins

Ms Ann Collins

Mr Vernon Robson

The Editor, The Warrnambool Standard

The Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages for Victoria

Detective Senior Constable Richard Hughes c/o Warrnambool Criminal Investigation Unit

Chief Commissioner of Police

O.I.C. Long Term Missing Persons Unit, Victoria Police

Signature:



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Paresa Antoniadis Spanos

Coroner

Date: 4 December 2020