

Jehovah's Witnesses, ALP conference and national redress scheme

The latest Royal Commission hearing which started last week into the Jehovah's Witnesses Church heard evidence that child sexual abuse survivors have received no redress from their Church community.

While almost 60 people have contacted the Commission regarding allegations of child sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses Church in Australia, the Commission heard that no redress claims have been made in relation to child sexual abuse concerning that Church.

It also heard that not one of 1006 cases of child abuse allegations recorded in Jehovah's Witnesses Australia documents since 1950 was reported to police.

The Commission heard that in the case of child abusers, the Book of Deuteronomy rule about needing two witnesses to a wrongdoing is applied and that this had effectively meant it is highly unlikely that claims against an abuser within Jehovah's Witnesses could be proved.

This is just one way that different churches and other institutions make it difficult for child sexual abuse survivors to seek justice and redress.

I mention the Jehovah's Witnesses not to single it out but to highlight the pressing need for a national, independent child sexual abuse redress scheme.

A national scheme is something abuse survivors are calling for and something that will obviously address the clear problem of institutions investigating themselves and determining how redress should be determined.

It was encouraging that the ALP National Conference last month [passed a resolution](#) to act on the recommendations of the Royal Commission, including a redress scheme for victims.

The resolution binds the ALP to act on the Commission's findings, in consultation with victims, and to report annually to the parliament on the implementation of the recommendations.

While the resolution is pleasing, it appears there might be an 'out' for Labor when one of the delegates speaking on the motion said the recommendations would not necessarily be implemented in their entirety, but "in their spirit".

If Labor does regain government at next year's election then the idea of implementing recommendations 'in spirit' might not provide the level of confidence survivors of child sexual abuse need.

Earlier this year [it was reported](#) that Prime Minister Tony Abbott promised a "strong and comprehensive" response to whatever the Royal Commission proposes by way of compensation for abuse survivors.

Labor, the Coalition and the Greens, and State and Territory Governments need to come out now and say they will fully back in the Commission's recommendations, particularly on redress.

There can be no 'ifs or buts' about this.

Almost two years of public hearings have demonstrated that institutions, left to their own devices are, for the most part, incapable of providing redress to abuse survivors. This role needs to be taken away from all institutions and vested with a national independent scheme or left to mediation or the courts, depending on the wishes of the abuse survivor.

Within weeks Commissioner McClellan is due to deliver to Government his recommendations on redress and reforms to the way in which cases of child sexual abuse should be dealt with through the legal system. This will be a very significant milestone in the course of the Commission's work and goes to the very heart of why it was created.

Federal, State and Territory Governments must get their act together and agree to the Commission's recommendations on redress at the very least. Anything less will be a slap in the face for survivors and an unconscionable waste of money.

And despite the Commission pushing forward with its valuable private hearings and policy development, if an effective, generous and independent redress scheme does not emerge from the Commission's process then survivors and the broader community could rightly see the past three years as nothing more than 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

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