

National redress disappointment, Ballarat hearing resumes

Francis Sullivan, December 9, 2015

This week AAP reports thousands of child sex abuse survivors expecting the Turnbull government to commit to a national redress scheme before Christmas face bitter disappointment.

According to the AAP report hopes the government would, in line with the final recommendation of the child abuse royal commission, announce by year's end its backing of a \$4.3 billion scheme are fading, principally because some states are reluctant to come on board.

NSW and Victoria support a national scheme. South Australia doesn't. Other states are yet to commit. But the states have written to the Prime Minister asking him to clarify the Federal Government's position.

The Church supports a national scheme that will provide justice for victims. It will be transparent, independent of the Church and other institutions and relatively generous, given the burden of proof will be limited and victims who suffered at the hands of perpetrators who have died will still get access to compensation.

As the work of the Royal Commission continues, it's clear that while a diabolical number of perpetrators have come from the Catholic Church, other institutions have not escaped the scourge of the abuse of children in their care.

Every week I get calls from survivors of abuse who want to know what is happening - what is coming out of the Royal Commission for victims?

I say to them that the Church backs a national redress scheme, that we have issued guidelines to Church Authorities to ensure they provide an entity that can be sued, backed by insurance and/or assets and that the Council will hopefully be able to make an announcement in the new year regarding an independent body that will set, monitor and report on standards that affect children and vulnerable people in the Church.

I can hear the sighs down the phone line.

The Ballarat hearing resumed in Melbourne this week.

Counsel Assisting the Commission, Gail Furness, told the Commission the second part of the hearing would hear evidence from nine current and former priests in the Ballarat Diocese who were advisors to Bishop Mulkearns. The hearing is focusing on the knowledge of these priests and the response of the diocese in relation to four offending priests, John Day, Gerald Ridsdale, Paul David Ryan and another unnamed priest.

It's a sorry litany of one account after another of heads in the sand, of the reputation of the church taking precedence over powerless children whose lives have been so tragically affected by systemic abuse. And the criminal activity did not just sit with the Church. We heard allegations from former Victorian police about elaborate efforts to protect the church.

The hearing provides more evidence of why we have to move urgently on reform to provide a safer future for children and vulnerable people in all Australian institutions and to give some hope to people who have been so damaged by the incompetence and criminal activity that has typified past responses.

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