

Time for governments to act on redress for child sex abuse survivors

Francis Sullivan 31 March 2016

Tomorrow government leaders from across the country will meet to discuss many important issues dealing with great matters of state – tax, education, health and the like.

They will fly into Canberra with caravans of advisors and bureaucrats to take part in the imposingly named, Council of Australian Governments meeting. The Prime Minister will be there, as will most, if not all state premiers.

But what appears to be off the COAG agenda is any discussion about a national redress scheme for the survivors of child sexual abuse.

For more than three and a half years terrible stories of abuse have filled newspapers and radio and TV bulletins.

What we have heard at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been horrifying.

Young children brutally abused by the very people who should have been protecting them: priests and teachers, welfare workers and dance instructors, sports coaches and house parents.

Opportunities squashed, lives lost, families devastated.

The Catholic and other churches, state police, prosecutors and community service departments, sports and community organisations have all come under the intense scrutiny of the Commission.

There appear to be very few institutions which have dealt with children over the past half century in which abuse of one kind or another hasn't taken place. It is a tragedy and betrayal that continues to cripple so many survivors so many years after the horrors took place.

When the Commission was announced at the end of 2012 it had the full support of politicians of all persuasions across the country.

Last year the Commission released a report into how, as a community, we can go about the long overdue business of providing fair and compassionate redress for child sexual abuse survivors.

The proposal would see the Commonwealth establish and then run a scheme in which abuse survivors can have a claim assessed and a redress payment independently determined. This payment would then be made by the organisation which ran the institution in which the abuse took place.

The scheme would, for the first time, provide consistent redress across the country for survivors regardless of where or when they were abused or who abused them.

Importantly it will be funded by the institutions themselves, not by the tax payer except when the abuse happened in a government home, mission or other state or federally operated facility.

Not one cent of taxpayer money will be spent on covering abuse in Catholic institutions.

The Commission's redress proposal has received across-the-board support from most, if not all survivor groups, the Catholic Church and many other institutions with a history of child sexual abuse.

The rubber has now hit the road for our political leaders.

The only things holding back setting up what appears to be an eminently sensible proposal is the indecision of the federal government and unwillingness of some states.

Three and a half years ago, when the Commission first started, politicians from all persuasions were quick to show their support. It now seems extraordinary that one of the Commission's key recommendations is being effectively watered down to a scheme that does not meet the expectations of the Commission or survivors.

It's not too late for this important issue to become part of the COAG agenda and it is certainly not too late for preliminary funding to be made available in the upcoming federal budget.

If our political leaders do not start to seriously discuss national redress for child sexual abuse survivors it's difficult to draw any conclusion other than that they don't really care.

While I hope this is wrong, so far there has been little evidence for optimism.