

Government response to redress breath taking

Three cheers for the Sydney Morning Herald editorial of 5 April 2015.

The non-negotiable ruling-out by the Commonwealth Government of support for a national redress scheme has been breath taking.

At a time when national leadership is required to address the scourge of child sexual abuse in institutions our Commonwealth Government has left the field! You have to wonder where in the Commonwealth bureaucracy the decision was made to reject the Royal Commission's options on redress. Given the reasons in the Commonwealth's brief submission, those mainly being based on the administrative load and cost sharing issues between levels of government, it is clear senior leaders of the Government were not engaged with this vital social issue for the nation.

Let's run through some of the basic considerations that seem to have alluded those charged with submitting the Commonwealth's response.

Firstly, a proper public policy approach is to adopt a principle of fairness. In this case it seems more than obvious that victims of child sexual abuse should be able to access the same level of redress regardless of when the abuse occurred, where it occurred or from within what institution it occurred. For any even casual observer of the Royal Commission hearings, this is a 'no brainer'.

Secondly, apart from the Catholic Church, there have been very few organised institutional redress schemes on offer since the late 1990s for victims. I am the first to acknowledge that *Towards Healing* and the *Melbourne Response* have worked for some and not for others, but at the very least the schemes were available. For other victims outside the Church there is precious little to rely on apart from lawyers and the civil litigation system.

Thirdly, governments, at both the Commonwealth, state and territory levels have had responsibility for child services. Unfortunately child sexual abuse has occurred within government controlled institutions. Why should these victims be regarded differently to those from other institutions? Why should victims in government institutions only have access to limited redress schemes, or none at all?

Fourthly, the Commonwealth rightly extended the Royal Commission's time to cater for the demand on the inquiry. To do otherwise would have been seen as a cynical exercise. Just as cynical is an approach that unilaterally rules out the option of a national redress scheme even before the issue was publicly discussed at the Commission's formal hearings. So much for respecting the work of the Commission, its measured recommendations and careful considerations!

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Many political observers are beginning to question whether difficult social and economic issues can be prosecuted in the current partisan climate that characterises federal politics. In other words, are issues quickly dismissed because they are difficult or they don't easily play into the strategic narrative one side, or both, of politics choose to tell? Is the notion of a national redress scheme facing the same fate?

If so, then maybe the institution of politics runs the risk of heaping one more injustice on those already struggling to be heard and treated with respect.

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