

Commonwealth redress response – slow train coming

Francis Sullivan, 4 February 2016

In its long awaited response to the Royal Commission's redress recommendations the Federal Government last Friday released a statement saying it will work with the states and territories to set up a national framework to offer compensation to victims of institutional child sexual abuse.

The statement, thin on detail and long on rhetoric, seems to be saying that the Commonwealth won't be setting up a scheme but rather looking to the states to establish individual schemes run out of each state and territory but under a set of national principles.

While this is the second best option proposed by the Commission, it is a far cry from what survivors, most of the major institutions and some of the bigger states have called for.

While it is good to see the Commonwealth respond it's been a very slow train coming.

I think the best that can be said about the announcement is that the Commonwealth has now placed redress on the agenda of all governments, there is now a process and hopefully things will start to move a bit quicker.

The big problem however with what the Commonwealth seems to be proposing is that by running individual schemes in different states and territories survivors from different places around the country will inevitably, be treated differently.

The facts are that regardless of how hard the Commonwealth works to ensure that all states operate their redress schemes in the same way it is an absolute certainty that over not a very long time they will start to differ from each other.

And when this happens we will be back to Day One where abuse survivors seeking compensation are being treated differently depending on where they were abused and what state they live in.

Also, and I don't mean to be unkind to treasury officials and bureaucrats, but you can bet London to a brick that they will be looking to build schemes that cost their governments the least possible amount. That's their job. And that means survivors will miss out.

It cannot be left to public servants to decide how, as a nation, we provide redress to victims of child sexual abuse.

We can't have state and territory governments going down the path of putting their interests before the needs of victims, like the Catholic Church and so many other institutions have.

The people who have been abused as kids are now in the 50s, 60s and 70s and for decades have had no voice. That has changed and now, through the Royal Commission they are being heard.

The plight of survivors needs to be heard by the community, by institutions and by Government and the ramifications of what happened to them needs to be fully understood.

I am concerned that we might find ourselves in the situation where state governments and COAG officials look at the redress proposals in a narrow, self-serving, institutionally defensive way. Or worse, as a tool to be traded on other pressing issues involving the states and the Federal Government, especially in the lead up to a Federal election.

This must not be allowed to happen.

What matters here is the human story not a public policy that is going to be restricted by technocrats who, if it all becomes too hard, can file it away till later.

The Commonwealth has tentatively come to the table and given some sort of direction. What we need now is for leaders to take up the challenge and make sure survivors of CSA get access to consistent, transparent, fair redress regardless of where or when they were subject to the criminal acts of the people they should have been able to trust.

We are heading into the fourth year of the Royal Commission's ground breaking work. For the Catholic Church, this will be a year of analysis and action. A lot of work has already been done in individual dioceses and religious orders, but there's a lot to do yet.

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