

17 Apr 02 07:19a

p. 1

Archbishop loses plot on child abuse

ANGLICAN Archbishop Philip Aspinall grabbed the headlines on February 19 by promising an inquiry into sex abuse in his diocese of Brisbane. While ostensibly an attempt to help victims, Archbishop Aspinall was also distancing himself from his besieged predecessor, Governor-General Peter Hollingworth. Two months on, though, and the G-G isn't the only one struggling to retain credibility.

Having promised to smoke out any child-abuse claims within his church, it is up to Dr Aspinall — not the state Government, not like-minded senators, not the media — to deliver a practical and open inquiry. It certainly is not up to John Howard to start a royal commission to save the young churchman from his predicament. While a national approach to tackling child abuse is needed, royal commissions are expensive and lengthy, especially when they turn on case-by-case specifics as they would here.

It is clear Dr Aspinall opened his mouth before thinking his inquiry proposal through. From the outset he should have seen the problems. He even admitted on February 19 that his inquiry would have to be held in secret — to protect victims and retain the presumption of innocence for the accused. Now he sees the church cannot compel witnesses to testify, so conclusions would be based on "incomplete information".

The church also cannot provide indemnity for participants against possible libel action. You can be sure the church's insurance won't cover it against defamation actions arising from the report of any inquiry, either. And victims have been warned not to cooperate with Dr Aspinall's inquiry lest they prejudice their own court cases or tip off alleged abusers.

Dr Aspinall has sought help from the Beattie Government, which might have passed laws

to give the church power to compel witnesses and protect participants against legal action. Premier Peter Beattie might even have established a parliamentary inquiry or passed the brief to a standing commission. But the state Government rightly knocked back the archbishop, saying it would set a bad precedent. Yet having batted the problem away, Mr Beattie still backs a federal royal commission — surely another bad precedent.

The worthy course of action for Dr Aspinall would be to exercise whatever moral authority he has over church employees and followers to encourage them to reveal anything they know about sexual abuse in the church. The archbishop should also reassure victims they would be treated with respect. And he should ask church workers to waive their rights to sue.

These will be difficult tasks indeed. Should Dr Aspinall fail, though, his inquiry would only be a general audit of the church's sexual abuse protocols. That's what the Nolan review of Catholic Church rules on sexual abuse did in England and Wales. "It has not been our role to investigate or comment on individual cases and we have not done so," the Nolan review said last year.

While useful in Britain, such an inquiry would be of little use in Brisbane. The protocols that operated but were barely used under Archbishop Hollingworth from 1994 to 1998 have been replaced as part of a national revamp. If the new protocols need auditing, then surely it should be done nationally, not just in Brisbane.

Dr Aspinall got himself into this mess; it's up to him to find a way out. And even if he is saved from further angst by a Democrat-initiated Senate inquiry into abuse, Dr Aspinall will still have much to do — to restore his standing in the community.

AND ANOTHER THING:

POLLY the red heeler died while saving her owners from a blazing country pub. Now the RSPCA wants to give her a posthumous Purple Cross and she'll be honoured with burial in a park opposite the hotel. These measures will surely encourage any dogs who might be considering acts of valour.

"Australian"

17.04.02.