



Greens feel pressure of hospice deal decision

The ACT's third force feels the discomforts of the balance of power, **Victor Violante** writes

The ACT Greens find themselves in quite a dilemma. They support the ACT Government's bid to buy Calvary Public Hospital from Little Company of Mary Health Care, but oppose the sale of Clare Holland House – Canberra's only palliative care hospice – to the Catholic health care provider. The only problem is that, according to the Government and Little Company of Mary, one cannot happen without the other.

The Greens' position is shared by most – if not all – of the stakeholders affected by the sale of the hospice if it goes through, including the ACT Palliative Care Society, Health Care Consumers Association, the ACT branch of the Australian Nursing Federation, and a very vocal sector of the community.

The difference, however, is that it is the Greens who will have the casting vote when the proposal is put to the ACT Legislative Assembly early next year, and if they fail to have the hospice separated from the purchase of Calvary Hospital, the crux of the decision they must make is whether the perceived benefits of acquiring the public hospital are worth parting with an asset which they firmly believe must be retained.

For a party that has staked its

position in the Legislative Assembly as being one of representing the community, the Greens would find the arguments against the sale of the hospice compelling.

Take Greens party member and emeritus professor Valerie Brown, a visiting fellow at ANU in managing for local sustainability, collective decision-making, sustainability and health. Her husband was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2006 and accessed the hospice's outreach services during his two-year battle. Even now Brown weeps as she recalls the selfless work of the volunteers who helped her family through the most difficult of times.

"We knew two years ahead that it was terminal," Brown says. "For two years we had the most wonderful nursing services. The nursing services were, for me and our whole family, complete and caring, and the volunteers were there, always."

Her fear is that the services will change for the worse if the sale – which includes plans for a 30-year palliative care service agreement with the Little Company of Mary – goes through (at present the contract with the ACT Government is negotiated on a year-to-year basis). And regardless of what conditions, lease requirements or assurances are included, she will not be dissuaded from her view that services will

decline, a view shared by the stakeholders.

ACT Palliative Care Society president David Lawrance represents about 200 members who provide some services to the hospice and lobby for better palliative care services in Canberra. He too believes Clare Holland House was thrown into the equation as an incentive for the Little Company of Mary to part with Calvary Hospital, and that whole deal could come unstuck unless the parties compromise. He points to opposition to the sale of the hospice within the Labor Party ranks, including from Government backbencher John Hargreaves, as proof the deal was ill-conceived.

"That just makes us all realise that this was never thought through," Lawrance says. "I think the Government will rue the day that it added this sweetener in, particularly as Clare Holland House will scuttle the whole deal if it gets scuttled."

Greens health spokeswoman Amanda Bresnan has in recent weeks stepped up her party's opposition to the sale of Clare Holland House, but has stopped short of declaring that her party will vote against the Bill that would facilitate the transaction.

She says the Greens' "preferred outcome" would be to have the two items separated, but how strongly do the Greens feel about the need to



acquire Calvary Hospital, or about keeping the hospice in Government hands? Strongly enough to scuttle the whole deal unless the ACT Government and the Little Company of Mary agree to their request?

It is quite likely that even the Greens are yet to decide how they will answer that question, and they are counting on the Little Company of Mary to relent and take the hospice out of the equation so they don't need to find out. Regardless of how they vote, they can expect criticism from either the Opposition if they back the Government, or from the Government if they sink the deal.

Brown, for her part, is sympathetic to the Greens, with whom she has been in regular talks on the issue – not least because of the inconsistent policies at the heart of the deal, which sits uncomfortably with the Greens' position that public health facilities should be in public hands.

"They've been presented with the most intolerable proposition, tying together one service going into public hands and another going into private hands," Brown says.

While the Little Company of Mary is currently bearing the brunt of the pressure to separate the hospice from the deal, if its position remains unchanged it will be the Greens who

will decide the fate of Clare Holland House. If or when that becomes more apparent they can expect the lobbying to be more focused on them.

And this is a likely scenario, as the company's position is a good one from a bargaining perspective and there is little incentive for it to exclude the hospice from the negotiations. It is the Government that is pursuing it to sell Calvary Hospital because of the financial benefits it believes the transaction would bring to the ACT budget (about \$145 million over 20 years in budget savings). As well as \$77 million for the hospital, the Government is also prepared to part with the hospice for \$9 million.

The Government could pursue a more aggressive tack to persuade the Little Company of Mary to exclude the hospice by threatening to run Calvary Hospital into the ground through a lack of capital investment. There is a belief among some following this issue that the Government threatened to take this course if the sale was not agreed to.

Whether the Government ever prosecuted this argument is unknown (it vehemently denies it) but in any case it is one the Little Company of Mary would not have

taken too seriously. Health Minister Katy Gallagher would know full well that for a Government to deliberately offer substandard health services in one of only two public hospitals in Canberra would be political suicide and it is the Labor Party – not the Little Company of Mary – that would face the ire of the community.

It is not the first time the Greens have argued for a particular policy or the strength of community outcry. At last year's election they vowed to have a proposed gas-powered data centre moved from Macarthur to industrial land, and it was one of the first items in their agreement with Labor that was implemented (the development was moved to nearby Hume). Here, however, they find themselves the lone decision-maker and their diplomatic efforts to decouple the sale have to date failed. It is an unenviable position the Greens find themselves in, but with the balance of power in the Assembly it is almost certainly not the last time they will find themselves the decision-makers on major policy reform.

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Opponent: ACT
Palliative Care Society
president David
Lawrance: "This was
never thought
through." Photo:
KARLEEN WILLIAMS