



Calvary in limbo as sale scuttled

Gallagher accuses archbishop of putting politics ahead of community

By Scott Hannaford

The future of Calvary Hospital has been thrown into disarray after the Little Company of Mary Health Care pulled out yesterday of the proposed sale of the hospital as the result of alleged pressure from the Catholic Church.

ACT Health Minister Katy Gallagher laid the blame for the collapse of the sale to the ACT Government squarely at the feet of the Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Mark Coleridge.

Ms Gallagher accused the archbishop of actively working to stop the sale and of putting church politics ahead of the needs of the Canberra community.

The Archbishop strenuously denied the allegation yesterday.

He said he had been working only to protect the broader interests of the Church.

Little Company of Mary Health Care chairman Tom Brennan said the sisters had withdrawn from the sale after it was made clear to them by the archbishop that any deal to sell the hospital would likely meet significant delays.

"They drew from the communication that any Vatican approval, if granted at all, would take a number of years.

"Accordingly, they believe it would

not be in the interests of the community of Canberra to apply for approval for the sale to the Holy See," Mr Brennan said.

The ACT Government and Calvary were in the process of finalising details of the \$77 million sale, which would have included a \$200 million investment by the Government in new facilities for the north Canberra community and a new 75-bed private hospital built by Calvary from the proceeds of the sale.

The tentative deal had also included selling the palliative care centre Clare Holland House to Calvary for \$9 million, a condition that had met strong opposition from sectors of the Canberra community.

As early as July last year the Government and Calvary had reached provisional agreement about the sale, but the ACT Government elected to wait until necessary church approvals were in place before proceeding while at the same time attempting to deal with opposition within the Legislative Assembly to the sale.

Ms Gallagher said the Government was now left with a number of potentially unpalatable options for providing much-needed upgrades to hospital services in north Canberra, including building a third hospital on another site.

"The option is always there, but it's not the Government's preference. If we build a third hospital it would signal the end of Calvary," she said.

Ms Gallagher said studies had shown the ACT was not big enough to support three public hospitals, and that the current hospital loca-

tions were well suited to serve the Canberra community, but it was extremely difficult as Treasurer to consider handing over hundreds of millions of dollars to the Catholic Church to build an asset the Government would have no ownership of.

She said compulsory acquisition was a third option, but that would probably result in a decade of costly legal battles.

"I certainly think the archbishop will be celebrating this and my concern is that he's put his own interest ahead of the people of the ACT and for me that's the most regrettable result.

"We as a community have to ask, are we comfortable that the archbishop has taken a position that has resulted in this outcome without us

being able to determine it?" Archbishop Coleridge said at no time had he exerted pressure on the sisters or the hospital board to walk away from the process, and he had been open about his opposition to the sale from the beginning.

"I have not been working behind the scenes to block it, obviously there have been private conversations, but I have been doing my utmost to ensure the future of Catholic health care not just in the ACT – this has ramifications for Catholic health care around Australia," Archbishop Coleridge said.

While Cardinal George Pell had not been closely involved in negotiations, he had become increasingly concerned that Calvary's sale could set a precedent of Catholic providers

being pushed out of public health care, Archbishop Coleridge said.

"I think it would be an impoverishment for the entire community if there was growing pressure to push Catholic providers out of public hospitals ... I don't want to play either the sectarian card or the obstructionist card, but I have a job to do as archbishop and some people don't seem to understand that."



PRECEDENT:
Mark Coleridge.



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