



Sickness that curbs religious freedom

AS anyone who reads this column may know, I am not in favour of a charter of rights in this country, basically because we don't need one.

It would usurp the elected parliament, give activist judges unprecedented power and — under the guise of defining and extending rights — narrow the ambit of rights, pushing on to us the preoccupations of a few.

This has happened in Britain, especially in the area of religious freedom, as British legal expert Paul Diamond told *The Australian* this week: "It is good to be 10 years behind. I have seen the future and it doesn't work."

But we don't have to go to Britain to see the future where religion or anything associated with it, even its charitable mission, is relegated to the private sphere and bluntly told that it doesn't belong in the public square. I have seen that, too, because I live in Futureville, ACT. The future is Canberra.

Readers may have noticed a reference in the column by Catholic Archbishop of Sydney George Pell, published in *The Australian* on October 23, to the proposed sale of 220-bed Calvary Public Hospital, which would end up in the hands of the ACT government, in an example of ideology dressed up as social justice.

Calvary is the second big public hospital in the ACT and is in the northern suburb of Bruce. Relatively new, it is well run by the Little Company of Mary Health Care. It has a good reputation in contrast to the bigger, more stressed Canberra Hospital.

Calvary's sale has initiated a growing antagonism between the ACT government and the Catholic Church, and a level of suspicion, now magnified to alarm, among the sizeable Catholic population that the whole *raison d'être* behind the push for this sale is ideological. In other words, the ACT's Stanhope government does not want to buy Calvary hospital because it wants to improve health care in the capital and certainly not to save money. No, the notoriously green-Left ACT Labor government simply wants to get the Catholic Church out of public health care in the national capital.

This was reinforced on Wednesday by Health Minister Katy Gallagher's denials on ABC radio. She rather tellingly stated that the furore was being fuelled by outsiders "with a particular interest in religion in health care coming into our secular ACT health system". Note the word secular.

But the people who are kicking up the present fuss are not outsiders. They are ordinary residents of the ACT, such as me, who have had good health care there — including the birth of a generation of babies at Calvary — and who want to continue that diversity of option within the sound ethical framework that Calvary provides.

But there are some interesting complications with this sale that allow the government



ANGELA SHANAHAN

a certain disingenuous face-saving. The present owner, the Little Company of Mary, has agreed to sell the hospital because of economic imperatives. However, the ACT government has wanted to buy the hospital since 2005.

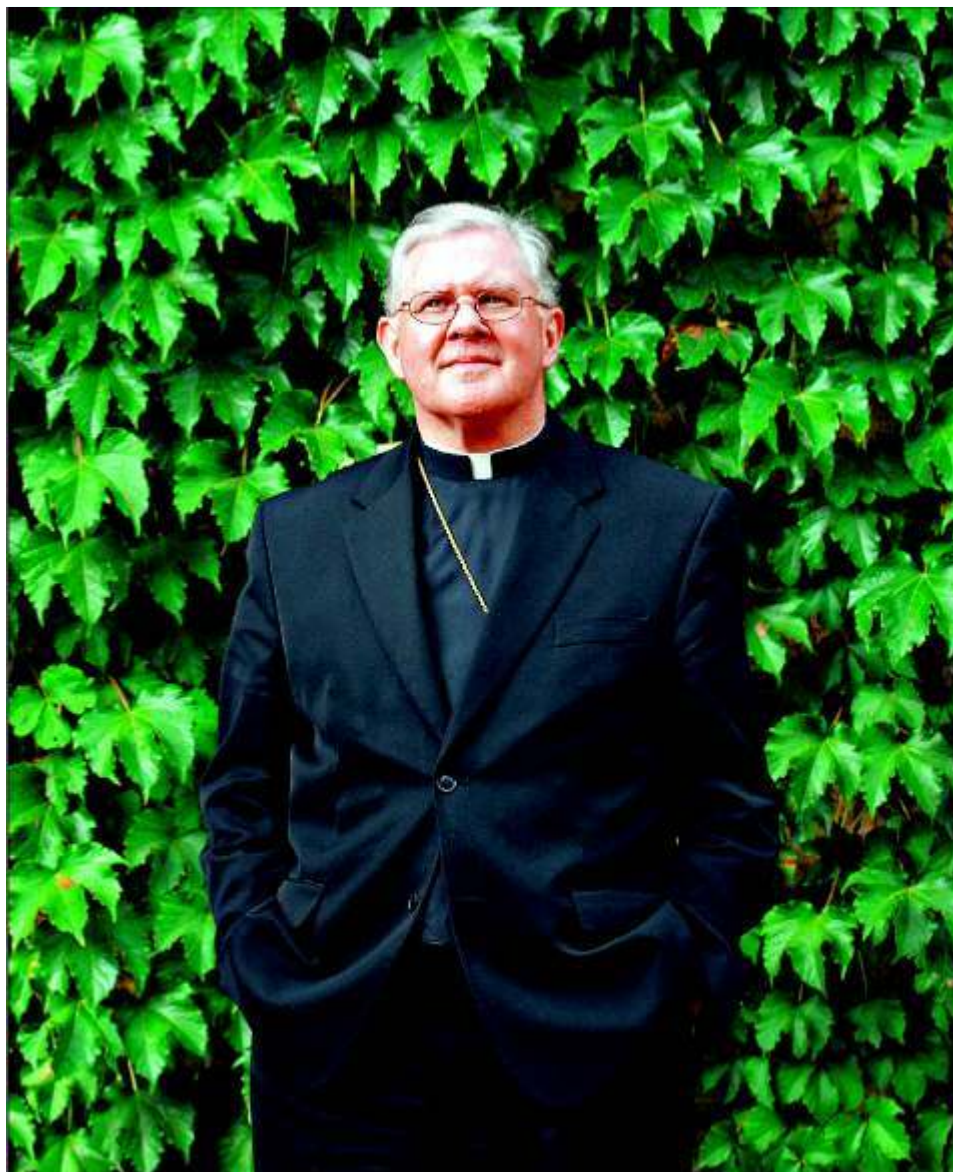
Why? A report chaired by former Greens' assembly member Kerrie Tucker recommended that the hospital be taken out of Catholic hands or sold to the government because — you guessed it — they won't do abortions, elective sterilisations or what the report euphemistically refers to as the "full range of reproductive services".

Calvary is not just a public hospital. It is a facility with a distinctly Catholic ethos and is part of the church's mission in health. The diocese does not want the sale to go ahead unless the future of Calvary as a Catholic hospital can be secured. Consequently, Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn Mark Coleridge won't agree to the sale.

That this is ideologically motivated is clear if you look at the economic arguments mounted by the government, which claims it will save \$145 million over 20 years from a takeover. As Coleridge points out in a statement published this week, the claim is founded on a simplistic modelling at a time of unprecedented concern about healthcare provision. What is certain is that if the present public funding arrangement with the government were to continue, it would save the ACT government \$77 million.

Coleridge is even handed. He also has been explicitly critical of the Little Company of Mary. He notes an "understandable desire to save the mission [of the LCM] in the middle of 2008 when disaster loomed" but says "now that ... moment of crisis has passed. LCM Health Care certainly don't have to sell. They have a choice."

One thing is certain, though; the ACT has had Calvary in its sights for a long time. From the confidential minutes of a meeting attended by the principal *dramatis personae*



Firm stand: Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn Mark Coleridge **Picture:** Kym Smith

— Jon Stanhope, Gallagher, Coleridge and his colleague Bishop Pat Power — on April 6 this year, it is clear the government was threatening to do everything it could to force the sale to the government, including starving the hospital of funds.

The ACT government did not seek any alternatives to the present proposal. It had made it clear that Calvary would not be the recipient of any significant capital funds while it is outside government ownership. The Stanhope government also exposed itself as ruthless when it hinted at the same meeting it was not only willing to starve Calvary of capital and operational revenues but would build a competing hospital nearby.

So much for economy. But its last shot was the worst.

Claiming that the government was “not satisfied that Calvary Bruce has met performance and reporting targets”, they threatened to respond aggressively to any “save the Catholic hospital” campaign.

In other words, if starving the Catholics of funds didn’t work, they’d blackmail them.

This is the ethical level of government we have in the rights paradise. A government willing to close a good hospital that has served a generation of Canberrans well for almost 30 years, all for the sake of its own ideological zealotry. Welcome to the future.