



Time for care to be a central election issue

with IAN YATES COTA chief executive

COMMENT

Reform: THE federal election is upon us. The change of prime minister from Kevin Rudd to Julia Gillard will give it an unexpected flavour, but we need the election to be about real issues.

In past election periods, opinion polling showed that aged care was a big concern to the majority of people but not by itself a vote changer.

Regrettably that meant neither side of politics was prepared to take major aged-care reform to elections – “it’s not a vote changer so no need to make big promises”.

Consequently fundamental issues facing aged care for over a decade have gone unanswered.

The Howard government set up an inquiry, implemented some of its short-term recommendations, but ignored repeated proposals even from within to address the longer-term issues.

After resisting major change for most of its term, the Rudd/Gillard government announced some small steps towards reform and set up another wide-ranging inquiry, this time by the Productivity Commission, timed so that it will not report until after the election.

COTA supported setting up this inquiry

but is seeking an unequivocal commitment from all parties that the Productivity Commission’s report will be followed by major aged-care reform.

Aged care really is in need of fundamental reform. If we don’t get it in the next term of government, then the system will definitely start to collapse.

Aged care does not meet the needs of many of the people who have to use it. It is also increasingly financially unviable for many of those who provide it. That makes it two crises in one.

The Federal Government cannot duck and weave its responsibility to resolve this twin crisis. Aged care is the most government-regulated industry in Australia. In aged care, government controls what you can provide, the terms it can be provided, the price it will pay, the price charged, the accreditation and complaints processes and anything else that’s left.

Government is directly responsible for the fact that many people have to go into residential care because there is insufficient community care. So the aged-care crisis is totally the responsibility of successive federal governments.

Both sides of politics have failed their responsibility to do it well.