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Minister says Pell as bad as that 'boofhead Hilaly'

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THE Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, could be compared to "that serial boofhead Sheik al Hilaly", the NSW cabinet minister Nathan Rees has said in an explosive speech in Parliament.

Mr Rees, a Catholic, accused him of "emotional blackmail" for warning that Catholic MPs faced "consequences" in their religious lives if they supported a bill that would expand stem cell research.

"The hypocrisy is world-class. No government would seek to influence church teachings when providing taxpayer funds for refurbishment of St Mary's Cathedral, or taxpayer funds for the education of Catholic school children, or taxpayer funds to subsidise rates exemptions for churches," Mr Rees, the minister for water utilities and emergency services, said yesterday.

MPs continued to debate the bill in the lower house last night. They will take part in a conscience vote. Mr Rees's unprecedented attack came as many within the church criticised Cardinal Pell for his "inappropriate" comments. They said he should not threaten MPs or try to influence their views.

The group Australian Reforming Catholics said Cardinal Pell had limited jurisdiction over Catholics in Australia and it could not be assumed he was an influential figure for all Catholics. "Some Catholics assume he is the head of the Catholic church in Australia, but he isn't. He wouldn't even speak for all Catholics in his archdiocese, let alone all Catholic MPs in the NSW Parliament," the group's spokesman, John Buggy, said. "He has gone beyond his jurisdiction ... Any action he takes can only be within his jurisdiction of the Sydney archdiocese, which does not even include all of Sydney."

The Catholic Labor frontbencher Kristina Keneally said she would not support the bill but criticised Cardinal Pell, accusing him of not taking a "pastoral approach to this issue".

"If the cardinal's approach is to start excommunicating Catholic MPs, I think he might want to know of my support for the ordination of women."

The Planning Minister, Frank Sartor, a Catholic who supports the bill, described Cardinal Pell's comments as reminiscent of the church in the Dark Ages.

"I'm very sceptical about people who claim to speak in the name of God but are human beings, because if you look at history people have been burnt in oil in the name of God," he said.

"Now I don't think God ever wanted them burnt in oil ... I would have thought that we have moved on.

"These are matters for individual conscience. Churches are there to guide us; they are not meant to be there to tell us."

The Archbishop of Perth, Barry Hickey, backed Cardinal Pell and suggested excommunication of politicians supporting embryonic stem cell research would be a last resort.

The chief executive of Catholic Healthcare Australia, Francis Sullivan, said Cardinal Pell had a legitimate right to put the church's position.

The Premier, Morris Iemma, said Cardinal Pell's threats would not prevent him supporting the bill and he would continue to take Communion. "This is no time to stand in the way of science ... in the way of hope. The opportunities for progress have never been greater."

Asked if priests could withhold Communion, the chairman of the National Council of Priests, Ian McGinnity, said they would be reluctant to intervene.

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