

Australia: Howard government seeks to provoke “abortion debate”

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Not long after its victory in the October 9 federal election the Howard government attempted to launch a “debate” on abortion—opening a campaign to return to the days, only three decades ago, when medically-assisted abortion was a criminal offence.

In a provocative speech, one of Prime Minister John Howard’s closest associates, Health Minister Tony Abbott, called abortion an “unambiguous moral tragedy” and claimed to be haunted by the “missing millions of Australians”. He declared that Australia’s “abortion epidemic” was proof of a national moral decline. According to Abbott, women turned to abortions because of a “culture of convenience,” “moral failings,” and “teenage promiscuity.”

These claims to uphold “morality” and the “sanctity of life” are hardly convincing coming from a government that participated the criminal invasion of Iraq, making it directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, including women and children.

By attacking the fundamental democratic right to abortion, the government was hoping to use the issue—a rallying point for the Christian fundamentalist constituency that it is seeking to cultivate—to shift the entire political atmosphere further to the right.

Women’s still-limited rights to abortion and birth control are bound up with, and to some extent symbolise, wider socially-progressive measures that were fought for in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of widespread radicalisation and political struggles by working people, students and young people generally. These measures included the extension of social security benefits to sole parents, “no-fault” divorce law reforms, universal health insurance and broader access to university education.

The government’s push quickly ran into difficulties because Abbott claimed that the number of abortions had risen to 100,000 annually, before being forced to admit that no reliable statistics exist. In fact, estimates based on Health Insurance Commission data show a fall—from 76,846 in 1997 to 73,191 in 2001. Moreover, these figures cover various surgical procedures listed under the one Medicare item: terminations of pregnancy and curettes for miscarriages.

Nevertheless, other members of Howard’s Coalition backed Abbott, including National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, who declared pregnancy terminations were “out of hand”. Anderson launched into an attack on the

present system whereby the Medicare health insurance scheme covers terminations of pregnancy, calling for a parliamentary vote of conscience on “Medicare-funded abortions”. His proposal was endorsed by a host of MPs from the rural-based National Party, including Senate leader Ron Boswell, Veterans Affairs Minister Deanne Kelly and new Queensland Senator Barnaby Joyce.

The immediate reasons for the anti-abortion push soon became clear. In the lead up to the election, when it was by no means certain that the Coalition would be returned, Howard had signed-off on a well-publicised preference vote-swapping deal with the Christian-based Family First party. He was anxious to counteract preference arrangements between Labor and the Greens and to shore up his electoral support with a party that he was in essential agreement with.

Family First chairman Peter Harris told Brisbane’s *Courier Mail* that he canvassed abortion reform in the pre-election preference talks. Evidently mindful that an anti-abortion stance could lose votes, Howard told Harris the government was currently “of no mind” to change abortion laws but “that might change” after the election. If the Coalition retained office and if Family First did well at the polls, he promised to revisit the issue.

The controversy surrounding Abbott’s remarks, which made media headlines for weeks, erupted while Howard was on holidays. But far from the prime minister being “dragged into the abortion debate,” as media commentators insisted, it is a key element in his government’s strategy. Howard is mindful of the fact that he will need the support of National Party Senators to force through key economic agenda items, including the full sale of Telstra, the former state-owned telecommunications carrier.

More broadly, the government was returned to office, not on a wave of popular confidence, but, paradoxically, on the basis of the financial insecurities and fears of many layers of the population. In the absence of any genuine opposition by the Labor Party on any issue—least of all the government’s free-market agenda—Howard was able to capitalise on those concerns. But he and his ministers are acutely aware of the need to develop a deeper right-wing social base in order to carry through the requirements of the financial markets for the further dismantling of the living and working conditions of ordinary people.

While appeals to so-called Christian values did not play as prominent a role in the Australian election as they did in the United States presidential campaign, Howard has closely aligned himself with President George W. Bush on both foreign and

domestic policy and has adopted the tactics of the Republican right as far as possible. Last year, Bush signed a bill banning a form of late abortion, imposing the most significant federal restriction on abortion in the US since it was made legal 30 years ago. During the Australian campaign, the government said little on abortion but tried to push through legislation outlawing gay marriages, copying another Bush measure.

In re-igniting the abortion issue, Howard attempted to pursue the political methods he adopted in 1996 in response to the emergence of Pauline Hanson's right-wing populist One Nation party, which agitated against refugees, Aborigines and welfare payments. He allowed others—in this instance Abbott rather than Hanson—to make the front running, while sniffing the media and public reaction. Howard brushed aside as “rather odd” those asserting that abortion reforms were unassailable because of legal and democratic rights won three decades ago. “That is evidently a negation of a free and open society. People are entitled to raise these issues,” Howard declared, echoing his defence of Hanson's right to “free speech” eight years ago.

Howard let the “abortion debate” run on for almost a month, before being forced to place it on hold. It soon became apparent that there remained strong popular support for the basic right of women to access abortion, provoking nervous concerns and some expressions of opposition among Coalition MPs.

A report released last month by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Diversity and Change in Australian Families*, found that “between 1987 and 2001 the percentage of people approving of ready access to abortion has increased substantially from 39 percent to 58 percent”. Support for access to abortion was equally shared between women and men, with the highest levels among younger age groups.

In part, this support reflects the prevalence of the procedure. An earlier medical research council inquiry concluded: “Abortion is ... a very common experience, affecting at least a third of all Australian women and the majority of families.” The comprehensive report, which the Howard government quietly shelved in its first term in office, found that recourse to abortion was “spread throughout the Australian population as a whole, without apparent peaks for religion, wealth, race or religion”.

Despite Abbott's claims that “moral degeneracy” is responsible for abortions, the evidence points to definite economic and social factors. According to a submission to a recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into Pregnancy and Work, 70 percent of employed women who sought abortions said they faced losing their job if they allowed their pregnancy to continue.

Speaking to the WSWS, Dr Geoffrey Brodie, medical director of one of Sydney's largest abortion providers, said statistics from his clinics showed an increasing number of married women with children seeking abortions and an ageing of the average abortion patient, who was far more likely to be in her 40s and 30s than in her teens.

Dr Brodie suggested a connection between the number of abortions and soaring house prices, particularly in Sydney, which require families to have two incomes. According to Brodie: “The men are working full-time and also have a second job, wives are working part-time, and there is just no capacity for them now to

have children. All they can do is live and pay the mortgage.”

More profoundly, the strong support for abortion rights expresses heart-felt opposition to winding the clock back to the days before abortion laws were liberalised. Australian women, particularly working-class women—unable to pay the high fees that qualified doctors charged for illegal abortions—faced terrible risks at the hands of backyard abortionists, police and official authorities.

Brodie recalled that between 1967 and 1971, illegal abortions in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia's most populous states, were the largest single cause of maternal deaths. Pioneering abortion clinics, such as that conducted by Dr Bertram Wainer in Melbourne, were subjected to police raids.

Growing outrage over death rates from septic abortions, fuelled by revelations that police at the highest levels in Victoria had been running abortion-protection rackets for decades, finally forced law reform. Even so, the legal status of abortion remains far from clear-cut and varies from state to state. For practical purposes, a termination during the first trimester (the first 12 weeks of conception) is available in most states, but the Australian Capital Territory is the only jurisdiction where abortion has been removed from the criminal statutes.

The Victorian Supreme Court's 1969 Menhennit ruling was regarded as a landmark in establishing access to safe abortion. Yet the court's ruling placed the onus on doctors, who must establish that each abortion is necessary for the preservation of a woman's life or her physical well-being. There is no doubt that the re-criminalisation of abortion would see many women die, particularly poorer women.

While abortion is a state matter in Australia, the federal government is involved through payment of Medicare rebates and a real possibility exists that it could introduce legislation to restrict access. Last August, the Health Insurance Commission threatened to withdraw Medicare funding from Australian Birth Control Services, clinics directed by Brodie.

For now, Howard has put the abortion debate on the backburner, ruling out a “government-sponsored change at federal level to current arrangements”. However, he has deliberately kept the door ajar to revisiting the issue. “It is always open, if someone wishes to, on an issue like this, to bring forward a private members bill and the Liberal Party for its part, and I'm sure the National Party, would allow all of its members a free or open vote as we have in the past,” he said.



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