

Racism, religious obscurantism and hypocrisy

Australian parliament's "vote of conscience" on RU486

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A "conscience vote" in the Australian federal parliament last week on the fate of abortion pill RU486 presented a sordid public spectacle. While the vote in the House of Representatives saw the health minister's veto power over the drug's importation overturned, the debate itself provided a nationwide platform for yet another frontal assault on science, mingled with appeals to racial politics and anti-Muslim vilification.

MPs on both sides of the House engaged in an orgy of mutual backslapping and chest-baring during the final debate on Thursday. "[A]n enormous array of views has been provided," Labor MP for Holt Anthony Byrne enthused. "That is what makes Australia a great democracy and it is what makes this parliament a great democracy."

Labor Opposition leader Kim Beazley praised the proceedings in what he referred to as Australia's "palace of democracy". Choked with emotion at the opportunity the conscience vote afforded for cross-party solidarity, Beazley declared that, "this debate has been, frankly, inspirational... On this occasion I am not only proud of my colleagues on my side of the chamber; I am actually quite proud of my colleagues on the other side of the chamber as well."

He offered not one single word of protest against the religious right, despite a steady stream of false and provocative claims emanating from anti-abortionists on the government benches. Just two days earlier, former Veterans Affairs Minister Dana Vale, a key Howard supporter, told a press conference: "We are aborting ourselves almost out of existence by 100,000 abortions every year ... You multiply that by 50 years. That's 5 million potential Australians we won't have here." As a result, Vale declared, Australia was at risk of being taken over by Muslims.

That these were not the comments of some isolated backbencher was quickly underscored by the response of Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone: "That's just a complete misunderstanding of how our migration program works and where our source countries are from," Vanstone

said. In other words, there was no danger that Muslims would "take over" the country, because the government had no intention of allowing significant numbers in!

The parliamentary debate on RU486 revealed not the vitality of Australian democracy but its debased character. Vale's remarks, which enjoy the backing of substantial sections of her party, hark back to the days of White Australia, where fear of the "yellow peril" and the "Asian hordes" was repeatedly invoked as a means of heading off any politically unified struggle of the working class in Australia and throughout the region.

The Health Minister's veto power over the abortion pill Mifepristone (known as RU486), has effectively banned its importation and distribution in Australia since 1996, despite the fact that abortions have been legally tolerated and conducted openly by many doctors for nearly 30 years. Moreover, every poll of public opinion has reported overwhelming support for the right to abortion.

The veto was enacted as an amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Act with Labor's support and with further backing from some Democrats. It was moved by Independent Senator Brian Harradine, a right-wing Christian who led a decades-long crusade against the right to abortion until his resignation from parliament in June 2005 (he was also Tasmanian Trades and Labor Council secretary between 1964 and 1976, and a member of Labor's federal executive before his expulsion from the party in 1975).

Government support for the amendment was partly a quid pro quo for Harradine's backing for stage one of the privatisation of Telstra, the public telecommunications service. But it was not merely that—it was part of a definite pitch to create a conservative "family values" constituency under conditions where the newly-elected Howard government was preparing to launch a major offensive on the social conditions of the working class.

This has been the standard operating procedure for the Howard government ever since, seizing on so-called "values

issues”, wrenching them from their roots in politics and society and transforming them into matters of spiritual and religious conscience. The “conscience” votes on euthanasia in 1996 and stem cell research in 2003 were used in the same way—as a means of smuggling religion into public life, dumbing down public debate and strangling objective scientific thought.

In the case of the 1996 Harradine amendment, an explicitly anti-democratic principle was asserted: that the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), which is mandated by law to assess all drugs for efficacy and safety on medical and scientific grounds, should be stripped of that right in the case of abortifacents. Instead the Minister for Health was to exercise a unilateral veto, on the basis of... spiritual and moral values.

Speaking in the House last week, both Prime Minister John Howard and Health Minister Tony Abbott vehemently defended that proposition. After conceding that a “significant majority of the community” would oppose any move to scrap the right to abortion, Howard charged that MPs who supported the abolition of the veto were handing the responsibility for making “difficult decisions” to “some experts”—that is, the scientists and doctors of the TGA. Abbott made it plain that he wanted to retain the veto because women who had abortions (an estimated 100,000 a year in Australia) were, in his mind, “guilty of murder”.

While Abbott and other anti-abortionist MPs proclaimed the “right to life” as their guiding principle, their position on abortion is motivated by religious prejudice against the right of human beings to interfere, on the basis of science and reason, with the biological products of conception. They view this as God’s domain.

From the standpoint of the political establishment, however, the “right to life” disappears soon after birth. The same MPs who denounced abortion as a sin last Wednesday and Thursday preside over an ever-escalating social crisis affecting millions of ordinary Australians, including children, that claims new lives every day. Moreover, they voted to commit Australian troops to an illegal war of occupation in 2003 in which thousands of Iraqi men, women and children have been killed and injured, subject to torture, starvation, poverty, humiliation and terror.

Yet such is the unanimity in support of the Iraq war that Defence Minister Brendan Nelson could speak to the debate on RU486 stating he had not been able to follow proceedings on the matter altogether carefully, as he had been “flat out with defence matters”. He then proceeded to tell the House, “I too believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the death and the resurrection and the life ever after... and thank God we live in a country where we can have these sorts of issues

determined in this place.”

RU486 provides a non-surgical means of abortion during the first 63 days of the first trimester. A briefing paper prepared by parliament’s Social Policy Unit explains as follows: “RU486 works by blocking the effects of the hormone progesterone, which is crucial to starting and maintaining pregnancy. Without progesterone, the lining that covers the walls of the uterus breaks down. In the absence of progesterone, the uterus cannot hold onto the fertilised egg, making it impossible for pregnancy to continue.” A prostaglandin must then be taken, causing the uterus to contract and the contents to be expelled.

The advantages of such a non-surgical procedure include its non-invasive character, with many women appreciating the greater degree of privacy that a pill offers. In the case of surgical abortion, the trauma or emotional discomfort which women experience may lead them to opt for general anaesthetic, with a consequent heightened risk to maternal survival.

While Health Minister Abbott and other opponents of the basic democratic right to abortion have run a scare campaign, attempting to cloak their support for the veto’s retention behind claims of dangerous side effects, the peak medical associations are unanimous in their endorsement of the drug’s efficacy and safety. According to the Royal College of Gynaecologists in London, RU486 is “the most effective method of abortion at gestations of less than 7 weeks”. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Gynaecologists has concurred, arguing that, “best practice in the field includes the option of using Mifepristone when termination of pregnancy is to be performed”.

The drug is currently approved for use in the United Kingdom and much of Western Europe, Russia, China, Israel, New Zealand, Turkey and Tunisia. The US Food and Drug Administration has approved RU486 for distribution, but a Bill before the US House of Representatives, sponsored by the religious right, is calling for the drug’s suspension.



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