

# Australia: Victory for a women's right to choose

Monday 20 February 2006, by [ZIRNGAST Natalie](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2006).

**In a victory for women's right to choose not only abortion, but also the method of a termination, the bill to remove responsibility for the abortion drug RU486 from the federal health minister and return it to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) was passed in the House of Representatives on February 16.**

Two amendments were also defeated. The first, proposed by Queensland Liberal Andrew Laming with PM John Howard's backing, allowed the TGA to approve the drug but gave parliament the power to overturn the decision. The second, from NSW Liberal Jackie Kelly, retained the health minister's veto power but allowed parliament to reject the minister's decision.

This was the first private member's bill to be sponsored by members of four parties: Lyn Allison (Democrats), Fiona Nash (Nationals), Claire Moore (Labor) and Judith Troeth (Liberals). Women parliamentarians played the central role in the bill's passage, with 24 of 27 women in the Senate, and 30 of 37 women in the House of Representatives voting in favour. Overall, the bill was passed in the Senate with 45 votes for and 28 against, and in the House of Representatives with 95 for and 50 against.

The private members' bill overturns a 10-year restriction on RU486 that was imposed by anti-abortion independent Senator Brian Harradine's 1996 amendment to the act governing the TGA's jurisdiction. Harradine's amendment was supported by both major parties, ensuring his support for the part-privatisation of Telstra.

Commenting on last week's victory, former Victorian ALP premier Joan Kirner told the media: "In my generation in the parliament it was still the blokes making the decisions and mainly doing deals between themselves, as in the Harradine case, rather than involving the people who were most affected by the decision, and that is women. This time it was women leading the debate."

Allison said: "It's a win for women, but it's also a win for people who want to have a direct say in the political process. It's a credit to both houses that members listened not only to their conscience but also to the voice of the majority of Australians."

The heated public and parliamentary debate in the days leading up to the vote in the lower house included some desperate, last-minute attempts to stop the passage of the bill. Most notably, and most appallingly, Liberal backbencher Danna Vale told the media on February 13: "I've actually read in the Daily Telegraph where a certain imam from the Lakemba mosque actually said that Australia's going to be a Muslim nation in 50 years' time. I didn't believe him at the time, but you know when you actually look at the birth rates ... we are aborting ourselves almost out of existence by 100,000 abortions every year and that's on a guesstimate. You multiply that by 50 years, that's five million potential Australians we won't have here."

Howard rejected the fact that RU486 is just another drug as "patently absurd", stating, "We are not

dealing with a flu tablet". He was contradicted by fellow Liberal Sharman Stone, who argued, "It is not our task as elected representatives ... to decide by what medical method a woman is given a pregnancy termination by her doctor".

The debate showed the huge gulf between the views of most women and most men in the Senate about women's right to choose. While the outcome gives hope for future cooperation in defence of reproductive rights between female politicians - and male supporters - across party lines, the leaders of the major parties may not let MPs off the leash again by allowing a conscience vote on such issues any time soon.

Nevertheless, there remains overwhelming public support for women's right to choose abortion, so perhaps further progress is possible. Abortion remains on the criminal code in all states and the Northern Territory, such that a "lawful abortion" is enabled only under certain conditions, and doctors performing abortions are still prosecuted. In the wake of the RU486 victory, private member's bills to repeal these laws could succeed, and supporters of choice should push our advantage and put pressure on state MPs to introduce such bills and remove, once and for all, the criminalisation of this fundamental right.

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**P.S.**

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