

In search of a new abortion debate

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People who have strong views shouldn't feel as if they can't express them, but they ought to be expressed within the framework of understanding and concern and care for what is right for mothers and children and society as a whole. [*Peter Costello*]

Abortion should be a decision of the woman and her medical practitioner. It's not something that governments should butt into. [*Women's Electoral Lobby spokeswoman Eva Cox*]

Above all, the decision to have a child should be a matter for private consideration, not something determined by the state or those who believe they have a divine right to limit a woman's right to self-determination. [*Cyndi Tebbel*]

To tell the truth, I don't even think about it. It doesn't enter my mind. You can't regret something that you didn't want in the first place. I see children and I think they are cute and sweet and lovely and all those things but, and this can sound a bit simple, but they are almost like a piece of art, nice to look at but I don't want them in my house just yet. [*'Tracey', who has no regrets about having an abortion 12 months ago*]

This country has a bad conscience about abortion. You can tell this by the frantic attempts to make us shut the hell up about it. [*Andrew Bolt*]

The recent renewal of debate about abortion in Australia is to be welcomed. However, there may be much more that needs to be said. This briefing attempts to observe what is being said in the current debate; what opponents of abortion might minimally say in response to the current debate; and more ambitiously, what might be said in an attempt to change the terms of the debate.

What is being said. A few dominant themes, for and against abortion, emerge from recent press about it:

- Opponents question the high rate of abortion, and contemplate policy changes concerning Medicare funding, or contemplate abortion law reform to outlaw (at least) late term abortion.
- Some think the issue should be handled by states, not by federal politicians.
- For proponents of abortion, decisions about pregnancies are only private, solely to be made between a woman and her doctor.
- Also, it is said that men should not speak about abortion nor propose policies concerning abortion.
- There is no clear agreement upon the facts of the matter. The profiles and circumstances of the women most likely to have an abortion are unclear. Even the actual numbers of abortions performed are disputed.

In all this, there seems to be a refusal to discuss more fundamental moral questions. Disputes about numbers, and comments about state rights, privacy or men all refuse to consider whether our current high abortion rate is problematic. Conversely, calls for law reform or funding reform too quickly 'cut to the chase', and often fail to win hearts and minds about how good it is to welcome children into our community, and why the high abortion rate is so bad.

A minimum response from the opponents of abortion, corresponding to the bullet points above, might go as follows:

- Opponents of abortion might not oppose changes to Medicare funding policy, although some would not wholeheartedly support such an initiative. Opponents of abortion would

probably support legal changes to restrict late-term abortion, which may have saved up to 163 Australian babies in 2002 (according to Andrew Bolt). Changes like this would be **a powerful symbolic way** to communicate that abortion is a moral issue serious enough for our leadership to challenge current cultural practices.

- We should also resist notions that discussion of what constitutes a healthy society should, in the first instance, be sidelined by questions of states rights (even though we might want eventually to defend the propriety of states rights in many arenas).
- Nor should we accept that a woman's 'private' decisions are made in a vacuum, as if she is not deeply influenced by the cultural attitudes and possibilities that she is immersed in.
- Nor should we accept that men have nothing to say on these matters: they too assist to build communities, and if they see communities that are hostile to women or children, they would be wrong not to say so and act accordingly. Men should indeed speak carefully; but to silence them is to suggest that we should not attempt to care for each other across lines of difference.
- The decisions that women make at a difficult time are fed by a complex interweaving of circumstances and options that we as a community should seek to understand, discern and address in meaningful ways.

Changing the terms of debate. However, the responses outlined above are not really adequate to protect the lives of the unborn.

For example, it was interesting to see older feminists cautiously agreeing that late-term abortions may indeed be problematic, with some even agreeing that the abortion rate is too high. It is probable that for some older feminists, it was never their intention to see such high rates of abortion (just as the original plaintiff in the U.S. *Roe vs. Wade* case has more recently opposed U.S. 'abortion culture'). But when conservatives then question Medicare funding of abortion, or ponder changes to abortion law, these same feminists are driven into a corner: they will not be seen to ally with conservatives against such hard-won feminist initiatives. The debate is polarised, and any opportunities for a constructive consensus is lost.

The same concern applies to initiatives to tighten abortion law so as to prevent late-term abortion. While symbolically important, such a move expresses the politics of polarisation, and in the end will probably only save a relatively small number of babies. (Indeed, it would probably prove difficult actually to convict anyone.) Of course, such law reform should not be opposed; but the point is that much more can be done, and in less provocative ways.

A more interesting response, which is politically unloseable and which will save far more babies, might look something like this:

Although we oppose abortion, we recognise that simply tightening the law, or restricting funding for abortion, is not an adequate response. Rather, we seek to understand what causes so many women to abort so many babies, and we seek for a society where women can afford to bond joyfully to the children they carry within. To this end, we might propose policies and initiatives along these lines:

- Discussions about the reasons behind increasing numbers of women—variously reported as including over 40's and teens, full-time workers, Asian migrants, or nurses, and probably others—to abort babies;
- Funding for homes and hostels where young women are offered environments in which to care for and nurture children (such as Anglicare's Carramar Cottages, or Canberra's Karinya House, <http://www.karinyahouse.asn.au>), so giving substance to the rhetoric of 'pro-choice' by offering a real 'choice';

- Funding that encourages young mothers to continue their education, also giving substance to the rhetoric of ‘pro-choice’;
- Renewed debate and consideration of State adoption policies;
- Fostering of research into medical culture: the attitudes governing medical advice where there is evidence of genetic anomaly in a foetus; the reliability of data governing such advice; scrutiny of the extent to which this data includes fetuses aborted for fear of anomaly, who later turn out to be ‘normal’, and whether mothers are told of such normal fetuses after an abortion;
- Auditing fertility clinics, Family Planning Associations and abortion centres (a) simply to clarify how many babies are aborted at the various stages of pregnancy, and (b) to consider whether these places require a closer regulatory environment—not primarily to restrict their practices (although such restriction may be a possible outcome), but to determine whether such places genuinely foster choice and keep records adequately, transparently and legally;
- Law reform to create a legal environment where doctors do not need to fear the delivery of disabled children;
- Reappointment of a Minister for Children—a portfolio that has lamentably disappeared after the recent election—whose brief might be expanded to include the promotion of a welcoming environment for children and a supportive environment for would-be parents.

It is interesting to note that in the U.S., abortion rates *dropped* under Clinton (‘pro-choice’) and *rose* under Bush (‘pro-life’). Something about the Clinton administration made it possible for women to have children, and one guess is that the administration’s welfare policies made it possible for young women to work and to keep their children. Other policy implications might arise from a closer study of this example.

We seek for a society where our love for children can extend even to the womb.

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