

## The New Testament According to the Lyons Forum : An Australia Bereft of Abortion Rights?

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**BACKGROUND:** Following the 1995 United Nations-convened 4th Conference on Women, it was plain that fundamentalist and population control forces were a double challenge to women's reproductive freedom, which includes the inalienable right to abortion that is lawful, safe, and affordable. In Australia, where 80,000 to 100,000 abortions are performed annually, abortion is the second most common therapeutic surgical procedure. Medical speak has an identical translation of both "abortion", with its connotation of deliberate impropriety, and "miscarriage", with its implication of biological mishap, which defines a pregnancy termination as the "expulsion of the contents of a pregnant woman's womb at any period of gestation short of full term" . "Abortion" is not however a legal term, and in Australia there are no uniform guidelines on what constitutes lawful abortion. Legislative provisions in each Australian jurisdiction make "unlawful" abortion a criminal offense, which, in theory, carries penalties of seven years to life imprisonment<sup>2</sup>.

In February of 1996, following a decade in opposition, the Liberal-National Party Coalition [the Australian political equivalent of the US Republicans and UK Tories] was elected to federal government. Within a year, the Coalition plunged the nation back into the far right climate which has frequently surfaced in the two centuries following European invasion. Amidst renewed attacks on Aboriginal land title, rising anti-migrant racism, and a war against youth to aged, unemployed, uneducated and chronically ill , , the speculated engine room of the Coalition, known as the Lyons Forum, commenced systematically to reduce women's access to their tenuous legal right to abortion.

**ABORTION LAW IN AUSTRALIA:** In some states the criminal law has been codified, so that provisions grant a statutory defense to the crime of abortion<sup>2</sup>. Overall, an abortion is deemed lawful when a woman obtains two medical opinions to certify that a pregnancy termination is necessary to save her life or prevent her suffering physical or mental injury. A 1995 survey of more than two thousand women attending abortion clinics in one Australian state illustrates the blind eye that the law casts on its own criteria of lawfulness; only 12 per cent of the women surveyed at multiple centers over a six week period underwent abortions that complied with the health-related legal conditions.

Recent abortion disputes in the Australian Courts prompted the claims manager for the United Medical Defense, Dr. Megan Keaney, to clarify the legality of abortion for medical practitioners. She explained that the ensuing judgments had not altered the existing law[s], and that abortion remained a statutory criminal offense . In many ways, Keaney's comment identifies the realities of Australian abortion statutes - reasonable protection for medical practitioners, but a continuing criminalization for women. Jo Wainer, arguing for the Victorian Women's Electoral Lobby in 1996 submissions to the High Court and National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] , has highlighted that the criminal code offends women, and is in conflict with the well-embedded ethical principle that decisions ought to be made by those most affected. With respect to abortion, undoubtedly those bearing the brunt of the decision-making process, both physically and psychologically, are women. Yet, within the eyes of the law, the mandatory medical certification which places abortion within the law reduces a woman to the rank of a child or the mentally infirmed, and deems her incapable of making an adult sane decision.

**THE LYONS FORUM:** Formed in 1992, the Lyons Forum is made up of Coalition members from the upper [Senate] and lower [House of Representatives] levels of the Australian Parliament. Membership is largely secret, but an estimated forty to fifty members make the Lyons Forum the largest political sect in federal politics, one that represents, at a minimum, thirty, and at a maximum, forty per cent of the governing Coalition .

Amongst the group's publicly known members, its first chairman, Chris Miles, is the current Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, John Howard. While in opposition, Howard was known nationally for his anti-Asian immigration platform. Since coming to office, he has risen to international prominence; initially because of his failure to curtail the blatant racism of another federal politician, Pauline Hanson, and her One Nation Party, and, more recently, because of his affronts to Australia's indigenous people - first, with his ten point plan which waters down, and opens avenues to extinguish, High Court-awarded Native land rights, and second, with his outright refusal to issue a national apology for the government-orchestrated genocide which authorized institutional authorities to steal Aboriginal children from their parents over four decades. Miles himself is best known from his days in opposition when he advocated the continued criminalization of homosexual acts between consenting adults in the Australian state of Tasmania. Back in 1994, when Justice Michael Kirby, now on the High Court bench, visited Tasmania to explode some of the myths around homosexuality, and speak up for gay rights, Miles accompanied Kirby's opponents, who included Senator Eric Abetz and other Coalition cronies, who opposed Kirby at the public meeting with a variety of fundamentalisms and homophobic vitriol.

Senator Abetz has since succeeded Miles as chair of the Lyons Forum. He too sits cozily with the Prime Minister, and was Howard's choice to chair the highly influential Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee. Abetz stands accused of orchestrating the Senate enquiry and report which conjured support for the anti-euthanasia lobby<sup>8</sup>, and which subsequently led to the enactment of a Coalition bill, masqueraded as a private member's bill, vetoing the Northern Territory's voluntary euthanasia legislation. The private member fronting for the anti-euthanasia bill, Kevin Andrews, is identified as a core member of the Lyons Forum, as too is Howard's treasurer, Peter Costello.

Professing to be about strengthening family based on Christian values, the Lyons Forum has released only one publication, "Empowering Australian Families". Issued after its own National Inquiry into Families and the Economy, the verses within the second chapter blame individualism, mass media, political correctness, and the feminist movement [my emphasis] for what the Forum views as the destruction of traditional family values in present day society. The new testament according to the Lyons Forum claims that feminism [and the sexual revolution of the 1960s] has created a new culture, one which regards children to be a burden, and has increased the ratio of single parent families and de facto relationships, escalated the number of working women, lowered the status of marriage, and is to blame for the ease and frequency of divorce.

Australian Democrat Senator John Woodley, the outgoing president of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship, argues that the Lyons Forum betrays its professed Christian ethos, raising not a whisper against a number of legislations passed by the Howard administration which fly in the face of Judaeo-Christian ethics. Woodley, the first ordained minister to serve on the Australian Senate, is at odds with the Lyons Forum's "narrow concerns" and "preoccupation with matters of sexuality" in relation to matters such as abortion, child care, censorship and homosexuality, and cites slashes to migrant and unemployment welfare as examples of legislation which contradict Christian values of social justice.

**FEDERAL ANTI-ABORTION ANTICS:** One of Australia's most vocal anti-abortionists, Independent Senator Brian Harradine, has not been publicly identified as a member of the Lyons Forum. While this may be correct, perhaps because of his expulsion from the Australian Labour Party some years back, there are still signs that he shares and supports, and may even be behind, the sect's anti-abortion and other pro-life agendas. My personal experiences indicate that there is at least a Lyons Forum-Harradine collaboration; between 1994 and 1996, one of Harradine's policy advisors regularly contacted me to

exchange information on long-acting contraceptives, and abortion and sterilization drugs [Depo-Provera, Norplant, the anti-fertility vaccine, RU 486, methotrexate and quinacrine]. Initially naive, I faxed the majority of these documents to Harradine's Canberra office. The remainder went by express mail to Canberra, but on several occasions I was asked to transmit the documents directly to the offices of various Liberal Party politicians, one of whom happened to be the above-mentioned anti-euthanasia zealot Kevin Andrews.

At the present time, according to Gerard Henderson, the director of The Sydney Institute, although Andrews is opposed to euthanasia, he has declared that he "wouldn't touch abortion". Henderson writes that the Lyons Forum is determined and influential, but, at this stage, does not represent the importation of US religious fundamentalism in its full expression. Nonetheless, with feminism its scapegoat, the Lyons Forum, like Harradine, has placed a considerable share of political energy into shrinking abortion services across the country. The Coalition began by passing federal funding of Family Planning Australia down to the states. Confirming this plan, Dr. Michael Wooldridge informed his critics that he was the Minister for Health, not the Minister for Family Planning, and appeared oblivious to the fact that his defense reflected either a glaring ignorance of the wide range of women's health issues addressed by these clinics, or a misogyny bemused by women's shrinking abortion opportunities. Wooldridge too has right wing connections, with his 1996 election campaign financially supported by the highly influential Right to Life which in Australia is best known for its anti-abortion hysterics.

In May 1996, the Coalition took a second step towards creating an abortion-free Australia. Harradine's above-mentioned policy advisor telephoned me to celebrate the impending enactment of the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Act which would effectively prohibit the importation of the French abortion pill, RU 486. Questioning myself on where these parliamentarians, professing their concern for women, had been when long-acting contraceptives like Depo-Provera were licensed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration [TGA] back in 1994, my penny dropped; unlike Depo, RU 486 induces abortion, and pro-life had been their prime motive all along. Less than an hour later, my suspicion was confirmed with a deluge of faxed Hansard arriving to reveal the exaggerations which successfully steamrolled the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Act through both federal Houses. In brief, the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill of 1996 claimed to be about protecting women from harmful drugs, but the rhetoric which prompted its enactment clearly demonstrated that the true agenda was to reduce abortion access. Henceforth, a safety clearance from the TGA is sufficient to legitimize the prescription of non-abortion drugs such as antibiotics, antidepressants, anticancer drugs, but abortifacients such as RU 486 remain prohibited until an identical authorization has been signed by the Minister of Health and approved by the parliament. In other words, to paraphrase Senator Dee Margetts for the Australian Greens arguing against the amendment, this Bill intensifies the discrimination against abortion drugs which, even before the 1996 legislation, were uniquely classified as restricted goods. The legislation capitalized on a split in pro-choice feminist ranks sparked in 1991 by a report emphasizing the broken promises of an RU486 abortion; rather than being a prompt procedure, RU486 prolongs the abortion process for, on average, a week; rather than being private, RU486 has three to five medical visits which turn the abortion into a highly public spectacle; and, compared with conventional abortion via suction curettage or vacuum aspiration, RU486 is not the perfect solution to an unwanted pregnancy, partly because it imposes more pain, nausea, and bleeding, but equally because it has a higher abortion failure rate [five per cent versus one per cent] even when a second medication, known as prostaglandin, is co-administered during the abortion protocol. The parliamentary debate befitted a pro-life rally as the House was told that a 95 per cent complete abortion rate from RU486 was dependent on two courses of prostaglandin injections when, in fact, the protocol calls for only one

course of prostaglandin, and tablet forms of prostaglandins have superseded the injectables in abortion protocols for the past five years. The House was also misinformed that women were hospitalized for twelve hours in case of any prostaglandin side-effects, when the reality of the medical monitoring amounts to but four hours. In the same vein, the House was also told that one woman has died following an RU486 abortion, when in reality the solitary death from 500,000 RU486 abortions pales in terms of the three to four estimated fatalities each year amongst Australia's annual 80,000-plus abortions by conventional methods .

The rhetoric continued as the Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease [CJD] legacy of the 1967-1985 Human Pituitary Hormone Program was cited as an example of the lethal risks imposed on women when government authorities stood back . In fact, this argument could not be any more incorrect. The Human Pituitary Hormone Program was a tragic example of harm to women when government stepped in, authorizing and sponsoring a drug that was manufactured by its own agencies. But, this argument did prove the exact point made by another major opponent of the 1996 TGA Amendment Bill, Australian Democrat Senator Meg Lees, that parliamentarians are not "the best people to determine what the risk [of a drug] really is." Ultimately, the RU486 decision belongs to women fully informed of their options. Instead, Australian women have been forced to sit and watch their legislators basking in their own ignorance, spouting forth with a chain of exaggerated and false accusations about RU486 and its prostaglandin abortion partner to exonerate their pro-life blueprint . Their bigotry denies women the opportunity to speak for themselves, and exposes them to the even greater dangers of back-yard abortion and RU 486 look-alikes. As Marijke Alblas, feminist abortion provider and reformer from the Netherlands, has put it ,

" .. there seems to be no end to the experiments on women. With the excuse of the growing world population and because RU 486 is still difficult to obtain in most countries, even worse methods of this so-called medical abortion are being carried out".

Those worse abortion methods already include anticancer drugs such as methotrexate and tamoxifen, with methotrexate now being touted as the RU486 of the Third World. Dr. Alblas has also pointed out that there is no freedom for women when it depends on the political, medical and social situation in a [given] country. In Australia, it seems that women now face legal, political, medical and social barriers to abortion, many of which are put in place by those disguised as their allies.

EPILOGUE: In February 1997 , anti-abortion devotee, Harradine, played a major role in Melbourne endocrinologist John Funder's disinvitation to become the next director of Australia's peak health and research body, the NHMRC. Because of Funder's pro-RU486 position, Richard Larkins, from the University of Melbourne's department of medicine at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, was instead substituted. Before the dust had settled, Larkins proclaimed that it was time to move on. Few, if any, feminists would agree; both Funder and Larkins have prompted feminist displeasure at various stages of their careers, and doubts linger whether either learned from their individual experiences.

By May of 1997, Larkins demonstrated that abortion reform is an unlikely priority now that he has taken the reins, as the NHMRC logo was promptly removed from an abortion report sanctioned by NHMRC's own women's health committee when under the leadership of previous director, Sydney nephrologist Judith Whitworth . Harradine denied any role in scuttling the report , but Dr. Margie Ripper, a feminist academic from the University of Adelaide contributing to the report, is quoted as saying that the study had been downgraded by political pressure and forces outside the NHMRC .

The NHMRC fiascoes appear outrageous examples of the Coalition bowing to the Harradine morality, that of an independent senator who attracts only 12 per cent of the vote in a single, and indeed hardly populous, state. Alternatively, the Lyons Forum may have preferred their low profile within the

Coalition, as Harradine copped the public flack for imposing an anti-abortion righteousness on the entire country. Whichever, it is equally outrageous that NHMRC policy, which affects all of the country's citizens, was made without consideration for the 51 per cent of the population who happen to be women. Both the cut to Family Planning Australia's federal funding and the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill contravene the 1996 Amsterdam Declaration on Abortion which calls on all governments "to advocate and defend legal, voluntary, safe and humane abortion provision to all women in need of it, as an integral part of reproductive health care." Taken together with the NHMRC controversies, these chapters paint dark prospects for abortion rights in Australia, as the nation contends with an onslaught of Lyons Forum-Harradine fundamentalism.

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