

# Abortion debate takes on a new life of its own

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Women don't want a debate on abortion, declared the Liberal senator Jeannie Ferris on ABC radio yesterday.

"We don't need this debate, we don't want this debate ... why have the debate? There is no mood for this debate. There is no intention by any Australians to reopen this debate in an obvious way."

End of discussion, says Ferris, 63. Her generation of women fought for abortion on demand in the 1960s and '70s and, as far as she is concerned, they won and the conversation is over. It bores them. Any attempt to reopen the debate is derided as a Catholic conspiracy by patriarchal men who just want to control women's bodies.

Yet the truth is that abortion is back on the table and it is women who are putting it there. They are not religious fanatics or dupes of men, but realists.

They are women like the US senator Hillary Clinton, a high priestess of liberal feminism and "hero" of the pro-abortion lobby. Last week she softened her stand on abortion in a speech which drew "gasps and head-shaking" from some 1000 abortion campaigners in New York State.

"There is an opportunity for people of good faith to find common ground in this debate," she said. Her common ground includes preventing unplanned pregnancies, supporting sexual education, including "abstinence counselling", and encouraging adoption, *The New York Times* reported.

"We can all recognise that abortion in many ways represents a sad, even tragic choice to many, many women. The fact is that the best way to reduce the number of abortions is to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies in the first place."

The gasping audience was gathered to celebrate the 32nd anniversary of the landmark Roe versus Wade legal case in the US. Ironically, the original "Roe", Norma McCorvey, 57, in whose pseudonym abortion was legalised in 1973, is now an anti-abortion campaigner.

She has said she was manipulated by pro-abortion campaigners who needed a test case. But she never had the abortion that was the basis of the case, instead giving birth to a baby girl she gave up for adoption.

Clinton isn't the only famous feminist to soften her rhetoric on abortion. When the British documentary *My Foetus* was aired by the ABC in Australia last year, the ardently pro-choice Women's Electoral Lobby icon Eva Cox acknowledged that medical advances which allow ever more premature babies to be kept alive made late-term abortions "more problematic".

In Australia, while male church leaders and male politicians such as the Health Minister, Tony Abbott, calling for a rethink on abortion might be given most of the spotlight, a younger generation of women is agitating. One Wednesday night in early December, 800 women crowded into the ballroom of the Sheraton on the Park to create a women's organisation to find ways to reduce abortion.

"We want to develop a new way of talking about the abortion issue," said one of the organisers, Rachael Patterson, 26, a law lecturer at Deakin University in Melbourne. She said the idea started with a "conversation among friends. A number of our group are academics. Some are politicians. Others are stay-at-home mums.

"We are concerned that the voices of women wanting to see a reduction in the levels of abortion and who want the Government to provide better support and practical alternatives to women are being stifled."

The speakers that night came from across the political landscape, including the ALP senator Jacinta Collins and the Family First candidate Andrea Mason.

The women have not settled on a name for the group, says another organiser, Melinda Tankard Reist, whose 2000 book *Giving Sorrow Words*, about post-abortion grief, is in its third reprinting. "But what we're doing is appealing to a broad range of women who question abortion and don't feel at home with the traditional pro-life movement. There is so much hypocrisy in the attempt to shut down and stifle the debate. People always talk about unwanted babies but no one should have an unwanted abortion."

On Monday night Tankard Reist joined a dozen religious leaders at the Salvation Army headquarters in Sydney for what was billed as a historic meeting on abortion. Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon and Salvation Army leaders agreed to call for restrictions on late-term abortions, promote alternatives to abortion and ask governments for accurate statistics.

The National Party senator Ron Boswell was among several politicians from the Coalition and Labor parties who attended the meeting, and later asked Abbott to make public definitive statistics on abortions. Thus came the tirade from his colleague Ferris.

But to engage in meaningful debate we need to know the facts. Estimates range from 60,000 to 100,000 abortions each year, although the number of Medicare-funded abortions in Australia has dropped by 5000 in the past nine

years, according to the Minister for Human Services, Joe Hockey. Fewer women aged under 25 are seeking abortions, while the number of women over 35 having abortions has increased. In NSW there were 31,600 abortions last year - 200 of which were late-term, the Premier, Bob Carr, says.

Monday night's meeting was organised by the anti-abortion Foundation for Human Development, which the editor of ostensibly Catholic website Online Catholics, Kate Mannix, told *The Age* was a "shadowy group [whose] strategies are lifted from conservative US Catholic groups". Quelle horreur!

It just goes to show that the sides in this debate we're not really having cannot be easily categorised.