

Women in the 21st Century

International Women's Day Breakfast 2006 with Senator Lyn Allison

**I know. But I do
not approve.
And I am not
resigned.**

Edna St. Vincent Millay
1892-1950

The Howard Government

- ∨ The last National Women's Health Policy was in 1989
- ∨ There is no current women's health plan
- ∨ Has a strong history of dismantling or defunding key women's organisations (see Anne Summers handout)
- ∨ Moved the Office for the Status of Women from the Dept of PM and Cabinet, thereby reducing its influence and capacity for cross government overview

The Bracks Government

- ∨ The last Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy was published in 2002
- ∨ There is no current women's health policy or plan

The United States Government

A bill, originating in South Dakota, is designed to challenge the Supreme Court's ruling in Roe versus Wade, which in 1973 recognized a right of women to terminate pregnancies.

South Dakota may be leading the way, but legislators in Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, West Virginia, Mississippi and Oklahoma have introduced similar bills.

The bill bans all abortion, including in cases of rape and incest, including cases that threaten the health of the mother; the only exception is if the mother's survival itself is at risk, and even in those instances the doctor must "make reasonable medical efforts under the circumstances to preserve both the life of the mother and the life of her unborn child." Doctors caught performing abortions would be charged with a Class 5 felony, punishable by up to five years in prison. It is due to take effect on July 1. In South Dakota, pharmacists can refuse to fill prescriptions for contraceptives.

The Supreme Court has become increasingly conservative with two appointments by George Bush. If an appeal is lodged against the South Dakota bill, it would provide the opportunity for the Supreme Court to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision, thereby removing core protections for women's freedom of choice.

A GLANCE AT REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

- ∞ 1933 First birth control clinic in Australia
- ∞ 1958 Victorian Crimes Act proclaims abortion illegal
- ∞ 1969 Abortion legalised in SA
- ∞ 1982 Right to Choose Coalition formed to assert the right of women to control their own reproduction

(Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner, *The Women's Power Handbook*)

- ∞ 1969 Common Law Menhennitt Ruling permits abortion in Victoria provided it is necessary to protect the life or health of the woman
- ∞ In 1996, The Federal Government did a 'trade-off' with Independent Senator Brian Harradine, whereby Harradine supported the partial sale of Telstra in return for an amendment to the Act governing the Therapeutic Goods Administration which resulted in the Health Minister having responsibility for RU486. Harradine is an anti-abortion campaigner.
- ∞ 2005 (October) Private Member's Bill initiated by the Australian Democrats to overturn Harradine's amendment and supported by four women senators - Lyn Allison (Democrats), Fiona Nash (National Party), Claire Moore (Labor) and Judith Troeth (Liberals).
- ∞ 2006 (February) Responsibility for RU486 taken from Health Minister to the Therapeutic Goods Administration. After a conscience vote, the private member's bill was passed by both houses despite public statement from Howard that he would not support the bill.
- ∞ 2006 (March) \$51 million allocated to counselling in relation to unwanted pregnancies. The aim is to reduce the number of abortions. Counsellors to have no links with abortion service providers. However, religious organisations can tender. Information to be given on abortion only 'if asked'. Howard envisages this would be 'rare'. Dr. Leslie Cannold, (Fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics) asks, 'How can a service designed to stop women having abortions ... provide impartial, non-directive advice?'
- ∞ Abortion has been decriminalised in W.A., Tasmania and ACT.
- ∞ 2006 (March) Push to remove abortion from Sections 10, 64 and 65 of the (Victorian) Crimes Act from Labor backbencher, Carolyn Hirsh. Senator Hirsh had spoken in Parliament about this 'unfinished business' on February 28th: "It is time for Victoria to remove this anomaly and to ensure that Victorian women have access to safe, medically performed abortion." She had spoken the following Thursday about moving a private member's bill, but the next day said, while 'the decriminalisation of abortion is an issue I feel very strongly about ... I have no plans (to) move in a unilateral way to bring a bill into Parliament'. *The Age* believes the statement was issued under direction from the Premier's office. (*The Age*, March 4, 2006)

RU486 showed that **we can lobby successfully**. The Victorian Election is due later this year.

Let's use our collective power to tell our politicians at State and Commonwealth level that we want women's services. We want equality. We want to change these stats as they stand in 2006:

- ∞ There is no national maternity leave scheme – it is provided ad hoc and at the employer's discretion. It is least available in rural areas.
 - ∞ Women in full time work earn 85 cents in the male dollar. Once all workers, including casuals and part timers, are included, that earnings gap grows to 66 cents in the male dollar.
 - ∞ Divorce rates are just below one in two, and after divorce, 35% of women under 45 live below the poverty line, and more than half who divorce over 45 live in poverty. In our region, 87% of all sole parents are women.
 - ∞ Women do a lot of unpaid caring. In Australia, 75% of carers are women. 91% of elderly parents receiving informal care receive it from their daughters, not their sons.
 - ∞ One third of women who work in this country have no paid entitlements and even more have no significant superannuation.
 - ∞ Despite women working more than ever, by the year 2019, women will have half the retirement savings of men and they are two and a half times more likely to live in poverty during retirement.
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Senator Lyn Allison

Senator Lyn Allison is the Leader of the Australian Democrats. She is the party's national spokesperson on: Health and Ageing; Education (excluding Higher Education); Resources; Energy and Infrastructure; Treasury and Commonwealth - State Relations. Elected to the Federal Parliament in 1996, she is the sixth female leader of the Democrats.

Senator Allison is an outspoken campaigner on health, particularly women's health; education; the environment and nuclear issues. In her former role as superannuation spokesperson, she was a strong advocate of mechanisms that would improve women's retirement savings and has argued for paid maternity leave and against the IR and income support changes recently passed as they will seriously disadvantage women. Senator Allison led the debate on RU486 and was one of the four co-sponsors of a ground breaking, cross-party supported bill that successfully removed the Health Minister's veto and transferred approval to Therapeutic Goods Administration.

In the area of women's health she initiated the referral to committee of petitions on the lack of research and support for gynaecological health and participated in the roundtable discussion on the subject. As a very active member of the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, she has worked to improve the health of women in developing countries, particularly those without access to good reproductive health in the Asia-Pacific region and was a key player in that group's contribution to the Government's recent White Paper on aid, arguing that Australia's focus on governance and security was to the detriment of programs in sexual and reproductive health.

Lobby, Lobby, Lobby

- 1. Vote in electronic polls**
- 2. Take part in surveys**
- 3. Write letters to newspapers**
- 4. Write or talk to your local, State and Federal politicians**
- 5. Pass on the info from today to friends and people in your circle of influence**
- 6. Never underestimate the ripple effect!**
- 7. Join protests!**

THE 10 POINT PLAN

In the current policy vacuum on women's health and wellbeing, a 10 Point Plan for Victorian Women's Health 2006-10 has been developed and endorsed by all Victorian women's health services and a range of related organisations including VCOSS.

It has been sent to all government Social Development Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries and key advisors.

We are seeking a pre-election commitment to this plan from both the incumbent government and the opposition.

1. Social determinants of health approach – recognising many factors determine the health status of an individual.
2. Gender as a determinant of health
3. Overarching values – including the right to live safely and free from violence and fear; the right for women to fulfil their potential and the right to informed and real choices

4. Priority issues – for the next 5 years should be: state-wide reproductive and sexual health policy and funded programs; end violence against women; emotional and mental health
5. High level cross-government leadership – establish new Ministerial Women's Advisory Committees within each of the critical portfolio areas and a mechanism for cross collaboration
6. Inclusive approach – establish a process to involve women's health advocates in policy development and changed practice
7. Honesty and transparency – in consultations and in resulting actions
8. Resourcing and accountability – for implementing a gender approach and this 10-point action plan
9. Women's specific services – renew commitment
10. Collaborative frameworks – support women's health services to work collaboratively with other organisations in primary and acute care

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