

Local

Bid to wind back abortion reform

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FRESH tensions have emerged at the senior levels of the Brumby Government over the abortion debate, with one cabinet minister seeking to wind back access to some late-term abortions.

Industry Minister Theo Theophanous is also proposing to drop the contentious proposal to force doctors opposed to abortion to refer women wanting the procedure to a doctor who would assist them to get a termination.

As debate on the abortion bill starts in Victoria's upper house today, Mr Theophanous's amendments would water down proposed reforms that shape as some of the the most liberal abortion laws in the country.

The 40 upper house MPs, whose vote will decide the issue, yesterday each received more than 60 spam emails -- all from anti-abortion supporters.

Since the bill was introduced two months ago, MPs have individually received more than 1100 emails and letters, almost all from anti-abortion supporters, acting in an apparently co-ordinated campaign.

Mr Theophanous is proposing that a single doctor may consent to an abortion for social and psychological reasons up to 20 weeks, instead of the 24 weeks proposed in the bill.

In cases beyond 20 weeks, he is proposing that as well as two doctors, a social worker or psychologist must also consent to the termination where it is deemed to be for social or psychological reasons.

His amendments say doctors who conscientiously object to abortion should not be required to refer women to another doctor for treatment. He proposes instead that the doctor makes the following statement to the woman: ``It is not illegal in Victoria for an abortion to be performed in certain circumstances. However, I am unable to assist you as I have a conscientious objection to abortion."

Mr Theophanous told The Australian last night he had not been able to support the bill in its present form.

``I have tried to take a realistic but principled approach to moderating some of the elements of the bill that have caused concern among so many people, and I hope these amendments are successful," he said. It is believed that Catholic hospitals, while remaining opposed to the bill, would welcome some of the minister's amendments. But Mr Theophanous's comments are at odds with the views of Women's Affairs Minister Maxine Morand, who defended the bill in its present form and said she wanted it passed with no amendments.

``The bill actually explicitly provides that a health professional can exercise a conscientious objection, but in doing that, we've got to make sure there's an effective referral," Ms Morand said.

The head of Pro-Choice Victoria, Leslie Cannold, said any attempt to amend the bill would effectively kill it.

``Some of these amendments being seriously discussed, like throwing out the mandatory referral clause and clawing back the two-doctor consent to 20 weeks, are so profound the bill will become meaningless," Dr Cannold said.

She said the ``hysterical scaremongering" by doctors who claimed their right to conscientiously object to performing a procedure or referring a patient to another doctor for medical help was reprehensible.

Catholic Health Australia signalled in The Australian last week its intention to legally challenge the bill, claiming the legislation infringed on doctors' rights to freedom of religion, conscience and opinion laid down in the Victorian Charter of Human Rights.