



News

Moves in upper house fail to derail debate on abortion bill

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ETHICS

AN ATTEMPT to derail legislation that would make abortion legal in Victoria failed in Victoria's upper house yesterday as debate escalated on the controversial bill.

Anti-abortion MP Peter Kavanagh, of the DLP, used legal advice prepared for Catholic Health Australia to argue that the entire debate was out of order.

Mr Kavanagh said the Government's own charter of human rights had not been followed, so the Parliament should not consider the bill.

But the tactic was rebuffed by Legislative Council president Robert Smith, who said he had no power to stop the debate before it began.

Eight of the first nine MPs to speak were in favour of the bill, including two who had previously described themselves as undecided.

Early resistance came from the public gallery: a pro-life campaigner who gestured at and shouted abuse at Labor MP Candy Broad was escorted out.

Parliamentary Secretary for Roads and Ports Martin Pakula fired a broadside at some pro-life groups, saying they had called him a Nazi, not knowing that his family had suffered from the effects of the Holocaust.

Mr Pakula said that he would be opposed to his own wife having an abortion, "but it would not have been up to me, it would have been a matter for my wife, for her to make the decision".

MPs in favour of the bill included deputy leader of the opposition in the upper house, Liberal MP Wendy Lovell, Nationals Leader in the upper house, Peter Hall, and Government whip Matthew Viney.

Most of the MPs in favour said it was not for Parliament to refuse women the choice of having an abortion, even if they were personally opposed.

Mr Hall said decriminalising abortion was important step in addressing the underlying causes of women seeking abortion.

Mr Viney said he believed that abortion should be a health issue, not a crime.

Imaginative opposition to the bill came from Liberal MP John Vogels, who said if abortion had always been legal the music world may have been denied the presence of composer Ludwig van Beethoven

and performers Andrea Bocelli and Stevie Wonder, all of whom he claimed were genetically disposed from before birth to a handicap. "The central question is 'are we destroying a life'," Mr Vogels said, answering his question in the affirmative.

Industry and Trade Minister Theo Theophanous - whose vote is considered crucial to the fate of the legislation - yesterday wrote to all upper house MPs outlining four proposed amendments to the bill.

Mr Theophanous seeks to reduce the 24-week time period for terminations to 20 weeks, require the advice of a qualified social worker or psychologist for post-24 week terminations, ban partial birth abortions and no longer require medical practitioners who object to abortion to refer patients to doctors without such views.

A coalition of doctors opposed to the bill stepped up their campaign yesterday, calling on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to intervene, arguing the Victorian legislation contravenes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Human Rights.

Also, bionic ear pioneer and scientist Graeme Clarke voiced his opposition to the legislation, branding it "bad medicine".

Raising the Nazi persecution of deaf people, Professor Clarke said it would be a tragedy if the liberalisation of the law "decided some children have the potential to get death".

But Coalition leader Ted Baillieu - who voted in favour of the bill in the lower house - said the emotive language in making a comparison to Nazi Germany was unhelpful.

Premier John Brumby yesterday reiterated his view that the bill would pass the upper house.