

EARLY DRAFT—DO NOT QUOTE

## **Gender divisions: Crossing the floor for women**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper will continue the author's exploration of factors facilitating the substantive representation of women in parliament. The operational meaning of substantive representation adopted for the purposes of the paper is advocacy on behalf of women and of the issues raised by women in the community. The paper will present an Australian case study of an initiative by a cross-party group of women parliamentarians to remove the special requirement for ministerial approval for importation of the abortion drug RU 486. Women Senators from four different parties co-authored a successful Private Senators' Bill on the subject in 2006. The conscience vote was markedly along gender lines, with women Senators from all parties overwhelmingly supporting the Bill (24 to 3) while male Senators marginally opposed it (21 in favour, 25 against).*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In early 2006 women Senators in the Australian parliament successfully co-operated across party lines to give women easier access to what was described as the 'abortion pill'—RU486 or Mifepristone. The Private Senator's Bill was co-sponsored by women Senators from four parties, including both government and opposition parties and a minor party. This was a unique development in the federal parliament and depended both on the 'critical actors' forging the initiative, on the presence of a relatively large number of women in the Senate (36 per cent) and on the role of a non-government organisation (NGO) operating partly outside and partly inside the parliament, in providing momentum and resources for the Senators.

If it were not for the sizeable minority of women in the Senate the Private Senator's Bill, would have failed, as a majority of male Senators opposed it. Women Senators from all parties overwhelmingly supported the Bill (24 to 3) while male Senators marginally opposed it (21 in favour, 25 against). After this success in the Senate the Prime Minister allowed the Bill to pass the House of Representatives on the voices, there clearly being the numbers for it

to pass. Was this an example of women in parliament making a difference and engaging in the substantive representation of the interests of women in the community? Following Pitkin, the term 'substantive representation' is usually taken to indicate the agency of the representative, as contrasted with their descriptive characteristics, such as gender. So the concept of 'substantive representation' involves an act of representation of a constituency. But who is the constituency when we talk about the 'substantive representation of women?' I shall argue that the constituency consists of those who have mobilised around the political identity 'women' and are making claims in that name, using women-centred discourses. I shall use the term 'feminist' for these women's-centred discourses and claims, while acknowledging that in other circumstances one might want to draw a distinction here.

A different approach to the constituency problem (see Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski 2007) is to argue that the constituency may be identified through the gender differences in attitudes revealed in survey data—substantive representation occurring when representatives reflect the preferences of women voters. Another approach is to avoid the constituency problem altogether and instead focus on whether representatives are promoting gender equality (Waylen 2007). While the gender gap in voter preferences is clearly relevant as is whether representatives are promoting gender equality, I shall continue with the approach of testing whether politicians are introducing into parliament the discourses and claims of politically mobilised women. These discourses mediate and reinforce the attitudes revealed by public opinion research—for example women's perception of whether or not they enjoy equal opportunity.

I have previously explored the question of substantive representation of women via content analysis of parliamentary debate, to look at how women's movement discourses are introduced to parliament, who is involved and how salient these discourses are over time. The items chosen for that content analysis of the Australian parliament concerned violence against women, paid maternity leave and the term 'unpaid work'. I attempted to assess the effects of the level of women's mobilisation outside parliament more broadly and the activity of one organisation, EMILY's List more specifically, on the propensity to introduce feminist discourses and claims into parliament (Sawer 2006). Some of the findings included the significance of feminist MPs in introducing movement claims and discourses and the

importance of a political base. EMILY's List was an important means of reinforcing feminist commitments in return for support, in the context both of the conflicting pressures on parliamentarians and the decline in visibility of the broader women's movement.

The present paper examines the question of how substantive representation of women occurs using a different lens—that of cross-party co-operation on parliamentary bills and motions, rather than analysis of debate. While Australian parliamentary culture is extremely adversarial, and levels of party discipline are very high compared to the United Kingdom, there have been some striking recent examples of cross-party co-operation by women parliamentarians around issues of reproductive health. One such intervention was the cross-party initiative in 2001 by women in the Tasmanian parliament, which resulted in abortion law reform in that State. All 11 women in the two houses of the Tasmanian parliament participated in the drafting of the Private Member's Bill put forward by the (female) Minister of Health. At the federal level the successful RU486 Bill in 2006 was followed by the co-sponsorship of another Bill still before the federal parliament, the Pregnancy Counselling (Truth in Advertising) Bill, aimed at preventing deceptive advertising by anti-abortion services.

In the paper I examine the range of political factors that led to this very uncharacteristic development in Australian politics, including the role of the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA), that, like EMILY's List, bridges women's movement activism and professional party politics. Unlike EMILY's List, ARHA is associated with more than one party, providing (at its own expense) the secretariat for the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development. This difference will be part of the story here.

For the purposes of this paper interviews were conducted with all seven Senators (from five parties) who were co-sponsors of the 2006 Private Senator's Bills, with one other Labor Senator responsible for 'doing the numbers', with the Chief Executive Officer of ARHA and

with the ACT Convenor of another women's organisation involved in the RU86 Committee hearings.<sup>1</sup>

### **The genesis of the RU486 Bill**

As I have written elsewhere (Sawer & Zappalà 2001), for most purposes representation does not begin with the election of a representative to parliament every few years, but rather with the process of community consultation that occurs in relation to policy development. Methodologies of consultation to ensure participation or representation of all sections of the community in policy development have been developed to differing degrees in different democracies (and in some cases rolled back under the influence of public choice ideology). Such policy consultation should always involve the participation, through representative bodies, of those most affected by a policy decision.

In the case of reproductive health issues such consultation should involve women's health organisations as well as women's policy agencies. In the case of the initial decision, in 1996, to remove RU486 (Mifepristone) from the normal processes of drug approval there was no consultation with women's health groups or women's policy agencies. What happened was purely a matter of horse-trading between male politicians. The newly-elected government wished to privatise part of the publicly owned telecommunications corporation (Telstra) but did not have a majority in the Senate. One of those opposing the sale was an Independent Senator with strong Catholic beliefs, Senator Brian Harradine from Tasmania. In order to obtain his vote for the sale, the government agreed to his demand that special conditions be imposed on the importation of the abortion drug RU486 and that it would require ministerial approval. He successfully moved an amendment to the Therapeutic Goods Act to this end, with the support of both government and opposition. Only the Democrats and one Green Senator opposed the Harradine Bill. The other Green Senator (both were women) opposed handing over judgement on the drug to experts, although she acknowledged this was supported by most within the Greens and by women's groups. RU486 was the only drug to be

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in March/April 2007 at Parliament House Canberra, except in the case of the two NGO interviews.

subject to ministerial discretion, and as was commented by many, it was remarkable that this was a deal effectively stitched up by male party leaders at the expense of women's options.

Abortion has been generally available in Australia for the last 30 years and is covered by Australia's health insurance scheme, Medicare. However, because of the importation restriction, only surgical abortion has been available and not medical abortion. Medical opinion has been increasingly critical of this situation, particularly with the accumulating evidence from years of use of Mifepristone in other countries including France, the UK, USA and New Zealand. A woman professor of obstetrics and gynecology at a North Queensland university provided the catalyst for the campaign to lift the ban on RU486 with an article in the Medical Journal of Australia in 2005, highlighting the plight of women in rural Australia unable to access terminations even when medically indicated. She was later to be the first to apply and import RU486 for the use of her patients.

All survey data, including that from the Australian Election Studies and the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, shows that overwhelming majorities of Australians support women's right to choose (for example 81 per cent in AuSSA 2003). Indeed one of the few groups not to support the right to choose over this period was made up of Liberal Party and National Party candidates for federal parliament. Support for choice among this group did not rise about 30 per cent in the period 1987-2001. In 2004 support for choice did rise in this groups as a whole, but among successful Liberal and National Party candidates only 44 per cent were pro-choice (Betts 2006: 1).

Given that availability of abortion is government policy and supported by a majority of the community, the effective limitation of methods available seems to have been mainly intended to prevent abortion being 'too easy'. As we shall see, not only was there a Catholic Independent Senator holding the balance of power, but the new government had an unprecedented number of senior figures with strong religious views and a Catholic-dominated union was wielding exceptional power in the Labor Party. The renewed salience of religion in Australian politics was one of a number of factors that were to combine to produce the events of a decade later.

## **Religion in politics**

As part of the Americanisation of Australian politics, the 1990s saw the creation of professionally organised and well-resourced fundamentalist Christian lobby groups. One example was the Australian Christian Coalition ('voice for values') founded in 1995 with Baptist and Pentecostal links. It became the Australian Christian Lobby in 2000 and has its headquarters in the National Press Club, close to Parliament House. By 2002 an electorally successful 'family values' party with a Pentecostal base, Family First, made its debut, winning a seat in the South Australian Parliament. It gained a Victorian Senate seat in the 2004 federal election, with less than two per cent of the vote but with Labor preferences. While Australia is generally characterised as being similar to Europe in being a very secular society, quite unlike the USA, it acquired the American-style political organisation of fundamentalist Christianity.

The creation of this new political base emboldened conservative Christian MPs to take up the 'values' issues being pressed by Christian lobby groups and right-wing think-tanks (Manning and Warhurst 2005; Maddox, 2005). Interestingly this new boldness of conservative MPs on religious issues coincides with attempts by the conservative federal government to silence mainstream churches critical of government. The mainstream churches and charitable organisations have often been critical of the federal government on human rights and social justice issues and in return have lost valuable government contracts for provision of services.

The issues being taken up by conservative Christians in the federal government, including the Health Minister (and his parliamentary secretary), amounted to an attempt to set the agenda on issues of reproductive health. Almost all of the conservative Christians in the Australian Parliament are men but they have been unabashed in seeking to restrict the choices available to women. They have expressed repeated concern at the number of abortions taking place annually in Australia. Rather than attempting to prevent unwanted pregnancies, however, they have mooted, and in some cases implemented, a range of policy measures to make access to abortion more difficult.

One example, apart from the recurrent proposals to tamper with Medicare funding of abortions, is that the federal government now provides substantial annual funding for pro-life pregnancy counselling services delivered by the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services. The names and advertising of these services, conceal their nature and the fact that they do not provide referrals or accurate information about abortion. Pro-choice counselling services, which do provide information on all options, do not receive federal funding. Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja first introduced a Private Senator's Bill on the prevention of misleading advertising of pregnancy counselling services in 2005. The growing anger of women Senators at men making the running on issues around reproductive health is one of the factors leading to the cross-party work of women in 2006.

The attempts by Conservative Christian men (the 'God squad') to set the agenda on reproductive health was one of the factors angering women in parliament. This anger, particularly at the outspoken Catholic health minister, was epitomised by the YWCA T-shirt worn by a Greens Senator as debate began on the RU486 Bill: 'Mr Abbott, Get your rosaries off my ovaries'. (Warhurst 2007: 25). But as well as inspiring cross-party work by women, the growing political power of religion was also an impediment to it. One woman Senator co-sponsoring the RU486 Bill came under heavy pressure to drop her sponsorship because of her party's need of the ears of preferences from the small religious-based.

The changing face of unionism and decline in union membership has seen the growing power within the Australian Labor Party of a right-wing union with a conservative catholic leadership, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association. The SDA is now the largest trade union in Australia and dominates the powerful Right faction within the Labor Party. Women Senators with SDA backing are expected to follow the SDA line on issues such as abortion. Senator Linda Kirk from South Australia, lost the backing of the SDA for preselection, due to her votes in 2006 in favour of RU486 and stem cell research. Before the conscience vote on stem-cell research (another successful Private Senator's Bill put forward by a government woman Senator) she was told by the SDA federal secretary that she would lose support for preselection if she voted for it.

### **The increased presence of women and the frustration of political careers**

One factor seen as contributing to the emergence of the cross-party initiatives in 2006 was the increased presence of women, particularly in the Senate, and the desire of some of these women to put their mark on politics before leaving. The Australian Senate has been elected by the Single Transferable Vote (STV) variant of proportional representation since 1949. While the presence of women has increased in both chambers since 1980, as the influence of the political mobilisation of women in the 1970s flowed through into the parties, it is the Senate electoral system that has been more favourable to the representation of women. The Alternative Vote system used for the House of Representatives, based on single-member electorates, has posed more barriers than gaining a place on a Senate party ticket.

Cross-cutting the effects of electoral systems have been divergent approaches on the part of the major parties to the recruitment of women. Strong mobilisation by women within the Labor Party led to the adoption of enforceable quotas in 1994, requiring the preselection of women to at least 35 per cent of winnable seats by 2002. On the conservative side of politics the Liberal Party eschewed quotas on the ground they were patronising to women and instead provided some training and mentoring for would-be women candidates. As the party moved to the Right in the 1990s it became less interested in issues of gender equality and less inclined to field women candidates. In every federal election from 1996 there were fewer Liberal women candidates, and its rural-based Coalition Party, the Nationals, did no better in this regard. Nonetheless, the Nationals did have a new young woman Senator, who was to initiate the RU486 Bill despite the hostility of her party colleagues. After the 2004 federal election women constituted 20 per cent of the parliamentary Liberal party in the House of Representatives and 33 per cent of Parliamentary Labor Party. In the Senate women constituted 46 per cent of the Labor Senators and 24 per cent of Liberal Senators. A similar pattern could be found in Australia's other eight parliaments. In early 2007 a reshuffle saw the number of women in federal Cabinet fall to two (11 per cent), a remarkably low figure and significantly lower than the presence of women in the Opposition front bench (23 per cent).

The use of PR for the Senate has also enabled the representation of minor parties in which women have often played a more significant role than in the major parties, and often occupied leadership positions. The timing of the creation of 'post-materialist' parties such as the Australian Democrats and the Greens, meant that they did not have much of the institutionalised gender bias of the older parties. They were created after the arrival of second-wave feminism, were based on participatory principles and were welcoming to women. A majority of the Leaders of the Australian Democrats have been women and three out of the four current Green Senators are also women.

All of these factors, the increased presence of women, particularly in the Australian Senate, and the shift of the Liberal party to the Right were to be relevant to the emergence of cross-party work by women Senators. Government Senator Judith Troeth's role was central in terms of obtaining the Prime Minister's agreement to a conscience vote on RU486, or indeed in terms of the cross-party Bills being progressed at all. Senator Troeth's political career was nearing an end and she had returned to the backbench in 2004, after holding Parliamentary Secretary positions in rural portfolios in the first three Howard Governments. While others closer to the conservative ideology of the Prime Minister were being promoted, she was passed over. She became one of the 'small l' Liberals expressing open dissent from Government policies on refugees issues and was responsible for the scuttling of a government Bill on off-shore processing of asylum seekers in 2006.

A number of the other Senators involved with the cross-Party work were also in their final term as Senators, including Senators Lyn Allison and Natasha Stott Despoja (the present and former Leaders of the Australian Democrats, whose party had collapsed for extraneous reasons. Senator Allison was responsible for crucial parliamentary tactics, threatening to tack amendments onto a government Bill until the government agreed to separate consideration of the RU486 Bill. Senator Ruth Webber, who did the Labor numbers for the Bill, despite belonging to the Right faction that was hostile to it, had also lost her Labor Party preselection. Senator Jeannie Ferris, Government Whip in the Senate and about to retire, played a similar back-room role in the progressing of the Bill. The making of history with the successful Bill was a particular satisfaction for women whose parliamentary careers were soon to end. The momentum led to the attempt (still in progress) to carry forward Senator

Stott Despoja's pregnancy counselling Bill, now as a co-sponsored Bill. Senator Troeth was again to play a central role— this time as the only government sponsor. She was also attempting to promote a sex education Bill, despite being shouted down in her own party room.

But it was not only those with 'nothing to lose' who were brave over RU486. One woman front bencher, representing a rural seat and promoted to the ministry just before debate on the Bill, risked the displeasure of the Prime Minister. She had been a very active chair the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development just before entering the ministry and strongly opposed to the situation whereby the anti-abortion views of the Minister for Health and his Parliamentary Secretary (responsible for pharmaceutical products) were denying Australian women the option of medical abortion. Her views were echoed by many as it saw it as inappropriate that parliamentarians who were not medical experts should be substituting their views on a drug for those of the experts normally responsible for drug evaluation. She received considerable media coverage for her letter to the Parliamentary Secretary asking that the ban be lifted. She, like the North Queensland woman professor of obstetrics who sparked off the debate in 2005, was concerned with the plight of women in rural and regional Australia, who had difficulty accessing surgical abortion: 'In some cases the services available today are worse than they were 15 years ago, which helps to explain why the rate of teenage pregnancy is so much higher outside the cities' (Price 2005). She was rebuffed by her colleagues but a message on Ausfem-Polnet, the Australian email list linking feminist activists, researchers and policy practitioners, urged that letters of support be written to her (and the Prime Minister).

### **The role of the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance**

The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) was set up following the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, to promote the undertakings made by the Australian government to the Cairo Program for Action. The Cairo conference had been notable for its feminist-inspired commitments to population policies centred on reproductive health and gender equality, particularly access to education and choice. ARHA was set up in 1995-6 as an advocacy body, free of the constraints of government funding or service

delivery, unlike the existing Family Planning Association. Money was obtained from US philanthropic foundations and from the UNFPA to support the creation of ARHA.

The establishment of ARHA was very timely, given the change of government in 1996 and the new influence of conservative Christians both within the government and holding the balance of power in the Senate. As already noted, an Independent Senator holding the balance of power was able to pursue anti-choice agendas both within the overseas development assistance program and domestically in Australia. ARHA had a two-part mission— undertaking advocacy outside parliament and providing the secretariat for the new Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, set up at the same time. ARHA has helped give the Parliamentary Group prominence with a well-designed website and logo and a staff member based at Parliament House during sitting periods. ARHA writes submissions and speeches for members of the parliamentary group and provides material to counter pro-life propaganda. In other words it is a counterpart to the Christian lobbyists now to be found stationed in Parliament House.

For most of the Senators involved in the 2006 initiatives, it was the networking and trust created through the Parliamentary Group that paved the way for further cross-party work. It was during a discussion at the Parliamentary Group of the Independent Senator Brian Harradine's valedictory speech in 2005 that women Senators started swapping stories and decided they should do something to undo his anti-abortion legacy. When work on the co-sponsored RU486 Bill got under way in earnest ARHA provided substantial back up, including the commissioning of a poll on RU486 by leading polling company Newspoll. It found only 21 per cent of Australians to be opposed to the availability of the drug, with a further 9 per cent being unsure. The findings were reported in a handsomely produced briefing document, countering myths and misinformation being circulated by pro-life groups. The document was written over Christmas by ARHA Chief Executive Officer together with a convenor of Reproductive Choice Australia (see below).

Copies of *RU486/Mifepristone: A factual guide to the issues in the Australian Debate*. were sent to parliamentarians and journalists and were carried into the chamber by Senators. ARHA also promptly bought up internet domain names beginning with RU486 to pre-empt

the newly formed coalition, Australians against RU486. ARHA's assistance to Parliamentary Group went far beyond support for co-sponsored Bills, and included back up for submissions on the aid budget. For example, ARHA walked through with the Foreign Minister's adviser a submission asking for 10 per cent of the aid budget to be spent on reproductive health.

### **Other elements of the constituency 'women'**

The two major advocacy groups outside parliament were the professionalised ARHA and the more traditional feminist pro-choice coalition Reproductive Choice Australia. While Reproductive Choice Australia represented some 20 organisations, including State-based pro-choice coalitions and long established advocacy organisations such as Children by Choice, Women's Electoral Lobby and the Australian Women's Health Network, like most feminist advocacy organisations it lacked money. ARHA paid for a very handsome purple, green and white website to be created for Reproductive Choice Australia, to boost its internet presence.

Women's Electoral Lobby dates from 1972 and had played a central role in women's advocacy since then, despite being defunded by the Coalition government in 1999 and no longer have a national office or staff. When the WEL representative arrived to give evidence, as invited, to the Senate Community Affairs Inquiry into the Bill, a Catholic National Party Senator tried to prevent her being heard: 'Who let them [WEL] in, I don't know'. He had also objected to witnesses from ARHA. At this and other hearings there was relentless bullying by pro-life male Senators of medical and community witnesses who supported access to medical terminations or simply made governance arguments about the drug approval process. Both the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Australian Medical Association had supported the use of RU486 for medical terminations but the expertise of medical witnesses was constantly queried in light of evidence provided by pro-life organisations. At the hearings some male Senators also obsessively asked questions how a woman would dispose of a dead foetus at home. Just before the Bill was to be debated the Health Minister also announced that abortion drugs had to be in class of their own because women could bleed for as much as two weeks after taking them - this caused much sarcastic comment ('Abbott's discovery—women bleed!') on the internet about male ignorance of menstruation or bleeding after childbirth.

Opposition to the RU486 Bill came from one pro-choice feminist constituency—radical feminists opposed to chemical abortion as part of a more general opposition to new reproductive technologies. Renate Klein was one of the founders of FINNRAGE in the 1980s (Feminist Network of International Resistance to the new Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering). She was a co-author of the 1991 book *RU486: Misconceptions, Myths and Morals*, and long-time opponent of the use of women's bodies as sites for medical experimentation and corporate profits. Like the pro-choice lobby groups, she wrote to all Senators and Members of the federal parliament, provided a submission and gave evidence to the Senate Community Affairs Committee inquiry into the Bill. She argued that RU486 had adverse medical effects and that conventional suction abortion methods represented best practice in the area. Klein, together with Sheila Jeffreys and Susan Hawthorne had been the most prominent continuing representatives of radical feminism in Australia, associated with FINNRAGE, the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the feminist press, Spinifex, founded by Klein and Hawthorn. They made some vigorous interventions on the feminist e-list Ausfem-Polnet, warning of the nature of the pharmaceutical industry and the harm it had done to women, but theirs was very much a minority viewpoint.

Much broader opposition came from the Right to Life organisations in existence since the 1970s and a more purpose-built organisation, Australians against RU486. There were some 4000 submissions to the Senate Inquiry into the Bill, most of them form letters or submissions, but also many more individual submissions opposing than supporting the Bill. This has been characteristic of law reform relating to abortion, church networks operating much more effective write-in campaigns than feminist organisations. An apparently more woman-centred organisation, Women's Forum Australia was created in 2005 and described as an 'independent women's think tank.' Its founding director was Melinda Tankard Reist, a high-profile pro-life campaigner, author of *Giving Sorrow Words: Women's Stories of Grief After Abortion*, and a former advisor to Senator Brian Harradine, responsible for the ban on RU486. Another Director was a research officer for the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute, an initiative of the Knights of the Southern Cross, a Catholic men's organisation. In general, as has been noted elsewhere, there has been a shift in pro-life discourse to give it a more feminist flavour, by focusing on the harm to women of abortion rather than on the rights of the foetus.

### **The meaning of the RU486 experience for the Senators involved**

All of the Senators involved in the RU486 Bill found the process an empowering one, and all except one (subject to the greatest pressure from conservative party colleagues) were committed to maintaining the momentum by joining in new cross-party initiatives. One Senator, from the conservative side of politics and without direct experience of the women's movement, was particularly impressed by the experience of this collective work, with no one person seeking to take the credit.

Another Senator, this time with women's movement experience, suggested that it was those with a community background who were more likely to see the advantages of cross-party work to achieve results on issues. Those whose whole career had been in party-related work ('party hacks') were more likely to see other parties as the enemy and to fail to see the point of cross-party work, for which credit would have to be shared. This Senator also emphasised the role of the extra-parliamentary body EMILY's List, that provides support for pro-choice Labor women parliamentarians. The EL network meant there was a guaranteed number of votes both in the Senate and the House of Representatives for the Bill, which could be counted on by the Co-Convenors

The RU486 debate was like other debates involving the substantive representation of women, in terms of the introduction of deeply personal experiences into parliamentary debate. In her Second Reading Speech, Senator Lyn Allison, Leader of the Australian Democrats, made the following statement:

...it is galling to listen to the men—and it is mostly men—who have such contempt for women who terminate unwanted pregnancies, who have neither compassion nor understanding of the huge and, for many, daunting task of taking an embryo the size of a grain of rice to adulthood...Women are fully human. We can be trusted to make reproductive health decisions for ourselves or to share those decisions with those we trust. An estimated one in three women have had an abortion, and I am one of them (Allison 2006: 95).

All federal parliamentarians received an avalanche of material from Right to Life organisations, including confronting images of aborted fetuses. This was counter-productive in its effects, persuading a couple of parliamentarians to switch to support of the Bill, in reaction to the 'over-the-top' methods. Nonetheless, some of the tactics employed were personally distressing for the Bill co-convenors who included both a practising Catholic and a very new Senator unused to this level of pressure. The pressure flowed over to a subsequent Private Senator's Bill on stem cell research, successfully promoted by a woman Senator who was a previous Minister for Health. This again became a gendered issue, fought with great aggression by some of the male opponents. The women helped protect each other, for example a whip arranging a pair. When the next so-sponsored Bill was arranged, a swap was arranged in sponsorship, to protect one of the women Senators who had been 'put through the wringer'.

The achievement of the passage of the Bill, historic in its nature, was seen by the women involved as a major breakthrough and perhaps the way that all progress in the reproductive health area would need to occur in the future. Success was particularly gratifying as some of those involved had been warned by colleagues that they were bound to fail, and that they might set back the right to choose by years. The breakthrough resulted in newspaper headlines such as 'Win for parliamentary sisterhood' (Dodson and Peatling 2006). The women Senators were widely acclaimed for standing up for other women and making a difference at last, and received 'Edna' awards from Women's Electoral Lobby.

A celebratory drink after the historic win, unfortunately advertised with a sign 'RU486 drinks, gave rise to less favourable publicity. The Family First Senator put a video blog of the sign on his website, while conservative newspaper columnists made hay with stories such as 'Hardly a time for champers and cheers' (Akerman 2006). Moreover pharmaceutical companies were allegedly warned by the Minister of Health and one of his key staffers of the consequences should they seek to import the drug. A small woman-headed German company was found, however, that was prepared to go ahead.

## **Conclusion**

The passage of the co-sponsored Bill on RU486 was widely viewed as a win for women, both in terms of the women involved in parliament and the potential beneficiaries in the community. There had been some disillusion with the role of women in parliament and their apparent passivity and silence as governments passed measures with disproportionate and negative impact on women—one prominent feminist described them as 'political eunuchs' (Summers 2003: 199–224). While there were some government backbench revolts, these had been on issues such as the treatment of asylum seekers, rather than on women's rights. Collective action at last on a central feminist issue was seen as perhaps a sign that women would no longer keep their heads down: 'Maybe women have finally achieved the critical mass that many have argued was the precondition to women having any real power in Canberra' (Summers 2006).

The Bill was also seen as a win for feminist advocacy, which hadn't had many wins during the years of conservative government at the federal level. One long-time feminist advocate described it as a win in the long campaign for greater reproductive choice and a rebuttal of the media view that 'feminism is old-fashioned, a strident, sensible shoe movement at a time when girls just want to have fun and wear high heels' (Albury 2006). On the other hand, the new style of advocacy was much more professionalised than in the past, and bridged the gap between community and professionalised politics, providing the resources needed for parliamentarians to be effective on the issue.

The women involved, both inside and outside parliament, were certainly empowered by the success of the Bill, and proceeded immediately to make a number of other health-related gains—a cross-party proposal for a Senate inquiry into gynaecological cancers led to government commitment of funds to set up a gynaecological cancer research centre and the bringing forward of the vaccination program for girls with the cervical cancer vaccine Gardasil. The cross-party bill on pregnancy counselling was introduced into the Senate, but ran into difficulties in the Labor caucus, while a cross-party initiative on sex education also seemed likely to have difficulty. In general it seemed that a particular set of circumstances had helped foster this unprecedented degree of co-operation among women in federal parliament and it was unclear whether this could be repeated in a new parliament, or outside the reproductive health area. Most cross-party work by women parliamentarians in Australia

has either been connected to abortion law reform, as in the successful Bill drafted by women in the Tasmanian parliament, or related to women-specific health issues. It has been assisted by the conscience votes traditionally accorded on abortion issues. Westminster adversarialism and the differing degrees of trust in the market seemed likely to stymie co-operation where a party vote will be involved. So while one might predict that women parliamentarians will take joint action with regard to the substantive representation of women if there is a threat to the public funding of abortion, for example, broader co-operation across the major party lines is more difficult to envisage.

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For women, the effects of gender divisions are predominantly negative. Para la mujer, los efectos de las divisiones de género son predominantemente negativos. There is ample evidence that high unemployment leads to ethnic tensions and fuels resentment against immigrants while deepening gender divisions. Sobran pruebas de que los altos índices de desempleo provocan tensiones étnicas y resentimiento contra los inmigrantes, además de profundizar las divisiones de género. Thus far it has been women and their advocates who have paid most attention to the impact of gender divisions on health. Hasta ahora han sido la mujer y los defensores de su causa quienes han prestado más atención a los efectos de las divisiones del género en la salud. Meanwhile there is a strong correlation. In politics, a politician is said to cross the floor if they change their party allegiance. Crossing the floor may mean changing to second party after being elected as a member of a first party, or voting against the approved party lines. Voting against party lines may lead to consequences such as losing a position (e.g., as minister or a portfolio critic) or being ejected from the party caucus. While these practices are legally permissible in most countries, crossing the floor can lead to controversy