




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BONNEY

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TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY BILL

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (5.42 pm): I rise to speak to the Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018. This bill is perhaps the most difficult bill any parliament will have before it. The reality is that, whichever way we vote, someone will be disappointed and believe that we have made the wrong choice. Abortion is one of the most emotional topics we can bring up in the public space. The range of views and passion with which these views are held is so divergent that it is impossible to bring people together. It is our job to assess the proposal before us and whether it best reflects the views of the Queenslanders we represent.

Frankly, as a male, this is a difficult topic to approach. I will never physically go through an abortion or pregnancy, but I find myself in the position of deciding what is right for a woman to do with her body. It is not just about that, though. We have to acknowledge that there are others involved. That creates an incredibly difficult and delicate situation in which we are trying to balance the rights of multiple people.

I have spent months talking to and hearing from hundreds of my constituents from my electorate—generally more women than men. I have also been raising these proposed laws at every opportunity as I have made my way around my community. That has probably not made me the best company over the past few weeks. Abortion is not usually a topic that you bring up in polite conversation at a local cafe, or while cooking on the barbecue at a Bunnings sausage sizzle for your local scout group, or even over dinner at a Rotary meeting. Nevertheless, it is important to hear what people think and to take every opportunity to engage them in politics and the debate that we are having in this House. I thank everyone who has been in touch and who has entered into that discussion with me. I want them to please know that I will represent them as much as possible as I make my decision about this bill along with following my own conscience on what I believe is right.

I am in favour of abortion reform in Queensland. To me, this is not a debate about abortion and no abortion. It already happens. In fact, I do not believe that any member is advocating for an increase in the number of abortions performed in this state. We know from other states and countries that reform to laws around abortion does not change the rate of abortion and that, if anything, it often decreases. We are talking about a framework for the regulation of the termination of pregnancy in Queensland and whether this framework before us is the right one. I believe that the framework around terminations needs change. I believe that abortion should be a woman's choice up until a certain defined point and, after that, only in specific medical circumstances on the advice of doctors.

Regarding the bill before us, I support decriminalisation. I believe that a significant majority of members in this House share that opinion. In the over 100 years of the law being as it is in Queensland, no-one has been convicted and, therefore, it is archaic. Taking aside the emotive nature of this argument, I do not believe in laws that serve no real purpose. All that does is add stigma to an already difficult decision.

I am also in favour of regulation around safe access zones. I have heard from health professionals who have heard the vile abuse levelled at women entering these clinics and I do not believe that is acceptable. I do not believe safe access zones impact unduly on free speech; they only curb the disgusting behaviour of some of these protestors. There are many people who disagree with abortion and who will always disagree with abortions. I think they should, just as with any other issue in this country, have the freedom to speak their minds. However, I do not believe that they need to be permitted to project that view within such a close proximity to clinics. Given the passion behind the beliefs that different people have on this issue, it is difficult to be civil and respectful, but women copping abuse outside clinics is not respectful and is not something that we should allow to happen as it currently is.

My main concerns are about some other aspects of the bill. In my opinion, and in that of many of my constituents, to allow terminations on request up until 22 weeks gestation is too high a threshold. The reasoning provided in the committee's report and by other members has not convinced me otherwise. As a comparison to other parts of Australia, 22 weeks would give us one of the highest levels of on-request abortion access across this country. The ACT has no threshold. Victoria is at 24 weeks and every other state is lower than that. The thresholds of Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Western Australia are 16 weeks, 14 weeks and 20 weeks respectively. I would be more comfortable with some of these lower thresholds than the recommended one for Queensland, but that is what we have before us.

The justification that this threshold is just below the point of viability is not good enough. With babies from 23 weeks considered to be in the grey zone, 22 weeks is too close. We are seeing more and more advancements in medicine. To bring the law that places on-demand abortions available up until viability is cutting it very fine.

The reasoning that abnormalities are picked up at the 18- to 20-week scan does not warrant on-request abortions up to 22 weeks, because in the case of severe abnormalities the woman would be in discussion with her medical practitioners and there would still be the ability to obtain a termination from there. This is a difficult decision for any woman and no-one takes it lightly. It is difficult, because we know that we are talking about another life.

To understand how my community felt, I ran a survey asking people for their opinion on the key components of this bill. I received just over 250 generally very detailed pieces of feedback from people in my area. People overwhelmingly—in the order of nearly three quarters of those who gave me their thoughts—believe that abortion should not be in the Criminal Code. They support the notion that abortion should be a woman's choice up to a certain point and then on medical advice in specific circumstances after that threshold. The feedback also showed that a significant majority think that 22 weeks is too high a threshold. To me, this section of the bill is the most concerning. However, there are other sections that I would like to cover. Allowing terminations by a medical practitioner after 22 weeks should be available in very specific situations. I note that the cases of late-term abortions are extremely rare, complex and often horrific circumstances.

For this reason we need to have very clear and tight regulation and, to me, including social circumstances is not necessary. I also believe counselling should be mandatorily offered to women. They are making a serious decision. There are often psychological ramifications of terminations. Why would we not offer counselling so that we can ensure the best possible health care for them. This would not be a checkpoint to approve their decision, but a voluntary additional piece of support. I have feedback from women who have had abortions saying this kind of support would have been helpful before and after termination.

We should all be guided by our own thoughts and our own conscience, but also by what those we represent think. I have done my best to do that today. As I have weighed this decision I have asked just about everyone I can. This includes my local LNP party members. They are a great group of people who I would not be in this place without. These are people who voluntarily want to be part of our political process and they are from all walks of life and ages, from students to retirees and we even have a pharmacology professor in our local branch. Last night we discussed this bill at great length and we had special guests, former senator Sue Boyce and Teeshan Johnson, presenting each case. At the end of it I laid out my position and we had a secret ballot to see whether the party members would endorse it. Although unnecessary given it is a conscience vote, it is important to me to have their support in my position and I thank them for that and for engaging in such a civil discussion.

To sum up, we need reform but, in considering my conscience and my community, I do not believe this is the right reform. I am in favour of some of the proposed amendments and I will use my vote to try to achieve a better outcome.