




Speech By
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TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY BILL

 **Ms BOLTON** (Noosa—Ind) (11.30 am): Life is precious. Every day Queenslanders work to save lives and create a better world and quality of life for Queenslanders. We strive to develop knowledge, technology and culture to increase life span, whether at birth or towards the end of our days. Nothing hurts more than to read or hear comments that those supporting the Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018 support the taking of a life. Nothing could be further from the truth, as demonstrated in this chamber yesterday and no doubt today. Many times in my life I have been told it takes a catalyst to effect positive change. I believe that this bill is one such catalyst, with the capacity to reduce the number of terminations in Queensland.

As we have heard, this bill incorporates exhaustive research and recommendations from the Queensland Law Reform Commission. Some will argue that the removal of the relevant sections from the Queensland Criminal Code 1899 is merely symbolic. Many women and front-line organisations in Queensland believe that the symbolism of removing any element of criminality from abortion is incredibly important to the development of respect for women and improved health outcomes and services. History has demonstrated a lack of respect for women, including rights to vote, work or attend university. Decisions about a woman's future were entirely in their parents' or husband's hands. How much have we really changed our attitudes over time?

Today Queensland is a modern, highly developed state. We promote equality, equity, inclusion and quotas for representation on boards and in the chamber. A recent paper titled 'Harming women with words', which was on hate speech, touches briefly on the concept that speech may constitute family or intimate partner violence, verbal abuse and/or controlling and coercive behaviour. Speech and language includes the written word. Legal frameworks and codes come into this realm. What message does it send about women when within legal frameworks terminations are a criminal activity? Could this be considered another form of hate speech?

This bill is an opportunity to speak candidly about terminations. A decision to terminate a pregnancy is not taken lightly or without great angst. To insinuate that decriminalising abortion will open the floodgates to rampant terminations is offensive, disrespectful and inaccurate, as statistics from Victoria demonstrate. What is even more distasteful are the comments that women without a catastrophic reason will be lining up for a late-term abortion. The inferences that are being made define women in the most negative ways, perpetrating a further lack of respect. We may not agree with some choices; however, we need to empathise, educate and support, not condemn.

It is also time to talk openly and without blame about how our society has contributed to women facing one of the most difficult decisions and times of their lives. It is not politicians, laws or legislation that create a situation where terminations are considered. It is what we have contributed, knowingly and unknowingly, to the decision to terminate that is not for medical reasons.

Firstly, there is pressure. Developing character, resilience and knowledge from the very start of our schooling life onwards is vital to construct the respect and responsibility to self and others to

withstand peer, partner, family and societal judgements and pressures, including reproductive coercion. The message needs to be clear and contextualised.

Secondly, there are university and work commitments, financial and family expectations, modern constructs of roles and behaviours. It takes a village to raise a child. We have become siloed with a loss of support from intergenerational families. One online submitter wrote, 'Community is always, always the answer.' That is so true.

Thirdly, there is the judgement and labelling of women, inadvertently or otherwise—being too young or too old to raise a child, too single or too engrossed in their careers. If they put their child into day care to get back to work they are judged. If they stay at the home and receive government assistance or child support they are judged. They are considered selfish if they consider adopting out a child and irresponsible if they have too many. Verbalised judgements are the forerunners to creating stigmas and labelling. Tags such as 'single mother', 'welfare dependent' and 'pensioner' now have embedded negative connotations. Let us think about the messages in our speech and categorisation and ask ourselves why we judge and how labels contribute to outcomes.

Lastly, our adoption laws desperately need modernising. With loving couples waiting years for a baby of their own, the laws that prevent a birth mother from being involved in selecting parents for her child or being part of their lives demonstrates an ignorance as to what a woman feels is necessary in carrying a child to term and then relinquishing that child to others. These are just a sample of contributing factors to how our society is shaping decisions. Regardless of the vote on this bill, we need to do much better in addressing these as a society.

There were a number of aspects of the bill that were of concern to constituents and in the written submissions. I will touch on those. Firstly, there was the 22-week gestational limit. It was felt this is too close to the viability margin. This recommendation from the Queensland Law Reform Commission reflects existing practice and is to accommodate the small proportion of terminations where scans have identified severe abnormalities. To insinuate that women wait until this time to terminate based on a whim is deeply concerning. Is it not time we placed our faith and trust in our women, the doctors looking after their wellbeing and the safeguards in our clinical practice procedures and policies?

Secondly, there is conscientious objector referrals. Access to safe terminations is a very clear mandate of United Nations treaty bodies and recognised by front-line services as essential to women's health and wellbeing. A referral to an appropriate provider or provision of information to access referral services is respecting the objector's rights as well as the patient's rights. In regional and remote areas where there are limited service providers, conscientious objection may force women to travel great distances at great expense to a provider. It is imperative that Queensland Health ensures these women are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Thirdly, there is the importance to have counselling, information and access to all available options and time to consider these. Independent, knowledgeable and objective advice in a holistic manner that offers support regardless of a woman's decision is needed. It was pleasing to hear the minister announce that a woman's hotline would be provided. This must be a priority and it must be mandated that all doctors provide contact to this service as part of patient care and the decision-making process.

My support of this bill does not mean that I support terminating a life. I am supporting the rights of women to have choice, to access information and services and to be respected. I am supporting our most disadvantaged women in remote and regional areas who do not have the services and support we have in our communities. I am supporting what I see as a catalyst that can lead to the necessary changes to decrease the number of terminations in Queensland.

To the women of Queensland and your partners, I ask that you take responsibility for your health, wellbeing and pregnancies by understanding the ramifications and consequences of decisions made. You, and only you, are responsible for your life and the life of others including your unborn children.

To women across Queensland in the direst of situations including domestic violence households, please take this opportunity to access the available services to remove yourself and your unborn children from these environments. I met an amazing, inspirational young mother who suffered horrendously and nearly died at the hands of her partner and her simple message was, 'If you can't or won't leave for yourself, do it for others.'

To finish, I would like to acknowledge and thank those who wrote genuine, considered and well-informed submissions. I have appreciated deeply the candid conversations with women and men from both sides of this debate. The sharing of viewpoints, experiences and hopes, as well as

suggestions on needed services, reforms and initiatives, have been invaluable. I give special mention to the pro-life and pro-choice advocacy organisations for the work that they do and for taking time to meet with me. I can see a future where both sides can work together in developing much better outcomes.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the government for caring for Queensland women. I also thank the health committee and the Queensland Law Reform Commission. To my own community: thank you for the respect and empathy you demonstrated to each other in your discussions and for your support of women across Queensland.