

Article by Leslie Cannold

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There's only one thing I have to say about Queensland National's Senator Barnaby Joyce. I hope he's telling the truth.

"About Telstra?" you might ask. Or Voluntary Student Unionism, where Joyce has sworn to vote against any Coalition bills that will reduce student services. Or perhaps you think I'm referring to Joyce's seeming willingness to block some aspects of the government's proposed changes to industrial relations?

Nope, my thoughts are somewhere else, though any confusion could be forgiven. The extensive media coverage of Joyce (including somewhere around 1297 articles since his election including at least 25 profiles) has focused almost exclusively on Joyce's publicly stated position on these issues to the exclusion of his repeated assertions on a subject of similar – if not greater – importance to the 50% of Australians not currently running the world. That subject is abortion.

My fervent hope – prayer really – that Joyce will be as good as his word refers to the Senator's hand-on-heart pledge that he would never horse-trade his vote on other issues to secure concessions on abortion laws or funding. Or so he told intrepid Fairfax journalist Misha Schubert who diligently relayed his comments in a recent news item mainly concerned with the recent scuttling by anti-choice MPs (Joyce amongst them) of a routine parliamentary motion reaffirming Australia's backing for reproductive health services in developing nations.

Those with a good grasp of recent political history will know why supporters of reproductive choice are so anxious about Joyce's veritableness. They will remember the backroom deal struck by both major political parties with anti-choice Senator Brian Harradine in 1996 to ensure his vote for the partial privatisation of Telstra. In exchange, and to their eternal shame, both Labor and the Coalition voted with the Tasmanian Senator to effectively ban Australian women from accessing a drug called mifepristone or RU486 by requiring the Health Minister to personally approve the importation, evaluation, registration and listing of the drug and to table that approval in parliament.

Of course, the effective banning of mifepristone has not only denied women access to a safe effective non-surgical method of abortion able to be used the moment an unwanted pregnancy is discovered (surgical terminations can not be done before the 5th or 6th week of pregnancy). It has also led women needing emergency contraception with fewer side-effects, and women seeking an effective method of oestrogen-free contraception to miss out. As well, the ban has left patients with breast cancer, prostate cancer, inoperable meningiomas and Cushing's Syndrome in the lurch. Indeed, so important is mifepristone to Australian patients in general, and female patients in particular, that the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists recently called on the government to review the drug's availability. A call the anti-choice Health Minister Tony Abbott seems destined to ignore.

Indeed, prior to Joyce's capitulation on Telstra, defenders of reproductive freedom were aghast at the possibility that yet another Senator who preached justice and fairness would trade their vote on the telco for a policy outcome that ignores just those values where women are concerned.

Of course, Harradine was a wily and experienced legislator who knew precisely how to wield his power for the tiny communities he represented at the expense of the less ably-represented majority. But Joyce is no dolt either. At least not according to Professor Brian Costa, a political scientist at Swinburne, who describes him as a "quite well-educated, articulate, smart operator". And Senator Joyce is firmly opposed to women's reproductive freedom. Having told a Right to Life Conference in July that his greatest goal in public life was to ban "the unfortunate carnage" of abortion, he used his first speech in parliament to identify abortion as the "slavery debate of our time".

And while the full sale of Telstra is a done deal, the danger for Australian women has not passed. Throughout the entire term of this Howard government Joyce's vote will be needed to achieve the government's legislative agenda. As each piece of legislation goes before the party room -- to ban compulsory student unionism, reconfigure industrial relations, revamp the tax system - Joyce will be there, demanding a pound of flesh for his support.

The only question is whose flesh will be for sale?

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