DISCUSSION PAPER IS A ONE-SIDED OPINION PIECE

Gerry Wood, Independent Member for Nelson, says the Department of Health’s discussion paper highlighting changes to the law dealing with the termination of pregnancy (abortion) using the drug RU486 is not a fair dinkum unbiased discussion paper but the view of someone in the Department of Health who supports changes to the law.

He says if this was an independent discussion paper it would not push a particular viewpoint but clearly highlight alternative views so that people reading the document could understand arguments for and against the proposed changes and make up their own mind. Instead this discussion paper is clearly based on the views of Family Planning NT as the paper copies most of what was in a letter sent to the then Health Minister in 2013. Nearly all the 11 recommendations from Family Planning are now endorsed by the Health Department in this discussion paper.

Gerry says from the words used in the document such as best practice in medicine (by the way RU486 is not a medicine – medicine fixes up illnesses), bringing legislation into the 21st Century, and RU486 will be available when the proposed changes come into effect in July 2017, you can see that the author of this bill believes this legislation is all done and dusted.

Gerry says that releasing a discussion paper during the Christmas holidays shows how some members change when they are in Government. When the present Government was in Opposition it screamed blue murder when the CLP Government introduced planning changes during the Christmas break. Of course now Labor is in Government it does exactly that and bringing this issue up at Christmas shows why people are cynical about politicians. Releasing a discussion paper during Christmas holidays makes it obvious that certain members of the Government want to avoid proper and meaningful debate.

Gerry says these proposed changes to the existing Act (17 in all) are not just about the use of an abortifacient called RU486 and when and how and to whom it can be given. It reduces how many people need to give permission for an abortion, it makes it easier to have an abortion including for minors and it also restricts the right to protest and the right to a conscientious objection. These latter two issues are just brushed over in the discussion paper.

He says the Government has recently established a Parliamentary committee to look at opening up Parliament to the people. The debate about RU486 should wait until the new Parliamentary committee delivers its recommendation
• or simply send the proposal to a Parliamentary committee now for consideration. This would allow for submissions, the calling in of experts on both sides of the debate and the option of travelling to remote communities. Note: the word Aboriginal is not mentioned in the discussion paper!
• Or send it to a Citizens Assembly similar to that presently operating in Ireland which is dealing with matters relating to the Irish constitution and other important matters. Abortion, climate change, challenges and opportunities for the ageing, and fixed term Parliaments are just some of the issues they are considering over the next 12 months. The Assembly is made of a chairperson who is appointed by the Government
and 99 citizens randomly selected from the Irish population who are broadly representative of the Irish population. Experts are asked to address the Assembly and there are Q and A sessions. All members vote. The Assembly then makes a report including recommendations which then goes back to Parliament. For more information on the Assembly follow this link www.citizensassembly.ie/en/Home/

Gerry says he is fearful that this issue is being pushed through by some determined pro-abortion lobby groups and sections of the media without real debate and in-depth and thorough research done first. Other views need to be heard not just from the noisiest.

For instance what are the views of our gynaecologists in our hospitals? What are the real reasons for Health promoting RU486 – economic? What do Aboriginal people out bush think? How can we reduce the need for abortions? There are many issues to be debated and you won’t find them in the discussion paper.

He said he would like the Chief Minister Michael Gunner to show some leadership on this important medical, ethical and social issue by making sure this legislation goes through a thorough process of consultation and consideration. Gerry says that the Chief Minister should stick to his promise to consult widely and listen to Territorians (and business) before making decisions in many important policy areas. The discussion paper does not fulfil that promise and is really a charade if one is hoping for a serious and mature debate on an important policy area.

This debate is a life or death matter, it is a moral issue, it is a medical issue, it involves the right to protest even silently and the freedom to act according to your conscience.

This matter should not be rushed, it should be considered carefully – it is too important.