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Medical and ethical issues dominate political debate in Australia

By Raymond Bonner
 The New York Times

American elections are always big news here, but the upheaval in the U.S. Congress - as well as concerns about rising interest rates here and a prolonged drought - were all eclipsed, at least briefly, by "values" issues.

First, an Australian senator announced that he and his wife had become parents through surrogacy, firing up critics and advocates of a practice that is banned in parts of the country.

Then legislators entered into an emotional and well-covered discussion of therapeutic cloning.

Australians are deep in a nationwide debate over a number of hot issues that have been raised by advances in medical science. Another legislative fight, over the abortion pill RU-486, ended early this year with legalization of the drug.

While polls show that Australians are generally quite divided on "values" issues - like abortion, which is legal, and same-sex marriage, which is not - political debates on the topics do not degenerate into personal attacks, perhaps a reflection of the country's secular nature.

For the most part, religion is a private matter here, not a political one. And while it would be glib to say that Australians worship the sun, the surf and the laid-back life, it is not wrong to note that, although Australians go to church - predominately Catholic or Anglican - candidates are generally not concerned with playing to religious groups. The evangelical right is politically insignificant.

Those conditions may help explain why Australia's politicians have had some very candid debates on very emotional subjects.

Earlier this year, during the legislative struggle over RU-486, a cabinet minister who opposed legalization mentioned that a girlfriend had once had an abortion; a few days later, a senator who supported legalization said she herself had had an abortion when she was 18.

Neither suffered politically.

The recent debate over surrogacy started with the news in early November that a Labor Party senator, Stephen Conroy, 43, and his wife, Paula Benson, a 38-year-old businesswoman who could not conceive after suffering ovarian cancer, had become parents through an elaborate procedure.

The egg was donated by one woman, fertilized in vitro by the senator, then implanted in another woman who carried the child to birth.

Surrogacy is banned in the senator's home state of Victoria, so the couple and the woman who bore the child came to the state of New South Wales for the birth.

That ban in Victoria was put in place 20 years ago when the Roman Catholic Church was still powerful there, according to Dr. Peter Illingworth, medical director of IVF Australia, one of the largest fertility clinics in the country.

But there is also a federal ban on "commercial" surrogacy - in which a woman is paid to carry the child - that Illingworth said was less about religious beliefs and more about what he said were basic Australian values.

"This is a quite secular country, but there are certain core principles," he said in an interview. "One of

these is that for rich people to pay poor people to take health risks on their behalf is not a good thing." In the senator's case, both women were friends of the couple and charged nothing.

One day after the Conroy-Benson story was front-page news, the big story was the debate in Parliament about legislation that would allow therapeutic cloning, which some say is critical to helping scientists find potential cures for diseases.

The technique involves taking the nucleus from a mature cell, like a skin cell, and transplanting it into an egg. The resulting embryo would be destroyed at an early stage to obtain stem cells.

In 2002, Parliament banned all cloning but called for a review after three years.

Last year a government-appointed committee recommended that the ban on therapeutic cloning be lifted.

Prime Minister John Howard, leader of the center-right Liberal Party, was opposed, and might have been able to block legislative action.

But he allowed what is called a conscience vote on the issue, which means that representatives are free to break from the party line.

Taking advantage of that opening, a Liberal Party senator, Kay Patterson, a former health minister and an advocate of stem cell research, introduced legislation that would permit therapeutic cloning.

The debate was intense and emotional. Opponents warned that human embryos could be created using eggs from cadavers and that legalization could eventually lead to human cloning.

"In my view, these proposals turn human dignity on its head," said Senator Julian McGauran of the Liberal Party. Others argued that poor women would be offered irresistible money for their eggs.

"These arguments are deeply offensive to women - indeed, they should be to men, too," Senator Jeannie Ferris of the Liberal Party told her colleagues during the debate.

"They suggest that a woman has no control over her body, is driven by money and greed, will willingly take medication to stimulate egg production, and in return for payment, and will jeopardize her health and potentially her life."

The legislation passed, but only barely, 34 to 32. Twenty of the yes votes were by women; four women voted against it.

"This is the second debate in a row that has taken the liberal, secular approach," Illingworth said about the cloning vote. In the debate in February over RU-486, support by women in Parliament was also critical.

The two votes demonstrate that "women are prepared to flex their political muscle," The Australian newspaper wrote in an editorial.

The stem cell legislation is to be debated by the House next month, and is expected to pass.

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