

Motion on rights of the fetus fails but finds cabinet supporters ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Canada's minister for the status of women joined nine other Conservative cabinet ministers and dozens of backbenchers in voting in favour of a motion to study the rights of the fetus, even as the Prime Minister's Office suggested it is time to move on.

Conservative MP Stephen Woodworth's motion to have a committee look at when human life begins was defeated 203-91 in a vote on Wednesday night.

Shortly before the vote, a spokeswoman for Prime Minister Stephen Harper repeated the assertion that the government has no plans to reopen a debate on abortion. "After the vote, we will move on," Julie Vaux wrote in an e-mail.

She declined to say whether Mr. Harper would attempt to prevent or dissuade other Conservatives from presenting similar legislation in the House.

Mr. Harper had long made it clear that he did not support Mr. Woodworth's private member's motion, and Conservative Whip Gordon O'Connor delivered a speech in the House opposing it. But some of the party's highest ranking MPs voted in favour of the motion anyway, including Status of Women Minister Rona Ambrose and House Leader Peter Van Loan.

Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Peter Penashue, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, International Co-operation Minister Julian Fantino, National Revenue Minister Gail Shea, International Trade Minister Ed Fast, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, Minister of State for Seniors Alice Wong and Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Diane Ablonczy also voted for the motion.

Labour Minister Lisa Raitt, who voted against the motion, tried to play down some of her colleagues' votes in its favour. "It's time to move on," she said. "We voted in a free vote, but the reality is that my constituents knew and understood that this was something that government was not going to be opening up."

NDP MP Niki Ashton called Ms. Ambrose's vote in favour of the motion "unacceptable," saying it shows the Conservatives don't respect women's rights. "Stephen Harper told us he wasn't willing to reopen the debate [on abortion], and you have the minister in charge of the status of women voting [for the motion]," she said. "At what point do the Conservatives consider women's equality a priority?"

The motion sought to have a committee examine whether a fetus should be considered a human being before it is born, and at what point exactly that designation should be given. Currently, the Criminal Code defines human life as beginning when a baby has completely emerged from its mother's body.

Although it was never expected to pass, the motion exposed a wide gap in the social politics of many Conservative MPs. Several of those who voted against it were careful to explain before the vote that they viewed themselves as "pro-life" but did not want to re-open a debate on abortion.

Brad Trost, a Conservative MP whose anti-abortion views have created controversy in the past, said he was approached by the Conservative Party whip during the last session of Parliament to ask what kind of legislation he might want to bring forward in the future. "Why would you even worry about that?" Mr. Trost said. "Some people seem a little more tense about this [motion] than otherwise." He said he has no immediate plans to present legislation of his own that relates to abortion.

Mr. Woodworth said he does not believe the motion damaged his party's unity, adding he's grateful to Ms. Ambrose "for reflecting the desire that I have on this issue to ensure that, in fact, the law does treat every human being as created equal."

He declined to say whether he believes Mr. Harper's opposition resulted in its defeat.

"He is certainly a persuasive man, and I'd love to have him on my team," he said of the Prime Minister. He later clarified that he was referring specifically to the motion on the rights of a fetus. "In virtually every other respect, I think that he and I are quite in agreement," he added.

Interim Liberal leader Bob Rae said he believes the vote's result reflects a Canadian consensus to leave the question of abortion up to women. "It's not something where the state has a huge role of interference and it's something where we have to respect women's right to choose," he said.

Four Liberals voted in favour of the bill: Jim Karygiannis, John McKay, Kevin Lamoureux and Lawrence MacAulay.

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