

The road to REFORM



Since October 2000, the New Zealand Parliament has been examining a Bill that would see many of the laws against prostitution dumped. If enacted, it will be goodbye to brothel keeping, soliciting, living off the earnings, and a bizarre Act that governs massage parlours.

Interestingly, the Bill was, and is, supported by various NGOs and other groups, as diverse as YWCA, nuns, Sexual Health groups, the National Council of Women, some church groups, and the Business and Professional Women's Federation.

Opposition has mainly been from morals campaigners, some of the "big boys" who own massage parlours and want to keep sex workers who work from home out of business. Additionally, some feminists trotting out a 70s line, who have used the what Carol Leigh calls the "ick factor" and scaremongering to whip up support for their view. They have also campaigned for a change in the law to criminalise the client and refer to this as "the Swedish model".

When the Bill was introduced to Parliament two years ago, the overwhelming majority of MPs

voted for it to proceed to the next stage. But that was before the 2002 election, which saw a more socially conservative Parliament elected. The balance of power is very fine in respect to this Bill. We were startled that there would be any support for this "Swedish model" but believe some politicians are using it as an excuse not to change anything.

The Bill, which was once so simple, has been changed in some respects and now it looks like a version of decriminalisation mixed with legalisation. The Bill does not include, at this point, any licensing or registration regime. It does allow sex workers to refuse to work with a client. It does legislate against coercion. However, it compels people to practice safer sex, which will make it hard if people need to talk to someone about having had unsafe sex.

The select committee added parts including the ability for local authorities to control signage, the ability for health inspectors to inspect venues, the ability of the police to enter premises to ensure no one under 18 is working there. It also establishes a Prostitution Law Review Committee, which will examine how the Bill has affected prostitution in New Zealand. NZPC has been named as one of the groups that must be included on this Committee.

The Bill passed its second reading by a narrow vote- 62-56. Two MPs out of 120 didn't vote, one "forgot".

The next stage is where the Bill is debated clause by clause. It is here that changes to the Bill could be made. Proposed amendments include the licensing and/or registration of venue operators, and, the one that would cause the most damage, a change to include the "Swedish model".

We are very anxious about this period, and hopeful that any changes proposed will enhance the Bill and make it more likely to pass the final reading.

Calum Bennachie

Pride and Unity for Male Prostitutes

New Zealand Prostitutes Collective 