

Officials get clearance to vote according to their conscience

# Abortion Bill row brews up in Legco

THE Governor has personally instructed officials sitting in the Legislative Council to vote according to their own conscience when the controversial Abortion Bill is put up for its third reading tomorrow.

And at least nine

by  
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Unofficial Legislative Councillors oppose the Bill in its present form.

Because of the likelihood of a legislative tussle of a kind seldom seen in the usually sedate chamber, the outcome of tomorrow's meeting is impossible to predict.

Government sources also said the Bill might be further postponed because at least three

Unofficial members intend to move amendments during committee stage before the third reading.

The Bill has been delayed before because of the strong feeling it arouses. The Official side has already stated that it would move two amendments tomorrow.

~~This is believed to be the first time Officials have been told they do not have to toe the Government's line.~~

At the same time, it was learnt that at least 12 Unofficial members will speak during the resumed debate on the Bill.

Up to yesterday, three Unofficials — Dr Harry Fang, Rev Joyce Bennett and Chan Kam-chuen — are known to

have expressed their wishes to move amendments. Further amendments might still be possible today.

The changes Unofficials would like to see focus on three points:

They would like to see a change to the three-month period allowed for rape victim to report to the police to apply for legal abortion. Unofficials would like to see the period shortened.

The second major change Unofficials would like to institute is a definition of foetal abnormality. Opponents of the Bill have expressed grave concern over the method of determining a suspected abnormal foetus before a legal abortion is carried out.

Under the proposed Bill, a legal abortion may be carried out if two registered doctors believe the child would be born abnormal.

The Unofficials will also block a Government proposal to lower the age for legal abortion of demand to 16. They fear this would encourage promiscuity.

The original Bill proposed changes that would make it easier for women to have abortions if there is suspicion that the foetus is abnormal.

The Bill also proposes that women under 17 years of age can have abortions virtually on demand.

The age was subsequently lowered to 16 so as to bring it in line with the Crimes Ordinance. Under the ordinance, it is an offence to have sexual intercourse with a girl under 16.

This amendment will be moved by Secretary for Social Services Eric Ho tomorrow.

At the same time, Mr Ho will also move an amendment to tighten up the part of the original Bill relating to rape and incest cases.

The original Bill stated that pregnancies resulting from such cases were separate grounds for abortion.

But the new amendment stipulates that pregnancies resulting from such case should also be considered on medical grounds.

The Bill has been scrutinised by an ad hoc committee of Unofficials chaired by Dr Harry Fang.

During committee stage, both Officials and Unofficials will move their respective amendments. Third reading might be adjourned if members feel there is a need.

The Bill has had a stormy passage through Legco. It has been delayed twice when Unofficials demanded more time to study the Bill.

At present an abortion may only be carried out legally if two registered doctors believe that the pregnancy involves danger to the mother of a greater physical or mental injury than if the pregnancy is terminated.