



“Hospitals offering an anonymous haven for unwanted babies seems like a reasonable option of last resort

TORY SHEPHERD STRAYING FROM THE FLOCK

AT first it sounds crazy. But do a bit of research, think it through, and before too long it sounds ... not so crazy.

Baby safe havens. Sometimes called baby chutes.

Literally, a space in a hospital wall – or at a police or a fire station – where a new mother can anonymously leave an unwanted baby.

The woman (or man, theoretically) puts the baby into the warmed space and an alarm is automatically rung, summoning a nurse. The parent is allowed to leave, unwatched.

It's not a new idea; they exist overseas and have been suggested at various times by various people. Earlier this month Tasmanian Labor Senator Helen Polley called on their House of Assembly to bring the havens in; she was supported by the Australian Medical Association, among others.

Now MLC Ann Bressington has sparked a new debate by preparing a Bill designed to bring the havens into existence here. Ms Bressington has had some quirky notions in her time, but at least she's not frightened to tackle big issues.

My first thought upon reading of the chutes was: "Won't that make it too easy?"

I pictured post-natally depressed women, desperate enough to make such a decision, only to regret it immediately. But how can you give a baby back to a mother who was prepared to abandon it?

And is the need so great? How many abandoned babies are there in South Australia? One report notes that about a dozen babies are abandoned in NSW, Victoria and SA. Officially, anyway.

Just one baby left in a bin or a wastewater treatment plant or a shoebox speaks of such a painful desperation that surely another choice is needed. And then there are horrifying cases of neglect we hear about, where parents who should not be parents leave children to starve, filthy and neglected.

Some children would be better off without their natural parents, at least until support can be found.

And if it is just a passing meltdown, Ms Bressington's Bill will include a cooling-off period, so



NAILING COLOURS TO THE MAST

Dear Penny Wong,
I had a bit of a crack at you a couple of weeks ago because you wouldn't stand up for gay marriage. It was a bit unfair because there are processes you have to follow. And now you've come out (in a different way) and said you support it. Honestly, it is inevitable that gay marriage will come about, and those who stand against it will look like mugs. As an openly gay woman, many

people hoped that you were just gritting your teeth and doing your job when you defended the institution of marriage as a man/woman bond, and now it appears that was true. So, thanks. Ministers are, one by one, letting their views be known. With such an emotive issue, it is brave indeed to nail your colours to the post. No surprise then that SA Premier Mike Rann confesses he has no position of his own.

parents can reclaim their child within six weeks, presumably with all the right checks and balances.

No one wants it to get to this point. The State Government rightly will continue to emphasise the importance of prevention.

But despite their best efforts there will always be women who have babies they don't want. And

some of them never come into contact with the system.

A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report shows last year in SA there were 40 women who had no antenatal care at all. Not a doctor, not a nurse – no one saw them before they gave birth. SA Health statistics show Aboriginal women are over-

represented in this group. Presumably so are young women; women who through shame or ignorance or fear sought no support.

So baby safe havens seem like a reasonable option of last resort.

In Europe, Japan and other countries they have saved lives; and they haven't prompted a surge of abandonments. In the US, where the laws are called "Moses laws", most accept the practice has saved lives.

Critics point out that the sort of women who would abandon a child are often not thinking clearly enough to seek out a safe place.

On her website Ms Bressington links the idea to anti-abortion information. Family First, which supports the laws, supports safe havens as a way to reduce the abortion rate.

This logic is murky, and an unfortunate distraction. But the logic that hospitals should offer an anonymous haven for unwanted babies seems sound; an organised replacement for the practice of leaving a child on a doorstep.