

The moral Right is a small grouping. But it is not isolated. It has a receptive ear in the Government. And it is beginning to make the running on moral issues.

Britain's Sexual COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARIES

Rose Shapiro

OUT SHE BOUNCES from the Appeal Court. Victoria Gillick, ecstatic on behalf of the nation's families at a court ruling that makes it illegal to prescribe contraception to a girl under sixteen without parental consent. She has other cause for joy . . . it's the first explicit victory for the moral right since Whitehouse scored over *Gay News*.

Victoria's triumph provided much-needed reinforcement for the curious network of moral campaigners that extends from the home counties into the more comfortable reaches of deepest England. Compensation for lack in numbers is found by choosing a good name. Mrs Gillick, before deciding to go for media stardom (and moving house), called herself 'Parents in Suffolk'. Many individuals style themselves as the 'Community Standards Association' of their locality, or 'Family Concern', 'Child and Family Protection League', 'Christian Social Action', or 'Campaign for Family and Nation'. In turn the membership of these groups makes up the numbers of the national organisations: National Festival of Light, National Viewers and Listeners Association, Moral Rearmament, Order of Christian Unity, and the Responsible Society.

The visibility of these groups fluctuates, probably dependent on the health of individual activists as much as on the choice of campaigning platform. They must look with envy across the water where their allies have their own TV stations, elaborate direct mail systems, and palpable influence over the government. Moral Majority doesn't have to meet in the treasurer's lounge, or run a bring-and-buy sale to raise funds. They don't have to invoke the silence of a population as testimony to their strength.

The moral Right

Here, as in America, the moral Right has

its roots in evangelical protestantism. Victoria Gillick, as a Roman Catholic, is atypical but this has not stood in the way of support from the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon protestant) moral Right. What counts is the stated commitment to absolute values, and opposition to what *Times* columnist Ronald Butt (whose articles are duplicated, circulated, and endlessly quoted from) described as 'a subjectivist and relativist ethic encouraging each individual to be governed in his actions by personal wishes and opinions'. Nostalgic idealism - the yearning for a revival of a society enhanced in memory with a flavour as glorious as that of childhood ice-cream that you can't buy now - permeates these groups' beliefs. They look to a time when absolute values were unquestioned, and when The Family stood firm, bathed in a golden and reverential light, and where, as

it's the first explicit victory
for the moral Right since
Whitehouse scored over *Gay
News*



Valerie Riches of the Responsible Society put it, the role of being a mother was 'acknowledged to be the most wonderful and rewarding in the world'.

It is the exploitation of sex that is seen to pose the most crucial threat to family life. The moral Right focuses on what it assortedly describes as the 'sex industry' or 'sex missionaries', who are the 'vocal minority' which tells children 'that nothing is intrinsically wrong' and gives them 'value-free instruction on deviant behaviour' (Ronald Butt). This in turn undermines 'the fabric of ordered and responsible relationships which has been the basis of our society' (Responsible Society).

The moral Right has a generalised opposition to 'permissiveness', which it thinks started in the 1960s. Manifestations include pornography, divorce, mixed hospital wards, sex education, sex outside marriage or under-age, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, and now reproductive technologies and surrogacy, all of which have been brought about by insidious relativism. Although the protestant moral Right opposes abortion, work against it is left mainly to the Roman Catholic church and its adherents in organisations like LIFE and the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child.

Many of the moral Right's concerns have been compressed into Victoria Gillick's campaign. She and many others appear to believe in a conspiracy to promote 'child sex', which plotters bring about by the removal of parental control and the provision of contraception for young girls. The subjectivism of sex education provides the stimulus for the sexual activity that all too soon is bound to follow, and the creation of a world where there is 'no entry for parents', as the Responsible Society called its Gillick-backing booklet.

It is made clear whose interests are

thought to be served, indeed represented, by those who promote sex education, contraception and abortion for the young. 'Paedophiles win the day', Valerie Riches wrote last year, before going on to quote from a Paedophile Information Exchange newsletter from 1978 which suggested (to Mrs Riches) that paedophiles were pushing for the removal of the age of consent or its reduction to four years of age, but were cleverly leaving it to the 'government funded birth control lobby' to do the groundwork. The paedophilia plot is an enduring favourite, designed to motivate even the most world-weary hack, but is becoming too far fetched to get much attention.

Imaginative use of statistics

The imaginative use of statistics provides more fertile ground. Capitalising on the fact that the population is far more literate than it is numerate, the story goes that teenage pregnancy figures are on the increase, and the incidence of cervical cancer has reached epidemic proportions because of premature sexual activity. None of the available figures suggest anything of the kind, with the rate of conceptions in 15 year old girls at 9.85 per 1,000 in 1982, a steady rate after a decline from 11.01 per 1,000 in 1974. This adds up to around 6,000 conceptions every year. Since it has been estimated that the number of under 16 year old girls who are sexually active could have trebled in the last 20 years, these rates are better seen as giving support to those who advocate availability of contraception as a way of avoiding unplanned pregnancy. But the moral Right would see this suggestion simply as proof of its belief that provision of contraception encourages teenage sex, not that previous policies on contraception were working.

The cervical cancer 'epidemic' for young women, with the doubling of incidence in a decade for those aged between 15-24, means in reality an increase of incidence from five women in every million to 12 per million, so the condition remains relatively rare. The increase in figures could have more to do with improved diagnostic techniques and the screening of younger women, and there is no evidence to suggest that early sexual activity has any link with the later development of cancer. The risk is thought to be increased by having sex with a man who is carrying a genital wart virus, so if a woman has a number of sexual partners she might increase her statistical likelihood of sleeping with a man who could put her at risk. It is true that the younger you start having



when the family stood firm,
bathed in a golden and
reverential light



sex the more time you might have for more partners, but you could hit unlucky with the man for whom you save yourself and marry, and to whom you remain faithful.

What must be a knowing manipulation of statistics is accompanied by an unchanging list of moral Right favourite outrages. The campaign against Jane Cousins' sex education book *Make It Happy* has ranked high since the 1970s, and succeeded in getting the Department of Health to ask the Family Planning Association to take it off their bookshop shelves. It is continually claimed that most sex education literature (usually referred to as 'sex manuals for teenagers') is 'written in terms of "boy/girl" intercourse', and that contraceptives 'are handed out like sweets' at family planning clinics. Brook Advisory Centres, with its concentration on providing contraceptive services for under 25s, with around 3% of clients under 16, is an enduring target, and the Department of Health and the medical establishment are portrayed as weak-willed fall guys to the propagandists of the anti-family sex industry.

The conspiracy theory

Less public is what the moral Right thinks lies behind the groups and ideas they oppose. Mrs Gillick, always ready to adopt the role of the anti-capitalist, has described an international network of drug companies, allied family planning agencies and sex educators who do it all for profit. Valerie Riches of the Responsible Society constructed a chart linking 36 organisations - including the FPA, the Department of Health, the Communist Party, and the Ministry of Overseas Development who together promote sex education in pursuit of 'communism, humanism' and 'world domination'.

Another document, circulated by the network of Community Standards Associations, was entitled 'Revolution by Stealth', and lists twelve objectives for revolutionaries. Elimination of censorship, discrediting of the family as an institution, the replacement of revealed religion with 'social' religion, the promotion of homosexuality, degeneracy and promiscuity are included in the means of revolutionary subversion. 'It will be noted that some of these objectives have already been reached', warned the CSA, possibly referring to Objective 7, which calls cadres to 'eliminate all good sculpture from parks and public buildings and substitute shapeless, awkward and meaningless forms'. Such red scare propaganda is not surprising, especially when linked to the moral

Right's historical antecedents in the virulently anti-communist Moral Rearmament, whose leader was well known in the 1930s for remarking 'thank heaven for Hitler'.

the sexual activity that all too soon is bound to follow

There is not much mileage in any of the moral Right's conspiracy theories, something of which it must be aware. Neither is the current success of Mrs Gillick, and her major supporter the Responsible Society, simply based on the strategic use of the spectre of moral decline, and the attack on the god-given innocence of our children. It has always secured the support of a certain breed of churchman, doctor, or peer, and there have always been Tory MPs who in the House of Commons will wave around sex education literature, call it pornographic, and get their names in the paper. The moral Right has never, and still hasn't, got the numbers or support to lead a movement.

Friends in high places

But now it can see its own language echoing back to it from the government front benches, with the prime minister talking fondly of Victorian values and the giving back of power to the family. Gillick wants power back in the home, and not in the hands of the state, tying herself perfectly in with the political rhetoric of the new Right and many of its policies. Gillick demands that the state does *not* take a programmatic approach to the family, and insists it is a sacred unit which must be allowed to pursue its absolute values independent of any outside agency.

Gillick is a gift to a government which wants to destroy the welfare state. Even better, she provides the means to call such moves populist, with inaction being seen as the most positive step that can be taken in support of moral standards. If the family wants to look after itself, then that is what it shall do. If the family is sacred, and what happens in it is private, it must be allowed to be self-regulating and self-supporting. The family must look after its own, and only a tiny and feckless minority could benefit from state interference. The unemployed are corrupted and made work-shy by state benefits, children won't develop ambition if their parents have no choice but to send them to schools that treat them like peas in a pod, and only a few are heartless enough not to be prepared to care



for sick and dependent relatives. The ideas promoted by Gillick are useful to the Right, and she is part of a campaign that is easy to please, but small enough not to get out of hand.

on the back of the Warnock Report, Enoch Powell is preparing the Unborn Child (Protection) Bill

But there is another kind of paternalism, one founded on benevolence and on pragmatism. The Department of Health, which has contested Mrs Gillick's attempts to obtain 'parental civil liberties', has now taken the case to the House of Lords,

despite new Right criticism. The Department has, until now, given guidance that doctors can prescribe contraception for under 16 year old girls without parental consent in 'exceptional cases'. If the principle of confidentiality were abandoned, the Department argued, some children under 16 might not seek professional advice at all. 'They could then be exposed to the immediate risks of pregnancy and of sexually transmitted disease, as well as other long term physical, psychological and emotional consequences which are equally a threat to stable family life' . . . it's the same melody as that of the moral Right, but a slightly different lyric.

The British Medical Association, fighting off allegations that it wants to see a lowering of the age of consent, emphasised

that 'early sexual intercourse is undesirable, both medically and emotionally' but pointed out 'there is no evidence to suggest that lack of contraception deters girls under 16 from having sex. Moreover, doctors, parents and social workers would still be left "to cope" with these casualties'. The FPA says that many of those teenage girls who become pregnant 'come from disadvantaged backgrounds', with some being 'pressured by the media, advertising, the pop industry and their peers into having sex before they are ready'. Brook Advisory Centres makes an effort 'to explain the legal position, the possible health risks of early sexual activity, and the particular hazards of pregnancy', and in common with others, the organisation frequently reiterates that the huge majority of those who come seeking contraceptive advice have already had 'unprotected intercourse'.

On the defensive

This is the stuff of pragmatic semi-liberalism, and not sexual revolution. Even taking into account that all these groups and organisations are continually on the defensive, with many dependent on government funding, the message is clear. The ideal promoted is sex within a 'loving, caring, responsible and lasting relationship' (FPA), but for those who aren't engaged either to be married or in such a respectable liaison, support in the form of contraception provision and abortion facilities must be made available, thereby stopping what is seen as a cycle of deprivation.

There is hardly any discussion of the double standard on which the under 16s debate is based, which ignores the possibility that boys may or may not run risks (moral or otherwise) from sex, with the BMA's Dr John Havard calling this 'a side issue' at a press conference last year. Rarer still are any explicit attacks on the moral Right, only sensibly written letters and the occasional press release which put the case for pragmatism days after 'gymslip sex girls in clinic shock' stories have been splashed on front pages. They all try hard to occupy the middle ground as it shifts further to the right, and are committed to playing by the book and continuing with traditional lobbying tactics through which one part of the establishment talks and makes arrangements with the other.

No-one dares question the ideology of moral absolutism and the family. Instead they say 'not all families are ideal'. Family planning organisations and others talk about being 'ready' for a sexual rela-

tionship with no definition of what this might mean or how anyone could tell, and certainly no evidence for what psychological damage could be expected in a 15 year old girl and her boyfriend who have sex together. Feminists and the Left linger on the sidelines. They are clear that Gillick *et al* are to be opposed, but the fundamentalist moral politics she represents remain unscathed, hardly even addressed. Though it is useful to know that Victoria Gillick has a context - Powellism, anti-abortion, a personal opposition to all 'artificial' methods of birth control - and that she has been working on her current campaign for seven years or more, it was her case for moral authoritarianism that somehow got her legal aid and won her appeal judgement.

Discovering and publicising her past will interest only a minority. Far more powerful is the face of Gillick victorious, made beautiful by her small-town-girl determination to take on the state and win back the rights of parents. Even her prolific family, which she at first thought would be a disadvantage and the fact of which she implored a local journalist not to publish, now smiles out from feature pages. No-one has forced a confrontation with her as a politician of the moral Right, only as a single-issue campaigner. The appeal judgement is opposed on the basis that it is legally unenforceable, that you can't stop teenagers from having sex, and that it will lead to more unwanted pregnancies, not that it is politically reactionary, or that the denial of rights (to confidentiality or to sexuality) for teenagers is morally wrong.

A progressive morality

It is the Right which makes the connections, and sets the terms for what is moral or not. Ronald Butt now sees surrogate motherhood as 'the epitome of self-centredness and the rejection of absolute moral standards', and believes its precursors and predators to be sex education, contraception for the young, artificial insemination and *in vitro* fertilisation. And on the back of the Warnock Report, Enoch Powell is preparing the Unborn Child (Protection) Bill, ostensibly to protect embryos from scientific research, but likely to carry with it the makings of a change in the law on abortion. The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child has been prompted by Warnock into circulating a petition to protect embryos, has been blaming the population lobby for the falling European birthrate, wants action on abortion plus 'a positive policy for the

family based on a moral code', is promoting a new abortion horror movie 'The Silent Scream', and is even confident enough to spread wild and baseless stories about British foetuses being exported to French cosmetic firms to be made into face cream.

So as the moral Right makes the running, encouraged by the new Right to characterise itself as a popular movement, everyone else keeps quiet and waits for a court case or parliamentary bill from which they have to defend themselves. The liberal establishment knows that it is under attack, and that its power and influence are increasingly unpopular with the new Right, but it will not risk confrontation.

the liberal establishment
knows it is under attack . . .
but will not risk
confrontation



Instead a single political grouping has been able to define a distinct set of ideas as absolute values, from which it then extrapolates and tries to prompt a series of reactionary moves in social policy. Its analysis leaves no room for opposition, because any other view is deemed amoral. It sees the 'right to choose' - on abortion or anything else - as anathema. Absolute standards cannot be optional, and any concept of choice will be recognised as the threat it genuinely is, and its proponents destroyed.

The Left is the ultimate adversary, and though it can just about identify backlash when it sees it, has not examined in what ways it would legislate on sexual behaviour, or what approach it should take to the rights of children. There is yet to be a moral Left which will recognise sexual politics as a point of confrontation and campaign as hard as Mrs Gillick for a progressive morality - or even consider what that might be.