

**David Alton**

David Alton is a 36-year-old Roman Catholic. He has no children and is not married. His father was a Dagenham car worker and his mother is an Irish-born school dinner-lady. His Irish roots are strong, so is his devout Catholicism. He was educated at a Jesuit grammar school and once contemplated entering the priesthood. Instead he became the youngest councillor on Liverpool city council, and when he won a by-election in Liverpool, Edge Hill, in 1979 he found himself, at the age of 28, the youngest MP in the House of Commons.

Despite these successes, his once-comfortable majority in Liverpool has now dwindled to 2,000. How better to call the floating Liverpool Roman Catholic vote to heel than by taking up once again the tired old issue of abortion?

This is what he has now decided to do, for the second time in his parliamentary

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career. The first time, in 1980, he attempted, unsuccessfully, a much more modest venture of a 24-week limit to legal abortion. However, he promised on that occasion that this was only the beginning: 'We must introduce a series of one-clause bills in order to amend the legislation.' Now he is trying for an 18-week limit to legal abortion. This will make it impossible for a woman diagnosed as carrying a severely malformed foetus to obtain a legal abortion, since the tests on which this diagnosis rests cannot come up with an answer until 19 or 20 weeks.

Although his proposed bill will have other baleful effects, it is probably this issue of handicap that will prove his biggest headache, since this is the issue on

which the public has always most consistently and most strongly supported legal abortion. In 1980, at the time of his previous bill, no less than 87% of a national sample of women told Gallup that they believed on these grounds, women ought to be allowed to opt for abortion even late in pregnancy. Alton states openly that he feels it is morally right to be introducing a bill that will compel women to continue with pregnancies even if they know the child will be born severely deformed. After all, the handicapped have the same rights as all the rest of us, don't they? What about a woman's right to choose? He looks genuinely baffled at such a concept.

David Alton sees nothing at all odd about a man without any children himself, trying to force women by law to have children they desperately do not wish to have.

When news of Alton's intentions leaked in the press in the middle of the Liberal Party conference at Harrogate, the Liberal women called a special meeting to denounce him. Many of the Liberal men were no better pleased. Could their chief whip, emanating from poverty-stricken, strife-torn Liverpool, find no better cause to espouse than destroying the 1967 Abortion Act, the one piece of Liberal-inspired legislation put on the statute books in the last 75 years? The views of David Steel, who made his reputation with this bill exactly 20 years ago, are probably unprintable. The next day, David Alton resigned from his post as chief whip. Will he do for the Liberals what David Owen has done for the SDP, one wonders? And how many Catholics, outside the ranks of the more fanatical pressure groups, will really welcome this divisive debate all over again, now that it is tnown that, in this country at least, there is no longer any difference between Catholics and others in the practice of modern contraception for-

bidden by the Church? Despite abortion being banned in Catholic Ireland, even to the extent of a ban on information being given to Irish women about abortion facilities in London following a High Court ruling in Dublin in January, Irish women are still coming to London for abortions at the official rate of 4,000 a year, and unofficially in much greater numbers. Women from Catholic Spain are currently arriving in London for abortions at the rate of some 12,000 each year. David Alton, on a recent television programme on which we both appeared, said he regarded foreign women coming here for late abortions as particularly obnoxious. About 6,000 of the 170,000 abortions performed in England and Wales each year take place after 18 weeks, less than 4%, but also some of the most tragic cases, and of these some 2,500 take place on desperate foreign women from Roman Catholic countries abroad. If legal abortion in civilised conditions was available in Eire and Spain, then women from these countries would not be travelling to Britain for this purpose.

If by any misfortune David Alton were to be successful with his bill, then middle-class British women would in their turn be forced to travel to the Netherlands, America and Scandinavia for their abortions, while working-class women would return to the tender mercies of the back-street abortionist, from whom the Abortion Act released them in 1967. During that period, 3,000 septic abortion cases ended up in hospital beds each year, and 50 women a year died as a result, as opposed to one or two deaths on average from abortion each year nowadays. When David Alton talks of the sanctity of life, he is of course referring only to the sanctity of life of the foetus, never to that of the real, live potential mother.

On our television programme, David Alton said it was only late abortion he really objected to; he was keen to improve facilities for early abortion. This, naturally



**Alton: Catholic martyr?**

enough, drew gasps of horror and amazement from the LIFE-SPUC-Order of Christian Unity lobby present on the set. David Alton has never made known any proposals for improving the early abortion services in his eight-year career in parliament. It will be interesting to find out what proposals he has in mind - if any. If he does eventually produce some, then he will lose the support of the fanatical lobbies that support him and run his campaign outside parliament. This he cannot afford to do.

Hence his insoluble dilemma. If he appears reasonable to the outside world, he loses his troops, who do not wish to see even early and safe abortion made more accessible to women. If he shows up in the colours of sectarian bigotry, then he is in danger of alienating the middle ground that might be prevailed upon to accept a 24-week limit to legal abortion. In the weeks and months to come, this is the dismal dilemma David Alton may find himself becoming increasingly bogged down in. Perhaps martyrdom has its attractions for him? Perhaps this is what it is all really about?#

*Madeleine Simms*