



Illustration: Christine Roche

Whose Right To Life

A Roundtable Discussion Ever since the 1967 Abortion Act, there have been regular attempts to erode its gains. The latest, the Alton bill, has its second reading in the House of Commons later this month

The participants in the roundtable are: Teresa Gorman, Conservative MP for Billericay; Jo Richardson, Labour MP and shadow minister for women; Wendy Savage, senior lecturer in obstetrics and gynaecology at the London Hospital; and Jane Woddis, Birmingham co-ordinator of Fight the Alton Bill Campaign and member of the Communist Party national women's committee. The discussion was chaired by Maria Duggan, an abortion counsellor.

The Alton bill is the 13th attempt to erode the gains of the 1967 Abortion Act. It is acknowledged that the supporters of the bill are opposed to abortion. Is the purpose of the bill simply to reduce the upper time limit? Or, as has been alleged, is it the thin end of the wedge, a tactical move aimed in the longer run at the complete erosion of the gains of the 1967 act?

Teresa Well, Alton has said that. He is in print in the *Catholic Herald* as having said that after the failure of the Corrie bill, the way to do it was step by step. This is the first move towards the abolition of abortion because Alton's views are rooted, I assume, in his Catholicism and the catholic church is opposed to abortion.

Jo It's also significant that he chose to announce that he was going to introduce the bill at the annual general meeting of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC). He didn't just do a press release unconnected with any organisation. He chose that particular place and they are avowedly opposed to the Abortion Act in every aspect. As Teresa indicated, he has said on many occasions that he is anti-abortion. I see this, and I hope that

in due course the House of Commons is going to see this, as not simply a way of trying to get earlier abortions, which obviously we are all trying to get anyway, but as the thin end of the wedge to get rid of the act altogether.

Jane One of the interesting things is Life's position. In the past there has been a division between SPUC and Life about the way to approach amending the law. Life has tended to say we are against abortion completely, we are not going to bother with chipping away at it. This time they seem to be behind it in a big way.

Wendy I feel that they learned from their failure with the Corrie bill. If they'd gone for 24 weeks in 1979 they'd have got 24 weeks. Alton made it quite clear in the 1980 10 minute rule bill that he introduced when he said: 'Let my friends on the other side have no illusions, this is the first of a series of measures to amend the act.' In an interview he said the right to life is paramount, so there is no doubt he is against all abortion, although he says he isn't against all contraception. Life are attempting to play on everybody's natural feeling of revulsion about the idea of late abortion in an attempt to

change the climate of opinion. And I think they're right, the climate of opinion is different today from 1967, doctors react differently to a request for abortion which is no longer seen as an illegal, criminal and sordid act.

So you all see this as tinkering in order to create the pre-conditions whereby a further, perhaps more drastic, attempt could be made. I know it's asking people to indulge in possibly useless speculation, but where would that attempt come from, another private member's bill or could we envisage a time when government itself might want to put this issue on the agenda?

Teresa I don't think that the Home Office, which was strongly behind the original bill, will ever allow things to return to the old situation. Although of course David Steel got the credit for the Abortion Act, and good luck to him, behind him was Roy Jenkins who was Home Secretary at the time, and behind him was the Home Office itself. The power of the civil service is enormous, so there would have to be a massive change in public opinion to shift the official view.

Jo My view of the DHSS officials, who are the ones mainly concerned now, is that they would on the whole prefer to leave things as they are, I don't mean necessarily at 28 weeks, I don't know about that, but certainly to have an act. If Alton went through, the plain fact is that there will always, I would imagine, be somebody in the House, whatever its composition, who would be ready to pick up the tab and go further.

Wendy One of the important things about the present campaign is that the anti-abortionists go on and on making these statements which people who don't know much about it probably believe, like 'we have abortion on demand in this country'. We don't have abortion on demand and when you say to people who know nothing about it, 'do you realise that 50% of women still have to pay for their abortions, that abortion is the most commonly performed operation for money in this country', they are shattered. Most members of the public don't understand that a woman has to go and see two doctors and convince them that she has grounds for an abortion. If David Alton genuinely wished to reduce the number of late abortions we have the example of Sweden in front of us. All he has to do is to provide in his bill for women to have abortion on request up to 12 weeks. That would immediately reduce the number of abortions over 18 weeks by at least 50%.

Jo If we had an even spread of NHS abortion facilities throughout the country - now you can more easily get an abortion in the north, the north east and the south west than you can in any other part of the country on the NHS -

then there would be less late abortions. I have heard David Alton say that he would now be in favour of that. But when I introduced a 10 minute rule bill in 1981, to say that every health authority had a statutory duty to make sure there were abortion facilities available for women who wanted it, he voted against it, as did the other people who are now supporting him. That's what reaffirms my belief that he's actually still very anti-abortion.

Jane I think it would be a mistake just to look at him and his motives as an individual because clearly the issue of abortion has not gone away. It has continued to be a contentious and highly-charged issue. It's not just David Alton, who happens to be a Roman Catholic and that's why he is doing it. Although obviously there's a link because of the catholic church's teaching on abortion, there is also a gap between the leadership of the church and what they say and what ordinary catholic people actually think.

Wendy David Alton's personality becomes a factor because of the way the media present things. He has been given prime television time to present his statement, which is always the same statement and which he has clearly learnt off by heart. He has no conception of what it is like for a woman who is in that position. So I think it is relevant that he's a catholic and it is relevant what sort of person he is.

Jane I wasn't saying that it was irrelevant but I was saying that I don't think that we should get completely focused on him as an individual. It seems to me that some of the arguments that have been presented have focused on the fact that he is celibate, that he is a Roman Catholic and while those are obviously important...

Wendy David Alton doesn't understand how women feel.

But surely the point underlying this is that the issue of abortion hasn't gone away. Why is that? Why is it always controversial when it does come up?

Teresa It touches two crucial things. One is property rights, the right of individuals to control their own lives, which is fundamental, and it touches on the age-long attitude towards women which has been prevalent in the church, and most religions, that a woman is some kind of a vessel for carrying the man's seed and of only second-class status.

Wendy There's another fundamental issue. When a woman becomes pregnant, left alone, and nature being kind, a new individual is going to be produced. I have always agreed with the anti-abortionists that life begins at conception, that a new individual starts at conception and that doing an abor-



Wendy: 'I have always agreed with the anti-abortionists that life begins at conception, that doing an abortion is not the same as removing an appendix'

tion is not the same as removing an appendix because you have got this other potential person there. I wouldn't like to live in a society where people saw abortion as like having a cup of tea. And I don't think women see it that way: they find it a difficult decision, it is always an agonising decision for them, but they have the right to make it and that's why this business about it being a woman's right to choose what she does with her own body is fundamental to it, and I think it is at that level that David Alton doesn't understand.

I think that's a really important point. In the past I wonder how well we have incorporated that into our organisation, into our campaigning? I recall after the Corrie bill there was a movement which was entitled 'the feelings behind the slogans,' but in general I think people have been nervous in admitting that there was this difficulty, we were unsure of our ground. Do you feel that we have now moved on?

Jane In the early days of the pro-choice movement, from the mid-70s, we were very certain about the slogan 'a women's right to choose'. It was only later that people started to talk about the feelings that they had, the mixed feelings of women very actively involved in the campaign. They said things like, 'well, actually I am not quite sure if I would have one myself.' We have moved on in the sense that we have recognised that more, but we still haven't fully embraced it. And part of the reason is that we are trying to work out a way to embrace it that doesn't give ammunition to our opponents, because the more we say, 'well there are problems here', the more they use those ambiguities.

But is there not another issue? I think that's part of it, but isn't the other side of it the fact that it is very difficult to translate the sophistication of this idea into very accessible terms. I mean, very anecdotally, I am pregnant and when I saw the scan that I had at 18 weeks, my feeling was essentially this: it's because this is alive that I retain the right to choose and that I want to retain the right to choose. It's not because its anything else but precisely because it's alive, therefore it must be my decision. How does that get translated into a message that will bring mass support? How do you say to a mass movement, 'we want the right to be grown-up moral human beings and take the consequences of our own decisions on our own backs'. It is not a very simple message.

Wendy After the Corrie bill was defeated, people were able to get away from their battle positions because everybody felt then, 'well, they are not going to try again', because everyone was sick and tired of abortion in the House. So women allowed themselves to start exploring things. They started

in favour of them getting a much better break in life. But previously we couldn't detect whether people were going to be handicapped before they were born. Now we can. And if you are going to bring into the world a new individual who is not going to be able to live life eventually on their own, you are placing an enormous obligation either on that family or on society as a whole, and it is at that point, I think, that you have to start deciding whether you have the right to insist that that individual is born - non-viable, always needing a great deal of care? Whether you have the right to impose that on a family or even on that child?

I deal a lot with social services in the constituency and I was there only last weekend going round with the social worker who visits families with handicapped members. She told me of the terrible stress involved which can cause families to break-up. In many cases the family wants to get rid of the child into an institution, the child goes off to a special school as soon as it is able to, and when it has finished its education at 16 or 17 the family don't want it back. When people say, 'there's 18,000 families waiting to adopt handicapped children' I just don't think that's true. And I don't think that gives you the right to decide on behalf of another individual, the mother, or the family who will bear the guilt of feeling that they abandoned their child. To say you have the baby and someone else will look after it, is quite immoral.

Jo I think that it is very important to remember and to re-emphasise what both Wendy and Teresa have said, which is that the test about handicap was not available 10 years ago, and that takes us back to just about the time of Corrie really. So the arguments which we are now having and the knowledge which women have arising from their own personal experience, whether or not they have a handicapped fetus or a perfect one, wasn't around in those days.

It is a point I think to remember that, thank goodness, people with disabilities are more articulate these days and also, thank goodness, more demanding. I mean the fact that they want access to buildings, that they want to lead lives which are more normal, is a very good thing. But I am in touch with a constituency point of view, as Teresa is and other MPs are, with a number of handicapped organisations and a number of organisations of parents who look after handicapped children. I have already talked to them about this and there is not one of those parents who hasn't said that they would like their children to grow up with the choice of whether they had a handicapped child or not, considering the pain which the child's had to go through as well as the parents. It's a very complicated thing and I think that for people like SPUC and David Alton to constantly try and suggest that we are anti people with

handicap is really quite outrageous, it is not the point. If anything we are a little bit more sensitive to the varying problems which surround handicap and the people who bear handicapped children, than in fact he is.

Wendy The other point that I wanted to make was that of course medical people feel quite strongly about the pre-natal screening programme, since it's because of the advances in medical knowledge that many handicapped people survive today. In the past they wouldn't have survived, so nature had a way even *after* birth of ensuring that some handicapped people *didn't* survive but we overcame that. So when people say 'how can you play God and decide which fetus is going to live or die', they forget that we have *already* changed the natural history by interfering after the baby is born.

Can we move on to the question of viability? Are we to accept that viability is an ever-decreasing spiral downwards, and that the limits of available technology are going to be the sole construct to establish the upper limit or are there other overriding or competing moral/social imperatives that we have to take account of? And if there are, what are they and how can we be brave about asserting them?

Jo We keep hearing about babies now being born from 23-24 weeks onwards, but as I understand it, there are very few and the medical view about the prospects of survival for a 23-24 week old fetus are pretty slim. We should be careful not to let people begin to feel that a fetus is a baby at 23 or 24 weeks. Some might be, but we are not quite there yet.

Wendy Again we've got this whole business of the media, haven't we? Nothing's more appealing than this little 'bag of sugar' baby in its incubator surrounded by wires, and it is a great technological advance. It is miraculous, but I don't think that we should let that kind of technology get in the way of the woman's right to choose. Natural viability seems to me, in practice, to be a good cut-off point because it is very unusual for a woman to present herself after 28 weeks. I think that we should leave the law as it is. We occasionally need to do one late, but in my experience almost all those done at 25 and 26 weeks have been teenagers, and some of those are the result of sexual abuse from fathers, step-fathers or brothers. I don't think we should force a 12 or 13 year-old girl to go through with a pregnancy because it is possible by spending enormous amounts of money and providing special care to keep 10% of 24-week fetuses alive with a 10% severe handicap rate. We should not get led down this road of 'if the child can be kept alive we should bring down the limit'. What women need is easy access to abortion facilities which would reduce most of

the late abortions, but we have to have facilities for some late ones because there are some hard cases.

Jane We have to be really alert with the Alton bill because it seems as if 24 weeks might be put forward as a reasonable kind of compromise between the present 28 weeks and Alton's 18 weeks.

Wendy The numbers affected over 24 weeks are tiny. Only 29 last year, but terribly important for those individual women, who are mostly girls.

Jo There is an awful lot of uncertainty in the minds of many MPs about this 24 week business, which they think they would prefer because some of them actually believe that all babies could be born at 23-24 weeks. There's a bit of a con going on, on the part of SPUC, Alton and so on, who keep saying, 'well, yes vote for 18 weeks and then you'll have the opportunity to amend it to something else'. This is the most cynical thing ever to get votes. I'm busy saying to my colleagues, 'you have to vote this thing *out*, no good just posing the 18 and the 24 like this. It's 18 or 28, and we have to have the flexibility of the act as it is, and not criminalise.' They don't realise that they are criminalising kids of 12 years old, or older women or people who are carrying a baby who might be massively handicapped...

Wendy Or a heart lesion which will lead the baby to die a week or two weeks after birth, and which is *not* surgically correctable. A woman nowadays can have that baby scanned - if she has had one of these abnormalities before, or if it is in her family - at 18 weeks, and then again at 24 weeks to make sure. Now what Alton doesn't understand is that many women, if there was a query at 18 weeks and they couldn't have it done at 25 weeks, would say, 'all right, terminate this pregnancy *now* because I don't want to take that chance.' So in some ways you would be restricting choice and aborting *more* normal babies.

Teresa I would like to take the issue out of politics altogether. If we have any respect for the medical profession, we must allow that they don't do late abortions for frivolous reasons. If we could adopt the Swedish practice of getting an abortion early without all the rigmarole of bureaucracy, we perhaps wouldn't be having the same debate.

We are talking about women as if they are a homogeneous group. Do, for instance, black women have a different relationship to the whole issue of abortion? Is it the same kind of issue for all groups of women?

Jo I happened to be speaking on this subject at a meeting last Friday and there were a number of black women in the audience, and two or three of them



Jo: Alton has said on many occasions that he is anti-abortion*

actually said that there was a different perspective. But in the end we found it was the same perspective: in other words they wanted, as white women want, control over their own bodies, but their *experience* was sometimes different in that when they went to get an abortion which they'd thought about very deeply they were sometimes told, I am sure that they weren't lying about this, 'yes, you can have an abortion providing that you are then sterilised.'

Wendy Does that happen more with black women than white women? I don't think we have any evidence for that statement. In the London borough of Tower Hamlets, we had a ratio of abortions to births for the West Indian and West African population which is 1:2; of the white women 1:3, and of the Bengali women 1:28. These figures were collected five years ago. Now the Bengali women are coming too. So I think that the need for abortion arises in all women. And that is what is fundamentally the same about us all; but the reaction to an unplanned pregnancy is very culturally conditioned. In all societies women have resorted to self-induced abortion to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy even though that might mean death, but there is cultural conditioning which makes the situation differ between women of different backgrounds. But I would predict that when we have Bengali women who have been brought

up in the East End, the attitude of those young women to an unwanted pregnancy in 20 years time will be different from their parents' attitude.

Given that we've all been saying how insidious we perceive this bill to be, and our overwhelming consensus about the need to oppose it, how should we campaign?



Jane: 'I have been struck by the sense of a great ground swell on this issue'

Jo I think that there are different facets of the issue which appeal to different age groups. I am really amazed at the strength of feeling of young women who have grown up under the 1967 act and would never have known about back street abortions except as stories they have heard from their parents. They are frantic that parliament should be doing anything to disturb the status quo. Indeed most of them would want to go on to have much more choice than they presently get under the 1967 act. And again you get groups of older women who remember the back street abortions and who are saying, 'this is outrageous, we can't possibly go back to the knitting needle days'. While well-off women could get an abortion and always will, poorer women had to resort to jumping on and off the table, having drunk a bottle of gin, or worse, knitting needles...

Teresa It is very serious because you can see in the House fairly popular measures, such as Sunday trading,

being defeated by organised and very successful lobbies representing a minority. This could happen with the Alton bill. If any of us gets the chance in the media, we should say to women, 'you had better damn-well write a letter to your MP, or otherwise he or she might go and vote for the bill. Whenever Alton gets on the radio or on the box, I am on the telephone almost before he gets his mouth open saying, 'listen I am brassed off with you continually shoving Alton and his 12 inch baby down my throat, and his disgusting story of crushed skulls and all the rest of it, I find it greatly offensive and when are you going to let me on to put the other side of the story?'

Jane I have been struck by the sense of a great ground swell on this issue. I have been involved in campaigning for 12 years on the issue and I can't remember, even at the time of the Corrie bill, getting such big meetings as we have been having in Birmingham, with groups being set up in so many localities. What has also struck me is how many, young people are involved.

Jo The campaign is all about mobilising people to lobby their MPs and to tell them how they as individual women, and in many cases men, feel about this issue. I agree with Jane about the ground swell, it's a fantastic feeling. I remember Corrie very well, it's much better than that. •



STOP THE ALTON BILL

DEFEND A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE



For women's rights

John Edmonds, General Secretary

Olga Mean, National Chairperson

**GENERAL, MUNICIPAL, BOILERMAKERS
AND ALLIED TRADES UNION**

THORNE HOUSE, RUXLEY RIDGE, CLAYGATE, ESHER, SURREY KT10 0TL
TEL: 0372 62081 TELEX: 27428 FAX: 67164