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Britain

Abortion - defend a woman's right to choose

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Anti-abortionists in Britain are waging a huge propaganda campaign and have taken some important actions through the courts. So far unsuccessful in their aims, the anti-abortionists are trying to create a climate of opinion which would ease the way to abortion restrictions.

Britain's main piece of legislation, which gave women some important albeit limited rights to control their fertility was passed in 1967. Over the next two decades a strong movement, headed up by the National Abortion Campaign and supported by the broader women's liberation movement and increasingly by key sections of the trade union movement, defeated a whole series of attacks on those rights.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ANTIABORTIONISTS.jpg>]

The 1967 Act gave women the right to an abortion in limited circumstances up to 28 weeks. In 1990 this was reduced to 24 weeks - a move that was not opposed by as vigorous campaigning as had been seen in the previous two decades.

This was partly because the attack, unlike the ones that preceded it, did not come through an up front Parliamentary move which allowed the movement time to mobilise, but through the back door as a result of an amendment to another piece of legislation not focused on abortion.

But the more crucial reason for this defeat was that by this time the autonomous women's movement as a whole in Britain and with it the pro-choice movement had become seriously weakened.

In the intervening 15 and more years, there have been various moves by the anti-abortionists to further restrict a woman's right to choose - predominantly through further cuts in the time limits for abortions.

The anti-abortionists, who have massive support from the Catholic Church in particular, have not succeeded in getting a new law introduced into Parliament but have run a number of high profile media campaigns and taken a number of actions through the courts.

In the most recent of these at the end of January, pro-choice campaigners had a welcome victory when the courts refused the application of Sue Axon to rule that as a mother she had the right to be informed of any decision of her daughters to seek advice that might result in an abortion. The High Court rejected a review of guidelines which state that terminations do not need parents' consent and doctors should respect girls' confidentiality.

What was worrying however for the rights of young women was the judges comment that "abortions should not be made available if the young person lacked the maturity to understand all the advice they were given".

Then the headline on the front page of the Observer, the main Sunday broadsheet, on January 29 was somewhat breathtaking: "Women demand tougher laws to curb abortions". The first line was even worse: "A majority of women in Britain want the abortion laws to be tightened to make it harder, or impossible for them to terminate a pregnancy".

Well certainly no one had asked me - or indeed anyone else I know. Buried at the end of the article was the information that Ipsos Mori had interviewed 1.790 people aged 16-64 by on-line questioning between January 6-10, in a poll that was conducted for the Observer. Quite why a usually a relatively liberal publication was playing into the

hands of the anti-abortionists and their religious backers is rather less clear.

The poll results do not currently appear on the Mori website so there is no way of verifying the way the journalists have interpreted them. Apparently 47 per cent of women interviewed said they believed the legal limit for abortion should be cut from its present 24 weeks, while a further 10 per cent want the practice outlawed all together.

Zoe Williams in a comment piece in the Guardian two days later gave a robust response. She argues that talking about abortion time limits is just a new (actually its not so new) way of "peddling the pro-life position". She reminds us that in fact the number of women having abortions over 20 weeks is miniscule at just over 1 per cent and almost exclusively in very dire situations. She attacks the "mawkish fetishisation of the foetus" that she believes lie behind the poll results. She also argues that the anti-abortions should be forced to come out openly and argue their real positions and concludes "lets stop asking questions about time limits and let's stop answering them".

While the burden of William's argument is absolutely correct and it's certainly refreshing to have someone arguing an unequivocally pro-choice position in the media, she does miss one important issue.

The problem is not only the anti-abortionists hiding their real position but the fact that the pro-choice movement itself, not to mention the women's liberation movement as a whole is much weaker than they were when the last major battles were fought to defend and extend women's rights to control our bodies in the 1970s and 80s.

We need to make slogans like "Not the Church, not the state, women must decide their fate" and "our bodies, our lives, our right to decide" as common currency as they were in those days and win once again a popular majority amongst both women and men to defend a woman's right to choose.