

Abortion rights under attack in Britain

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A coordinated offensive against the right to abortion has been under way in Britain, on the 40th anniversary of its legalisation.

Anti-abortion propaganda—promulgated by religious organisations and pro-life campaigners—featured heavily in the British media over the last weeks.

This is despite the fact that their campaign has little public support. A “service of remembrance” on October 27 at Westminster Cathedral—which church groups claimed thousands would attend—attracted just a few hundred.

In contrast, opinion polls have shown that more than eight out of ten British adults support the right to abortion—a view shared by much of the medical profession, including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Nursing.

This is no doubt why the campaign by the churches and pro-life groups has become ever more lurid and provocative. A recent “Dispatches” television programme featured an abortion at 16 weeks, which it was claimed demonstrated foetal pain. Much prominence has been given to 3D images purportedly showing a foetus at 12 week’s “walking in the womb,” while newspaper articles have questioned whether scientific advances require a “re-think” of existing abortion law. The current law permits abortions before the 24th week of pregnancy with the approval of two doctors. Terminations after 24 weeks are only allowed in the case of grave risk to mother or severe foetal abnormality.

Lacking any popular base for an all-out assault on abortion rights, the anti-abortion campaign aims at chipping away at existing legislation. With the support of the Major Conservative government, in 1990 anti-abortionists successfully campaigned to have the 28-week limit reduced to its current 24. They have now made clear that their intention is to reduce this limit still further—to 20 weeks—as a step towards its eventual prohibition.

Perversely, anti-abortionists have sought to use the imprimatur of “science” to achieve their retrogressive and antidemocratic ends.

They had targeted the Parliamentary Science and Technology Select Committee as a means of changing the

1967 Abortion Act via amendments under the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill, which will be in the Queen’s Speech next month.

Despite stating that its review would deal only with scientific development since the 1967 Act, and not moral or religious, arguments, the committee was forced to take the unprecedented step of asking those submitting evidence to reveal any relevant affiliations or interests. It subsequently emerged that eight of the written submissions were linked to Christian anti-abortion groups, six of which were allied with the Christian Medical Fellowship.

Anti-abortionists had sought to claim that medical advances meant that some babies born before 24 weeks’ gestation could now survive. If life can be supported at this stage, they argue, it follows that terminations carried out at this time are immoral.

But less than 2 percent of the almost 18,000 terminations carried out in 2006 occurred after 20 weeks of gestation. And in most cases the delay was due to the mother being unaware of the pregnancy, late diagnosis of abnormality or difficulties in accessing the operation earlier. Doctors can refuse to support a termination, forcing women to seek out sympathetic practitioners or resort to private clinics.

Moreover, official statistics show that none of those born at 21 weeks survive to discharge from hospital. This rises to 1 percent at 22 weeks and 11 percent at 23 weeks, 67 percent of which are severely disabled.

The select committee produced a split report last week. The majority found that current scientific evidence did not support a reduction in the time limit and supported some relaxation in procedures, including removing the requirement for two doctors’ consent below 24 weeks.

Two Tory MPs published an alternative report, accusing the select committee of pro-choice bias—a claim repeated by religious groups, which have urged MPs to base their vote on the minority reports findings. The *Telegraph* reported that of 100 MPs it had surveyed, two-thirds are in favour of cutting the 24-week limit, indicating that it could presage “the first major change in the law for 17 years.”

The attack on abortion rights goes beyond the UK and the House Select Committee. It is integral to a generalised

offensive by the powers-that-be against democratic rights under conditions of growing economic and social inequality.

The Vatican is at the spearhead of this campaign, not least because it senses it is losing its power and authority in some of its former strongholds.

In April, the legislative assembly in Mexico City—capital of the second-largest predominantly Catholic country in the world—voted to legalise abortion. Terminations up to the 12th week of gestation will now be permitted in the city (previously this was only allowed in the case of rape, severe foetal defects or a grave threat to the mother's life). There are an estimated 200,000 illegal abortions in Mexico every year, with some 1,500 women dying as a consequence. Across Latin America, illegal abortions are a major cause of death among women.

Amidst threats of legal challenges, the Church hierarchy in Mexico threatened to excommunicate politicians who had supported the change. They were backed by Pope Benedict XVI, who during his visit to Brazil in May warned that the penalty for supporting abortion was excommunication.

The Vatican has subsequently attempted to extend its veto to Amnesty International. Also in April, the human rights organisation had agreed to work to "support the decriminalisation of abortion, to ensure that women have access to healthcare when complications arise from abortion and to defend women's access to abortion ... when their health or human rights are in danger."

Amnesty has said the policy was necessary under conditions in which rape is being used as an instrument of war, especially in Africa. Forcing women to proceed with the pregnancies that result only compounds the original crime, the organisation argued.

But the Vatican reacted furiously, urging Catholics to withdraw support from Amnesty. In England, the Bishop of East Anglia, the Right Reverend Michael Evans, publicly resigned from the group in protest, arguing, "There is no human right to access to abortion, and Amnesty should not involve itself even in such extreme cases."

In the current "debate" over abortion in the UK, the Roman Catholic cardinals in England, Wales and Scotland have been a little more circumspect in identifying their real objective. An open letter issued by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor and Cardinal Keith O'Brien urged Britons to "work and vote for achievable incremental improvement to what is an unjust law."

Earlier in the year, Cardinal O'Brien likened abortion figures in Scotland to "two Dunblane massacres every day." Speaking on Radio 4, however, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor acknowledged that the Church was "not able to abolish abortion from the statute book," adding that he believed the Vatican would accept the approach taken by the Catholic

Church in the UK for "a gradual change in the law."

The Cardinal of England and Wales did back Cardinal O'Brien's suggestion—made during one sermon in Edinburgh—that politicians who support abortion should be aware of the "barrier such co-operation creates to receiving Holy Communion." O'Brien would not be drawn as to whether this meant excommunication, saying only that it was for "God to judge them." Cardinal O'Connor said it was Church tradition that "anyone who freely and knowingly commits a serious wrong (that is, a mortal sin) should approach the Eucharist only after receiving faithfully the Sacrament of Penance."

O'Brien also called on the devolved Scottish parliament to refuse "to allow our health services to participate in the wanton killing of the innocent." Scotland's First Minister and Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond—who reportedly said he personally favours a reduction in the time limit from 24 to 20 weeks—has called for an independent commission to examine abortion laws.

Not to be outdone, the Church of England has leapt on board. Writing in the *Observer*, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, declaimed "the growing belief that abortion is essentially a matter of individual decision, and not the kind of major moral choice that should involve a sharing of perspective and judgment."

Thus far, the Brown government's position has been that there is currently no scientific basis to support further restrictions on abortion procedures. But its argument reflects the degree to which the terms of the "debate" on abortion are being shifted in a manner wholly detrimental to civil liberties.

Asked if the government was content with the existing position on abortion, Health Minister Dawn Primarolo said, "Yes. *At the moment*, that's what Parliament have decided and that's where we are" (emphasis added).

Such caveats are deeply disturbing for, just as with the anti-abortion groups, statistics and technical advances are being used to sideline and ultimately diminish the principle of a woman's right to choose.



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