

# Abortion Reform 1967

*Sir David Steel remembers the battles over one of the key pieces of social reform legislation of the 1960s.*

---

Before 1967 there had been six attempts to reform the abortion law in the House of Commons and two in the House of Lords. Since the Termination of Pregnancy Bill, which I sponsored, was enacted, there has been one amendment, which I supported.

Abortion and homosexuality were the subject of two great social reforms which had yet to be passed by the 1960s. Both had been piloted through the Lords and required champions in the Commons. My third place in the ballot for Private Members' Bills at the start of the long session of 1966 allowed me to sponsor one of them. I decided, after much thought and consultation, to take on abortion.

The 1965 Church of England report, *Abortion: an ethical discussion*, was a seminal publication and it remains a powerful and positive Christian force opposed to the absolutist position under the previous law. The report was a major influence, not only on the choice of issue to take on in 1966, but also on the direction the Bill would take through its legislative stages. The conclusions of the report stated that it was: 'the feeling that the interest of the mother is least well served by the existing law, and a humane anxiety for her, that lends most strength to the movement for reform of the law in this country today'. The report highlighted some of the anomalies which had surrounded abortion, mainly in the various religious denominations. For example, the report challenged head on the view of the Catholic Church that all abortion is murder, a view which was reiterated by the Catholic Bishops at the time of the passage of the Bill: 'All destruction of life in the womb is immoral'. The report argued that: 'there has developed a casuistry to match the new medical possibilities,' and illustrated the point by showing that even a Catholic gynaecologist would be permitted by his Church to terminate an anencephalic pregnancy (one in which the foetus has no brain); consequently, it could not be said that the defence of the inviolability of the foetus, even in Catholic tradition, was absolute.

The Bill was framed, with the assistance of my co-sponsors: neighbouring MP Alex Eadie (Lab) and Lord Lambton (Con), and with the support of the Abortion Law Reform Association. The British Medical Association (BMA) and the General Practitioners were also supportive, mainly owing to the numbers of women who went through the trauma of illegal back street abortion – estimated at between 40,000 and 200,000 a year before the Bill was passed. Indeed, the former Secretary General of the BMA, Dr John Marks,

said on his retirement: 'Looking back over these forty years it seems to me that the event which has had the most beneficial effect on the public health during that period was the passage of David Steel's Abortion Bill'.

The passage of the Bill itself was far from easy, with fierce and organised opposition from anti-abortionists inside and outside Parliament, but perhaps the greatest problem was parliamentary time. Because of the controversial nature of the Bill the passage was long and protracted. The Committee stage alone took twelve weeks, and the Report Stage was reached a year after the initial publication. Because of the filibustering of the opponents extra time was needed and the support of the Labour government of the time was vital.

Throughout this time there was a furious public debate with rallies, radio and television broadcasts, and my mail bag was huge. The Bill was also a focus for a new development in political practices. The organised campaigns by both sides were a marvel to behold; much of the lobbying practices today, I feel, are in the mould of those started in 1967.

The high levels of discussion and thoroughness of the arguments rehearsed then have not changed substantially today, and in the recent examples of pressure for reform in Northern Ireland and the Channel Isles the strongly anti-abortionist wing paraded many of the tactics they used thirty years ago.

With the support of the government for parliamentary time – a further two sittings for the Bill were allowed – it passed the third reading in the early morning of 14 July. The Bill finally received Royal Assent on 27 October 1967.

In my whole experience of debate on the subject I have always envied those who are able to adopt positions of moral certainty such as 'to kill life in the womb is always wrong' or 'it is a woman's right to choose.' My Bill was based on neither of these assumptions, but on the more difficult one of conflicts of rights. I sought to create a positive state of law where medical practitioners could lawfully balance the rights and conditions of the mother against the assumption of the right to develop the full life of the foetus. I do not believe, with all of the controversy surrounding the issue, that the underlining principle has altered or the merits for it diminished.

*Rt Hon Sir David Steel MP has been MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles (now Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) since 1965. He was Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88, and Joint Leader of the Social & Liberal Democrats, 1988.*