

The thirtieth anniversary of the 1967 abortion act

[Family](#), [Abortion](#)



The passage of this act was the biggest ever step forward for a woman's right to choose in this country. Millions of women died from back street abortions before this law, countless others suffered hideous medical complications, including sterility. However, even though women in Britain today will not die because they need an abortion, the situation is far from perfect. The 1967 Act does not give women the right to choose but leaves us dependent on the whims and prejudices of the medical profession. Two doctors must give their consent before a termination can take place.

When the Act was passed Britain became one of the most progressive countries in the world in terms of abortion legislation. Today twenty four other European countries have laws giving women control in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. While giving women full control of our fertility means fighting for these sort of laws without any time limits, the situation in these countries is a massive improvement on what we have here. The reality is that a high proportion of later abortions occur because of inadequate provision and bureaucratic delays in the early months.

A change in the law to bring us in line with other European countries would result in a significant reduction in late abortions. The law is not the only problem that women face. Provision across the country has always been uneven both because of the role that anti-abortion consultants have played in blocking women's access and the different priorities of Health Authorities. With deepening cuts and over stretched resources the situation is becoming worse - even in places that used to have decent facilities women are having to wait an unacceptably long time.

The Labour government has thrown two seemingly large sums of money at the Health Service but they will be nothing like enough to avert a deepening crisis including in abortion provision - often seen as a 'non-essential' service. The National Union of Students Women's campaign called a demonstration in London to mark the anniversary of the Act. Three hundred turned out on a bitterly cold winter's evening. Unfortunately the event was not wholeheartedly supported by the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) - if it had been it would have been significantly bigger.

NAC itself had prioritised two other events - an advert in The Guardian newspaper celebrating the anniversary and the publication with Marie Stopes International of a book of women's testimonies of their abortions. Both these projects are worthy in themselves but the failure to seriously mobilise for the demonstration was worrying. NAC has been successful time and again in defeating the anti-abortionists in their attempts to further restrict abortion rights because it has relied on the method of mass action. It would be a really defeat if it were to turn its back on this way of organising and rely on a lobbying approach.

Despite this weakness the call made by NAC in the advert, to commemorate the Act by fighting for it to be strengthened, is one that should be supported. The moves of John Walker MP to seek signatures not only for an Early Day motion celebrating the passage of the existing Act but for a separate one calling for women to decide in the first twelve weeks are to be welcomed. Of course it should be the case that these changes are brought forward not by

an individual member of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs but by the Labour government itself.

Blair shows no signs of doing this and neither do any of the new women Labour MPs elected in May. If the fight to improve the law is to be successful then women and their supporters will need to take to the streets in their thousands. Alongside this we need to demand that Labour ensures that every Health Authority is obliged to provide adequate facilities for women who need abortions. Recent opinion polls show that the majority of people support a woman's right to choose. We need to organise to ensure that that support is turned into active and effective campaigning.