





# Reducing the Need for Abortion

HONEST EFFORT OR IDEOLOGICAL DODGE?

By Jon O'Brien

**B**ETWEEN 1979 AND 1990, THE United Kingdom was subjected to a decade-long period of bad government. Under the rule of Margaret Thatcher, we saw individual rights undermined, unions crushed and the state become a law unto itself.

In 1997, Tony Blair rebranded the Labour Party into New Labour and promised the British people a better future. Labour was elected, in part, as a result of that promise. Many people, including and especially prochoice advocates, were more than optimistic and committed themselves to the New Labour project.

However, it quickly became clear that they had jumped the gun. When Prime Minister Blair first rose to power, he sought to change the manner in which politics was discussed. He formulated a Third Way initiative to herald a new dawn on many controversial issues, including abortion and reproductive rights. But Blair had no intention of doing anything concrete to promote abortion rights. Rather, his Third Way was doublespeak for not doing anything substantive. Basically the message was while abortion, contraception and women's rights are indeed important, there are many other problems to solve right now and we don't want to spend our political capital (which was enormous as he was elected with the Labour Party's largest-ever majority) on reproductive rights at this moment. But, if you are patient, we will get to it.

I, along with my prochoice colleagues who had bought into this Third Way, waited. And we waited and then waited some more. Godot never arrived. In the end, the Labour Party did absolutely nothing with its Third Way apart from suck the enthusiasm and idealism out of a gener-

ation of activists. Essentially, the Third Way meant "no way" when it came to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

While it is true that access to contraception and abortion services improved under Blair, this came from quietly introduced policy initiatives and increased funding—not changes in legislation that have been championed by ministers, argued for publicly and decided democratically. Avoiding conflict, controversy and bad headlines in the popular press were key government drivers. The law on abortion contains the same restrictions now, after more than a decade of New Labour, that it did under Thatcher.

The Third Way did, however, have a political purpose. It purported to seek common ground with those who may be political opponents or were not completely on board with the Blair agenda. This means, as it always does, finding the lowest common denominator so that as many people as possible can find something they can agree on. It is the antithesis of sticking to one's principles. It is about following rather than leading. It is about appearing to be all things to all people. It is, in the end, about taking the path of least resistance and ruling by focus group and opinion polling, rather than ideology, vision and conviction. The consequences of New Labour's attempt to avoid controversy and tread a Third Way path of consensus came in 2008, when Evan Harris, a Liberal Democrat member of parliament who has championed a number of progressive causes, gathered together the votes to liberalize the abortion law by extending it to Northern Ireland and removing the requirement that two doctors approve an abortion. He was rebuffed by a Labour leadership that decided it did not want to be identified with such legislation. The

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leadership decided that rather than promoting a progressive cause with which many senior members of the Government identified, they would listen to the tiny minority in Britain who opposed the move, handing a victory to their political and ideological opponents.

As it stands at the moment, it appears likely that the Labour Party will be voted out of power next year, or sooner, with no positive legacy on reproductive rights to its name. Any practical gains achieved by the improved funding streams can be just as easily reversed—especially during a recession—because the party left its ideology at the door when it came to power. Now it has none. Ideology matters. Ideology is what drove great political leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Sometimes ideological campaigns can lead to finding common ground with opponents when they are won over by political arguments. But more often, when the aim at the outset is to find common ground for its own sake, we discover that common ground is not common at all, but rather a rejection of all ideals.

Like other leaders around the world who have sought to move on from the culture wars around abortion and contraception, President Barack Obama has sought a third way: preventing unintended pregnancies and reducing the need for abortion.

Prochoice organizations such as Catholics for Choice have been working to change the rhetoric on abortion for many years. Reducing the need for abortion is a noble goal, and Catholics for Choice supports the president's intent. However, we don't support it because we believe that support for abortion is waning (it isn't) or because we don't believe that women have the moral agency to decide for themselves whether to continue a pregnancy (they do). We support reducing the need for abortion because it increases the choices women have. And while noting our support, let's not pretend that there is anything new or innovative about these proposals.

It's clear to all that contraception should be affordable and available. Absti-

nence-only education has prevailed over comprehensive sexuality education far too often. The availability of child care is sporadic, at best, and the health-care system is abysmal. Obviously, the failures in these systems place huge burdens on women who wish to continue a pregnancy. However, we promote those issues in their own right, not just as a necessary tool to reduce the need for abortion. Health care and child care should be available to all because providing them is the right thing to do and offers a benefit to all of society regardless of their impact on abortion.

Therefore, we and others saw early on that in order to complement our support for reproductive rights, we needed to also actively campaign for improved child care and health care. Other organizations are already on board with this agenda. Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice America articulated very early on that providing people with the means to prevent unintended pregnancies was very important.

CFC's Prevention *Not* Prohibition campaign identifies a number of areas where policy makers can help reduce the need for abortion. These include ensuring the availability and promoting the use of safe, reliable and affordable contraception; promoting responsible sexuality education that provides accurate facts; guaranteeing that parents have access to high quality and affordable child care; and securing health care for all, whether individuals are employed or not.

AND SO, THE QUESTION BECOMES: How is the Obama administration going to reduce the need for abortion?

There are many people who seem to be completely on board with the discussions about reducing the need for abortion. However, if you dig a little, they really want to reduce the *number* of abortions. Ideologically, organizations like Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Sojourners would like to eliminate abortion completely. Even though they often pay lip service to the right language around reducing the need for

abortion, given the opportunity these groups would overturn *Roe v. Wade* and outlaw abortion.

Indeed, some of these groups—such as Sojourners—support contraception and sexuality education. This is helpful. On the other hand, Catholics in Alliance is completely silent on contraception. Concerned Women for America is very vocally against tried and tested prevention methods. Simply put, reducing the need for abortion means different things to different people.

For some, reducing the need means wiping out a woman's right to choose. There are those who believe that reducing the need for abortion will eliminate the necessity for safe and legal access to abortion in the US. These groups are conservative in the extreme and need to be branded as such at every opportunity. As you see in the pages of this issue of *Conscience*, women will always need access to abortion—and some of them will come in later stages of pregnancy. We need to protect the rights of those women.

Almost unbelievably, a key area of contention is sexuality education. At present, it appears that the only way we can sell sexuality education is by problematizing the behavior of young people, as if young people are different today than they were during the 1950s, '60s or '70s. Rather than discussing the positive reasons to support sexuality education so that young people can lead healthy sexual lives, current programs emphasize the negative, obsessing over the dangers of teen sexuality and pregnancy.

Many also focus on the role of parents. In doing so, they ignore the fact that some parents may not want to talk to their children about sex, nor are they always the best people to do so. In fact, many will tell their children not to have sex, which may be about as useful as the abstinence-until-marriage programs. We believe in comprehensive sexuality education. Abstinence can be part of such a program, but only a part. Research shows that it does little to promote a healthy sexuality and less to protect young people. These programs must be defunded.

HOWEVER THIS BRINGS US TO ANOTHER difficult issue. We need to be careful what we ask for and what we promise in return. What happens if we fund a host of prevention programs and the need for abortion does not go down? Indeed, how can we evaluate these programs? For example, many promoted the easy availability of emergency contraception as being a good way to reduce the need for abortion. However, while initial studies suggest that it has improved contraceptive choice, it has had little if any impact on the abortion rate. Therefore we must be careful not to suggest that promoting and providing contraception and sexuality education are quick fixes and be prepared for results that may not meet expectations. However, we should continue to support them because it is the right thing to do.

meetings with the administration, we have heard nothing that leads us to expect that this will change any time soon.

As we continue to work with the new administration, we must ask ourselves if the call by the Obama administration to reduce the need for abortion aligns with what Catholics for Choice and other prochoice organizations understand by reducing the need for abortion. Or is this a Third-Way-style conversation to allow policymakers to avoid talking about abortion? It would be very convenient for prochoice policymakers to make all the right noises about reducing the need for abortion when what they really want is to co-opt support from marginal and not-so-marginal organizations with very conservative political outlooks. Political and ideological dodge ball at its best.

dable as some like to make out, but that does not mean it could not become so in the future.

Rhetoric and words matter. Actions matter even more. We must invest in sexual and reproductive health services to secure these rights for the future. Preventative measures such as contraception and comprehensive sexuality education cannot be seen as a means to end the culture wars. However, because it is the right thing to do, and because these services are important for women and families, investing in them means much more than talking the talk. They must be incorporated publicly and thoughtfully into well-funded programs with the vocal and unwavering support of the administration.

Sex and sexuality are inherent in the human condition. Sexuality is driven by

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We recognize that, for many, abortion in the later stages of pregnancy can be a difficult issue. But those who highlight such abortions with the aim of banning them do a serious disservice to the women who have come to an often-wrenching decision to terminate at that late stage. The reasons women seek out abortion are complex. And, as President Obama has said, Congress and the president are not in the best position to decide for those women whether they can access an abortion. Therefore, while the president has said that his prochoice stance is unwavering, it is troubling that the current administration has not spoken out on second-trimester abortions or on federal funding for abortion.

For a president and Congress who supposedly champion anti-poverty measures, Medicaid funding for abortion and contraception remains slim. Reproductive justice groups who work with economically marginalized people understand the need for these services. However, in our

However, the problem with this dodge is, of course, that while it continues, people are suffering. Women, men and families need access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health services in order to lead healthy lives and participate in society. And when issues regarding accessibility to these services arise, it is not enough for the president or Congress to be silent or to talk and do nothing.

This silence (or avoidance), as we have seen from the example of the UK, can have a devastating impact. Not only does silence demonize abortion and the women who seek one, it also leaves room for a future administration to curtail or abolish a women's right to choose. If, after President Obama's one or two terms, conservatives take back power, a history of inaction or silence on abortion leaves room for conservatives to prosecute abortion to whatever extent they desire. The Republican Party's history on limiting access to abortion may not be as formi-

many complex factors—self-esteem, desire, passion, decisions around whether to use contraception, peer pressure, base human urges...the list goes on. This complexity calls for complex solutions including full support for preventative measures along with more accessible abortion services—including federal funds for those who need them.

Sadly, many have decided that it is easier to talk about the abortion debate, rather than about abortion itself. In his speech at Notre Dame, President Obama did just that. He was preaching to a Democratic choir. Chief chorister and *Washington Post* columnist EJ Dionne is only too delighted to pursue that line and denounce the extremes in the abortion debate rather than promoting a positive agenda that helps women and their families.

Sound legislation which addresses many of the complexities in the debate already exists. Representatives Tim Ryan (D-OH), Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), Louise Slaughter



(D-NY) and Diana DeGette (D-CO) have been backing such measures for a long time. Therefore the policies that the administration and Congress pursue should draw from the wisdom that already exists.

We know that there are many different views on abortion. The bottom line for us is that one cannot impose one's own values on somebody else when it comes to the abortion decision. Back in 1973, when the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade*, it concluded that it did not know when personhood began, but "the State does have an important and legitimate interest in preserving and protecting the health of the pregnant woman." If and when the courts review this decision, we are confident that despite decades of medical research and a far greater understanding of the development of human life in the womb, the basic facts are unchanged and the state's interest remains fixed on the health and rights of the pregnant woman.

Reducing the need for abortion is not and should never be presented as code for eliminating abortion. The evidence, as laid out in these pages, is clear: access to safe and legal abortion will always be necessary, no matter what preventative measures are available. Contraception fails, people get carried away, fetal anomalies occur, women's circumstances change. Each case is different and nobody can decide what is the right decision—except the woman herself. Those who talk about reducing the need when they really mean to prohibit abortion are merely repackaging the same old antiabortion message. At every opportunity, their duplicity must be exposed.

Speaking at Notre Dame, President Obama said:

I do not suggest that the debate surrounding abortion can or should go away. No matter how much we may want to fudge it—indeed, while we know that the views of most Americans on the subject are complex and even contradictory—the fact is that at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable. Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion

and conviction. But surely we can do so without reducing those with differing views to caricature.

In three ways, this passage strikes the right balance between truth telling and appealing to people's desire to end the culture wars by finding some common ground.

Firstly, it's inconceivable that there will be an end to polarization on certain aspects of the abortion debate. We do not and will not agree on, for example, whether the fertilized egg has equivalent moral status to a born person, for example, or whether the provision of abortion is a social good. Personally, I think it is socially advantageous that people can enjoy sex knowing that contraception is available and generally reliable and that abortion exists as a fallback. Others contend that this view distorts human sexuality and that the sex act should be unencumbered and open to reproduction. There is little hope of consensus here because our views are based on very different world views that extend well beyond abortion.

Secondly, as President Obama noted, it is important that we do not ignore these differences. It's good for society to be engaged in philosophical debates at the highest level about the meaning of life and the kind of society we want to live in. Sadly, this seldom occurs because both sides tend to pursue political point-scoring that involves caricature and denigration rather than respectful dialogue that acknowledges the principles involved.

Finally, it is only when we recognize where the antagonisms lie—what are the real deal-breaker issues—that we can start to consider where consensus might be achieved.

IT'S THIS THIRD POINT THAT MAKES ME think CFC'S Prevention *Not* Prohibition approach has real value. When a policymaker has to consider policies that will prevent abortion, or reduce the need for it, they are required to think about what practical steps they can take to do it. It puts people on the spot, they have to consider where they are going to draw the line,

where they can and can't compromise. For some, it forces them to contemplate which of contraception or comprehensive sexuality education they consider to be a lesser evil that they can live with. For others, the issues are different, but no less important.

We can all agree that it would be better if abortions were unnecessary—because I have been told and I believe that no woman *wants* to have one. Of course, adoption services can and should be improved because there are women with unwanted pregnancies for whom abortion is unacceptable, and there are people who would welcome the chance to care for children but for whatever reason cannot have them. Naturally, if there is to be genuine reproductive choice, we need to provide better child care so that women and men can combine family life with work and a life outside the home. Comprehensive and affordable health care should be a basic building brick of all societies. All these things are a given.

In an ideal society, when all these things are available and funded, where should we stand on abortion? There are those of us who believe that it will continue to remain a social need in any society that does not think that procreation should be an inevitable consequence of sexual activity. And that includes later abortions, because women will continue to need them. These are areas where we might not find consensus—but we must not avoid making decisions, nor must we avoid talking about them.

We are ready and willing to support any and all legislation from the Obama administration and Congress which champions reducing the need for abortion in order to give women more choices. Policy proposals must ensure that the choices offered to women are real choices, and cover accessibility and funding at the outset. Should these goals slip off the agenda, we will be here to remind policymakers of their duties and their promises. The bottom line will not change. We will support all thoughtful and effective preventative measures, but we will also work tirelessly to increase and ease access to abortion services wherever and whenever women need them. ■