

# A woman's right to choose

In a new series delving into TG's archives, National Chair **Penny Ryan** looks back at the part TG played in securing abortion rights

A query from a member as to whether her mother had taken part in the TG abortion debate at the 1965 AGM sent me scurrying through our archives.

## THE 1965 DEBATE AND MOTION

I started by finding the minutes of that AGM, held on 20 and 21 May, which were published in *The Townswoman* magazine the following September. These minutes were limited, as good minutes can be, but set out the full wording of the final motion after it had incorporated two amendments during the debate.

*That the NUTG in Council Assembled urges HM Government to introduce legislation to legalise abortion, when personally desired by the woman concerned, and when advised by a medical panel and performed by a suitably qualified member of the medical profession in the following circumstances:*

1. Where it is necessary to preserve her physical or mental health.
2. Where there is serious risk of a defective child being born.
3. Where the pregnancy results from a sexual offence (such as rape or incest).

The motion, which was carried overwhelmingly, was proposed by Ashford (E) Guild, and the two amendments by North West Kent Federation and Felixstowe (A) Guild. The motion and amendments were opposed by individual members.

I was delighted to discover that we still had the original file for this debate,



A section of the vast assembly of delegates and observers gathered in the Royal Albert Hall for the 1965 N.C.M.

proposed motion and asked for a vote (two-thirds majority required) as to whether it should be included in the Agenda. *Carried*

The Chairman stated that the Urgency Motion would be debated the following day. Mrs. M. E. Rice, Chairman of the Public Questions Sub-Committee, would conduct the discussion of motions until the time of voting when she (Mrs. Wykes) would take over.

Mrs. Rice gave a brief explanation of the "right of reply".

### (I) LEGAL ABORTION IN CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES

The motion as printed on the Agenda was Proposed by Mrs. S. Roberts (Ashford Evening T.G.). Seconded by Mrs. Brunt (South Middlesex Federation). FOR the motion: Mrs. F. Edwards (Melrose (E) T.G.); Mrs. M. Oughton (Weylyn Garden City Digswell (E) T.G.); Mrs. Maclellan (Norwich Thorpe Hamlet T.G.). AGAINST the motion: Mrs. A. K. Fairhurst (Bramhall Village (A) T.G.); Miss E. Rhodes (Birmingham Bourneville (A) T.G.).

The first amendment as printed on the Agenda was Proposed by Mrs. L. Holman (North-West Kent Federation).

Seconded by Mrs. Spracklin (North Surrey Nonsuch Federation). There being no speakers on the amendment the Proposer exercised her right of reply.

The amendment was *Carried overwhelmingly*. The second amendment as printed on the Agenda was Proposed by Mrs. D. Carrell (Felixstowe (A) T.G.).

Seconded by Mrs. M. Hurry (Suffolk & Essex Border Federation). FOR the amendment: Mrs. A. Dixon (Croydon Upper Norwood Evening T.G.); Mrs. E. A. Elstob (Southend-on-Sea Southchurch Afternoon T.G.); Miss L. Hockley (Swanage T.G.).

AGAINST the amendment: Mrs. Boxall (Glasgow Simshell

T.G.); Mrs. D. J. Yeo (Batheaston T.G.).

The amendment was *Carried*.

The Chairman then read the substantive motion as follows: **That the N.U.T.G. in Council assembled urges H.M. Government to introduce legislation to legalise abortion, when personally desired by the woman concerned, and when advised by a medical panel and performed by a suitably qualified member of the medical profession in the following circumstances:**

1. Where it is necessary to preserve her physical or mental health.
2. Where there is a serious risk of a defective child being born.
3. Where the pregnancy results from a sexual offence (such as rape or incest).

The motion was *Carried overwhelmingly*.

### CONSTITUTIONAL MOTION NO. 1.

**That the Objects of the N.U.T.G. be re-worded as follows:** "To serve as a common meeting ground for women irrespective of race, creed and party; to enable them through study and the pursuit of educational, cultural and social activities to fulfil their responsibilities as citizens."

In putting the motion to the meeting the Chairman drew attention to Standing Order 6, stating that for such motions a two-thirds majority is required. On being put to the vote the motion was *Carried with a large majority*.

### 9. Reports from N.U. Social Studies and Art & Crafts Advisers

The Social Studies Report was presented by Mrs. M. Gray. Before calling on the Art & Craft's Adviser the Chairman reminded members that at last year's meeting they said "Good-bye" to Miss Hilary Newton. Since then Mrs. I. Bowie had joined the N.U. staff, and had been first introduced to the movement at the National Art & Crafts Conference in November 1964. Mrs. Bowie then presented the Report.

which included a transcript of the speeches. The speakers were well prepared. They noted that there was a body of case law which accepted abortion on health grounds, to save lives, in cases of certain infections during pregnancy and in cases of rape and incest. It was estimated that at the time of the debate, 1,500 abortions a year were being carried out on the National Health Service, at least 10 times as many were carried out privately and 100 times as many in backstreets. Statistics quoted showed that 72% of the population were in favour of reform, as were a similar percentage of medical staff.

There were two main grounds for opposition: that doctors should not be forced to go against their consciences; and that automatic abortions for those under the age of 16 may give rise to promiscuity.

## WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Immediately after the AGM, letters were sent to *The Times*, the Home Office, College of GPs, British Medical Association, individual MPs who had shown support for abortion, and many other organisations.

There is an extensive file of newspaper clippings showing that the abortion issue was not going away. Lord Silkin introduced successive bills in the Lords and several Private Members' Bills were introduced over the next year. On 15 June 1966 David Steel MP, with the encouragement of

the Government, introduced his bill, which, after many ups and downs, received Royal Assent at the end of October 1967.

The act remains in place with minor modifications. The inclusion of sexual offences as grounds was not considered necessary, but TG stipulations that the abortions be carried out by a medical practitioner and in a licensed place are included. There are also provisions for medical staff to opt out of performing abortions except where carried out *in extremis*.

Abortion, outside the listed exemptions, remains illegal under acts of 1861 and 1929, with the possibility of a life sentence for the mother and anyone helping her. In the climate of the US Supreme Court overturning the constitutional right of a woman to abortion, this has raised many concerns.

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## ABORTION NOW

Following our visit to the archives we wanted to let you know of some recent developments.

During the Covid pandemic provisions were introduced to enable medical abortions to continue. These abortions involve taking two pills. Originally, the first of these had to be taken under the direction of a medical practitioner on licensed premises to comply with the 1967 act, but emergency regulations provided that after an electronic consultation with a medical practitioner, the pregnant woman could be sent the pills to take at home. After much debate, the law has now been changed to embed what have become known as telemedical abortions in the 1967 act.

Women continue to be prosecuted for abortions that fall outside the provisions of the Abortion Act and over the past 10 years a number of women have been subject to police investigation for what turn out to be natural miscarriages or still births. One woman who had investigated abortions in early pregnancy had a still birth after 28 weeks. Medical staff flagged this as a possible illegal abortion and the woman was arrested in hospital as she recovered from the necessary procedures and then



taken to a police station where she spent 24 hours in police cells.

In July, charities, doctors and lawyers signed a joint letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions seeking an end to the prosecution of women for having illegal abortions. Among other things, they pointed out that one in three pregnancies will end in miscarriage and that the probability of this happening after beginning to consider a termination – as in the case above – remains the same.

In August 2022 the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive

Healthcare issued a joint statement of concern that vulnerable women may be deterred from seeking appropriate healthcare. It called on the UK Government to decriminalise abortions across the UK. This included the dropping of all pending cases immediately. At the same time, they applauded the fact that telemedical abortion had reduced the number of surgical interventions. They restated their belief that abortion services should remain tightly controlled so that there would be no return to the backstreet industry.

The minutes of the 1965 AGM published in *The Townswoman* magazine