

## Single-Issue Social Movements after Success:

The case of the Abortion Law Reform Association after the 1967 Abortion Act.

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## Table of contents

List of abbreviations	3.
Abstract	4.
Introduction	5-9.
Chapter 1: ALRA and the 1967 Abortion Act	10-17.
Chapter 2: ALRA and the ‘environment’ after the Abortion Act.	18-24.
Chapter 3: ALRA and the Abortion Social Movement Industry.	25-30.
Conclusion	31-33.
Bibliography	33-35.
Attachments	37-38.

## List of abbreviations

ALRA: Abortion Law Reform Association

AGM: Annual General Meeting

AR: Abortion Rights

BMA: British Medical Association

COORD: the Co-ordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act

EC: Executive Committee

EMC: Executive Committee Meeting

LARC: Labour Abortion Rights Campaign.

SMO: Social Movement Organisation

SMI: Social Movement Industry

SPUC: Society of the Protection of Unborn Children

TUC: Trades Union Congress

TRC: Tories for Choice

WRTC: a Women's Right To Choose campaign

## Abstract

In 1967 the United Kingdom's House of Commons passed a law on abortion, known as the Abortion Act. This law made abortion legal up to 28 weeks when two medical professionals acting in good faith decided that the pregnancy was either a risk to the (mental)health of the mother, foetus or the existing children of the family. A major win for the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA), who had been lobbying for reform since its emergence in 1936. However, ALRA did not stop its activities after this success.

This thesis attempts to explain why it is that ALRA wanted and could continue its efforts after a success. In order to do so, this thesis uses W. Gamson's definition of social movement success and whether the 1967 Abortion Act can be considered as a success for ALRA. Additionally, this thesis builds on S. Staggenborg's theory on how changes in 'environment' influence Social Movement Organisations (SMO) continuance and how the role of SMOs in the Social Movement Industry (SMI) determined the viability of the SMO.

In order to test ALRA's case to these categories this thesis used the extensive ALRA archives held by the Wellcome Collection in London. Using, for example, minutes of meetings, internal correspondence, newsletters and publications. This thesis tried to analyse ALRA's actions along these categories to answer the question of what happens to single-issue SMOs after a success.

## Introduction

There are a multitude of women's movements all around the world with more or less the same objective: the betterment of women's rights. Whether this is in the workplace or the ownership over one's own body. An example of the latter is the subject of abortion. There is hardly a more contested debate than the abortion issue. To this day, abortion is the cause of political conflict. This August, New Zealand's justice minister, Andrew Little, introduced a bill aimed at legalising abortion in the country.<sup>1</sup> Even as recent as, the 21 of October a major development in the abortion debate took place as it became decriminalised in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> There are also, however, countries today that are aiming to restrict abortion laws. Proof enough that understanding the abortion debate and its history is very relevant in today's political climate.

Abortion is irrevocably tied to the women's rights movement, not only because abortion takes place in a women's body, but also because the question of who controls female fertility is a political one as it involves fundamental choices regarding the position and role of women in society.<sup>3</sup> Denying women the choice over their own fertility is seen as an attempt to exercise control over women's sexuality and to enforce certain roles and lifestyle choices and thus access to safe, legal abortion on demand was seen as a prerequisite for the full and equal participation of women in society and an essential part of any feminist political agenda.<sup>4</sup> However the question of abortion is also inescapably tied to the medical sphere while factually being a legislative issue. This makes abortion reform an interesting, multi-faceted issue.

One country that is known for having been a pioneer in progressive legislation on abortion is the United Kingdom, or more specifically mainland Britain. In the United Kingdom abortion became officially illegal by the Offences Against the Person Act in 1861. This law states that it is unlawful to

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Guy and Mitchell McCluskey, CNN, 'New Zealand introduces bill to legalize abortion', August 5, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/05/health/new-zealand-abortion-bill-scli-intl/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Page, 'Northern Ireland abortion and same-sex marriage laws change', BBC News, 22 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-50128860>.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Sheldon, "The Abortion Act 1967: a Critical Perspective." *Abortion Law and Politics Today* (London 1998), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon, "The Abortion Act 1967: a Critical Perspective.", 43.

administer oneself with drugs or use any instruments to procure an abortion or to supply it.<sup>5</sup> This was then slightly amended by the Infant Life Preservation Act in 1929, where it was stated that, if for the sole purpose of preserving the life of the mother an abortion, carried out in good faith, was not illegal.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1967, following many unsuccessful attempts that these laws were changed again. In 1967 the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill, later renamed the Abortion Bill was introduced to Parliament by the liberal member David Steel as a Private Member's Bill.<sup>7</sup> Despite adversity the Abortion Bill became the Abortion Act as it received royal assent on October 1967 coming into force six months after.<sup>8</sup> While David Steel made his career through it, the lobbying force behind this bill were the members of the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA). They had been campaigning for abortion reform since the creation of their association in 1936. Set up by a small group of women including Dora Russell and Frida Laski<sup>9</sup> the ALRA questioned the commitment by the left to women's issues 'They believed that sexual reforms could not be divorced from political and social change, and if such reforms were overlooked, it was women who suffered.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that during its founding period there were many areas in which women's rights were lacking, the founders of ALRA decided to focus on the single issue of abortion reform, making ALRA a single-issue organisation. As there is no clear academic definition of a single-issue organisation it is important to define one for use in this thesis. A single-issue organisation, quite straightforwardly, focuses on one specific issue and usually has one clear objective, in the case of ALRA abortion reform. Single-issue organisations are thus different from multi- or long-term-issue organisations that focus on more general issues and often have multiple objectives, such as a women's movement. While multi-issue organisations can have suborganisations for specific single-issues, after achieving their objective they will usually be abolished and its members will then focus on other

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<sup>5</sup> *The Offences against the Person Act 1861 (section 58-59)*, UK National Archives,

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/crossheading/attempts-to-procure-abortion>.

<sup>6</sup> Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929, UK National Archives, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/19-20/34/section/1>.

<sup>7</sup> David Torrance, . *David Steel: Rising Hope to Elder Statesman* (London 2012),

<sup>8</sup> Diane Munday, Colin Francome, and Wendy Savage. "Twenty one years of legal abortion." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 298.6682 (1989), 1231.

<sup>9</sup> Munday, "Twenty one years of legal abortion.", 1231.

<sup>10</sup> Brookes, Barbara. *Abortion in England 1900-1967* (London 2012), 80.

issues and objectives related to the cause of the organisation. However, what happens to a single-issue organisation when their objective is achieved? Logically, one might assume it will simply dissolve having 'fixed' the issue. However, this is not always the case. ALRA, for example, had a seemingly huge success with the Abortion Act of 1967, yet ALRA did not dissolve. Hence the main question of this thesis will be:

What happens to a single-issue social movement organisation after success? Focussing on the abortion reform movement, this study will use the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) after the Abortion Act in 1967 as a case study.

In order to answer this question, it is important to establish what a success is for a single-issue social movement organisation is and whether ALRA was in fact successful by the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967. William A. Gamson gives a definition of what success for a social movement entails. He writes that in order for a movement to be successful they need to be accepted as a valid spokesman for its desired constituency by their antagonist and have gained the advantages, for example the passage of legislation, it set out to.<sup>11</sup> It is easier to determine success for a single-issue movement as it only requires a single act for their protagonist to perform or change. The achievement of both these goals is not as straightforward as it seems and thus, while one can think of a movement to be successful it might not be entirely so. Therefore, in order to answer the main question of this thesis it needs to be established to what extent ALRA was successful. Accordingly, the first chapter of this thesis will answer the question how ALRA came in to being, what its aims were and how they were accomplished through the 1967 Abortion Act.

In addition to the question of success, our main question can only be answered by using the methodology proposed in Suzanne Staggenborg's paper 'Organizational and Environmental Influences on the Development of the Pro-Choice Movement', where she analyses social movement organisations (SMOs) and their role in social movements as a whole. She examines the factors which enable a social movement to maintain itself through the participation of its SMOs, using the American pro-choice

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Gamson, "Defining Movement 'Success.'" *The social movements reader: cases and concepts* (2003), 350.

movement as an example. Staggenborg's model builds on the already existing 'resource mobilization' theories by Gamson, 1975, McCarthy and Zald, 1977 and Tilly 1984, where SMOs are recognized as a primary actors in social movements instead of ideology. In this recognition theorists, such as McCarthy and Zald, have examined how social movements are influenced by the number and type of SMO's that make up these movements conceptualised as the 'Social Movement Industry'.<sup>12</sup>

Staggenborg's theory is particularly useful to answer the main question of this thesis, as she shift the focus on social movement maintenance instead of emergence. Additionally, Staggenborg use of the American abortion debate as her case study, makes her theory very applicable as this thesis focuses on the same debate, albeit in the United Kingdom, which has yet been done.

Staggenborg distinguishes three types of process that directly influence the participation of SMOs:

Firstly: 'the external social and political "environment" of the movement, which consists of the government, other movements and countermovements, established organizations, the mass media, and other actors relevant to the movement.'<sup>13</sup> Changes in the environment, be it in support or adversely, directly impact the rise and decline and outcome of movements. Staggenborg concludes, however, that this relationship is not as black and white as favourable environment leads to the formation and continuation of SMOs and unfavourable environment leads to decline of SMOs. Along these lines, it is important to look at the changes in environment after the Abortion Act in 1967 to explain ALRA's developments in this same period.

The second category put forward by Staggenborg, is the so-called Social Movement Industry (SMI) which includes 'all of the movement organizations with the same general goal(s)'.<sup>14</sup> The position of a SMO within its industry, and its willingness to adapt throughout environmental changes, determines the viability of said SMO. Tying in with this, is Staggenborg's third category: 'the movement organization with its particular internal organizational characteristics'.<sup>15</sup> Resources both tangible, like memberships and money, and intangible, like the dedication of said members, influence

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<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Staggenborg, "Organizational and environmental influences on the development of the pro-choice movement." *Social Forces* 68.1 (1989), 205.

<sup>13</sup> Staggenborg, "Organizational and environmental influences", 206

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 206.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 206.



the participation of SMOs. Additionally, the internal structure and level of bureaucratisation, and again, the ability to adapt these to the environment, also play a vital role in degree of participation of a SMO. Accordingly, when trying to explain ALRA's developments, it is important to look at how ALRA fit in its industry and what internal structural changes they implemented after the Abortion Act in order to continue as an SMO.

All three of these categories determine whether an organisation can keep participating within its allotted social movement. Consequently, the second and third chapter of this thesis will answer the following questions: to what extent did the environment around the abortion reform movement in the UK change after 1967 and what consequences did this have for ALRA? and lastly: What was ALRA's role in the Abortion SMI and how can this be explained by ALRA's internal structure?

In order to answer these questions the ALRA archive at the Wellcome Collection Library were used. This archive collection consist of 190 boxes of various sizes and is divided into the following sections: A. Records of the ALRA, 1930-1970, B. further papers of the ALRA and its officers, 1934-1980, C. Papers of the Committee on the Working of the Abortion Act (The Lane Committee), 1971-1974, D. Reprints, articles, lectures, etc. 1935-1979, E. Press cuttings, 1930-1979, F. Reports of the Brook Advisory Centres, 1965-1981, G. Madeleine Simms' papers 1950s-1980s and H. Supplementary papers of the ALRA 1961-1981. The collection is not fully accessible as certain restrictions apply concerning sensitive personal information. The documents used in this thesis are mainly Annual Reports, Minutes of Annual General Meetings or Executive Committee Meetings, pamphlets and ALRA's newsletters.. For five days these documents were examined to determine ALRA's attitude towards its environment and the Abortion SMI and how ALRA reacted to changes to these. The nature of documents studied gave an insight in both ALRA's internal views and struggles as well as what sentiments ALRA wanted to propagate to its members and the public in general. These questions will thus be answered using the Abortion debate as an environment and the pro-abortion SMI, conforming to Staggenborg's theory. Focussing on ALRA's role in these and how this influenced ALRA's continuance after the 1967 Abortion Act.

## ALRA and the 1967 Abortion Act

This chapter will try to establish whether or not the Abortion Act from 1967 can be considered a 'success', per Gamson's definition, for ALRA. Accordingly, this chapter will discuss how the Abortion Act came in to being and ALRA's role in this. In order to do this there must be a clear understanding of the history of abortion legislation in the UK, and the attitude towards abortion in general before and during the active campaign for abortion reform in the 1960's.

Before the Offences Against the Person Act in 1861, there was no explicit law in the UK concerning abortion. However, in 1803 Lord Ellenborough introduced the 'wounding and Maiming Bill' which concerned "the malicious using of means to procure the Miscarriage of Women".<sup>16</sup> It followed ecclesiastical tradition, where there was a differentiation between abortion before and after the 'ensoulment' or 'quickening' and thus also in the punishment of the offence. The first warranted a mere transportation or pillory sentence while the latter was considered a capital offence<sup>17</sup>. In 1833 the distinction of before or after the quickening was dropped and abortion ceased to be a capital offence.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, in 1861 the Offences Against the Person Act was passed, which made procuring an abortion an offence under any circumstance.<sup>19</sup> Notably, it was the first time that the woman herself was equally liable for prosecution.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the punishment, a life sentence, was disproportionately high when compared to other severe crimes such as rape, which punishment was 7 years imprisonment.<sup>21</sup>

The next piece of legislation concerning abortion was the 1929 Infant Life (Preservation) Act, which allowed abortion if the mother's life was at risk, provided that it was carried out in "good faith".<sup>22</sup> Through the new Act it was now up to the prosecution to prove an abortion was *not* carried

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967* (London 2012), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics: The Abortion Law Reform Association, 1930s to 1960s." *NGOs in Contemporary Britain* (London 2009), 80.

<sup>20</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> <sup>22</sup> Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929, UK National Archives, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/19-20/34/section/1>

out in good faith.<sup>23</sup> However, enforcing any of these acts was quite difficult as it was essentially a crime without a victim, because the women involved wanted the abortion and prosecution usually only took place if the woman died.<sup>24</sup> With the frequency of the practice and the popular sympathy it received, juries were reluctant to convict.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, all these legislative Acts did not stop women from procuring abortions.

In the early twentieth century, abortion and contraception were grouped together as means of birth control.<sup>26</sup> With *coitus interruptus* as main type of contraceptive, unwanted pregnancies were not uncommon and the use of abortifacients, a plethora of remedies to include an abortion, was commonplace. Most women were not aware of the illegality of their actions as companies capitalised on the demand of these drugs and framed it as simply 'restoring regularity' in the period cycle.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1930s this distinction became clearer and so became its limitations and in 1933, a leading authority noted, that fatalities from criminal abortion 'are increasing to such an extent that they may quite decidedly affect the maternal mortality rate in the near future'.<sup>28</sup>

To procure an abortion, women generally had two options. Firstly, a medical practitioner, usually male, would for quite the sum, be willing to perform the procedure. On the other hand, there were the amateur operators, with little to no medical experience, that varied from back alley abortionists to sympathetic women and friends. The cost of such an abortion would usually be cheaper than the fee a 'professional' would ask. It is also important to note that it was much more difficult press charges against a medical practitioner than the amateur abortionist, as their expertise was often used in their defence and their actions often romanticised in the public eye as they were seen as 'rescuing' women.<sup>29</sup> Criminal statistics also suggest that it was the lay women abortionists, often demonised as 'predatory harpies' that were the majority of those arrested and prosecuted for illegal abortions.<sup>30</sup> This

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<sup>23</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 3-5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Gleeson, "Persuading parliament: Abortion law reform in the UK." *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 22(2), (2007), 27.

<sup>30</sup> Gleeson, "Persuading parliament: Abortion law reform in the UK.", 27.

coincides with the fact that there was a difference in judgement of the legitimacy of abortion as a solution to an unwanted pregnancy according to the circumstance of conception and status and age of the mother.<sup>31</sup> Whether or not one could procure an abortion, in what conditions this abortion took place and the risk of being prosecuted for it, all depended on whether you had money. Abortion during that period is thus often described as a class issue. ‘One law for the rich, another for the poor’<sup>32</sup> was aptly the way the issue was described in abortion literature.

It was under these circumstances that the Abortion Law Reform Association was formed. In 1936, a group of motivated women, including Alice Jenkins and other like-minded women, such as Dora Russell, Stella Browne, Janet Chance and Joan Malleson. They believed that ‘sexual reforms could not be divorced from political and social change, and if such reforms were overlooked, it was women who suffered’.<sup>33</sup> They had become aware that abortion was quite common, especially under working-class women, who used it as a method of fertility control. Accordingly, they were of the opinion that legalised abortion would merely be a reflection of the realities of women’s lives.<sup>34</sup> From the beginning, ALRA wanted to foster discussion of abortion and reform the law to include social and economic reasons, as well as mental or physical health to be legal grounds for an abortion.<sup>35</sup> They also firmly believed that, even though legal abortion should be procured in consultation with a medical practitioner, it was ultimately the woman’s own decision.<sup>36</sup>

This conviction, however, was not necessarily reflected in what ALRA lobbied for. Contemporaries often accuse ALRA of its aims and achievement not being radical and/or feminist enough. First of all, the notion of ‘A Woman’s Right To Choose’ was not of its time and in Madeleine Simms’ words ‘unrealizable and extravagant’ those kind of aims came many years later.<sup>37</sup> ALRA took, especially in the inter-war years, a much more pragmatic approach. It is important to realise just how controversial

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<sup>31</sup> Gleeson, "Persuading parliament: Abortion law reform in the UK.", 8.

<sup>32</sup> Madeleine Simms, "'Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s—What were the Issues Then?'" *Abortion Law and Politics Today* (London 1998), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 81.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Simms, "Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s", 5.

the topic of abortion still was. Especially in the public sphere, it was not openly discussed, not even among the lower classes or youth.<sup>38</sup> Abortion advocates had to manoeuvre their very narrow sphere of influence, which included the medical and legal profession, the network of women's organisations and, to a limited extent, Parliament. It wasn't until the 1960s that the sphere widened to really include parliament and the press.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1930s, ALRA, thus, had to seek legitimacy and respectability through aligning themselves with the great and good and by associating themselves with a respectable establishment, such as the medical profession and the various Labour women's organisations and individuals.<sup>40</sup>

Their first chance of broadening their influence sphere came in 1937 when the government established an Interdepartmental Committee on Abortion, later referred to as the Birkett Committee after its chair. ALRA was allowed to give testimony to this committee and very purposefully put forward a particular kind of women, married, maternal and working-class, as their main object of sexual reform.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately, the results of the Birkett Committee were unsatisfactory, the Committee advocated no extension to the right to abortion, However it did 'recommend reform of the existing law along the lines of the Bourne judgement.'<sup>42</sup> The Bourne trial in 1938 had seen Alec Bourne, a gynaecologist, acquitted of his charges after he aborted a 14 year old girl who was raped on grounds of her physical and psychological health.<sup>43</sup> This ruling had since then been used as a precedent for other cases. It however, only protected other doctors that performed an abortion and not the amateur abortionists.<sup>44</sup> Any form of actual legislation following the results of the Birkett Committee, were halted by the outbreak of World War II.

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<sup>38</sup> Simms, "Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s", 6.

<sup>39</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 77.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 84.

<sup>43</sup> Drife, James Owen. "Historical perspective on induced abortion through the ages and its links with maternal mortality." *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 24.4 (2010), 437.

<sup>44</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 40.

The 1950s were difficult times for abortion advocacy dealing with the consequences of the war. World War II caused a decline in population making reform abortion less desirable. It was then that ALRA started to think differently about strategy. This was brought on by the fact that Douglas Houghton, husband of ALRA president Vera Houghton, had been elected as a Labour MP. With this direct link to Parliament, ALRA managed to persuade Joseph Reeves in 1953, followed by Lord Amulree in 1954<sup>45</sup> to present an abortion reform bill to their respective houses. Both received little support. This can be explained by the changing social circumstances, as it was no longer the overburdened working-class mother that evoked sympathy for the position of the working class women had changed.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the focus shifted to new arguments, which were woman's rights and the protection of the health of the woman. Yet ALRA's members were made up of a certain class and therefore lacked motivation to push the abortion issue forward as this old protagonist fell away.

This all changed in 1961 when the thalidomide tragedy struck. It had come to light that the sedative thalidomide had caused around 349 babies in the UK to be born badly deformed.<sup>47</sup> In general, the early 60s was an era where new drugs were coming onto the market with yet unknown side effects for pregnant women. Abortion suddenly transitioned from being a sordid criminal issue to a public health issue.<sup>48</sup> After the Thalidomide, tragedy public opinion became much more sympathetic towards abortion reform.<sup>49</sup> In 1962 a National Opinion Poll showed that 72 per cent of the British population was in favour of legal abortion if there was a good reason to suspect deformity in the foetus.<sup>50</sup> The tragedy invigorated ALRA, and the organisation underwent a significant metamorphosis. A new generation took over with Douglas Houghton, as chair, Diane Munday, as Vice Chair and Madeline Simms as secretary.<sup>51</sup> ALRA's work was still mainly focussed on The Commons and The Lords, but

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<sup>45</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 86.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 86-7.

<sup>47</sup> Gleeson, "Persuading parliament: Abortion law reform in the UK.", 30.

<sup>48</sup> Simms, "Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s", 7.

<sup>49</sup> Clements, Ben, and Clive D. Field. "Abortion and public opinion in Great Britain: a 50-year retrospective." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 39.4 (2018), 431.

<sup>50</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 89-90.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 87.

the organisation also started to use the press and public opinion polls, something which became a staple for ALRA's later work.<sup>52</sup>

Under this new leadership and a shift towards favourable opinions towards abortion, ALRA felt that the time was right and launched a large-scale campaign. They redefined their aims and used leaflets to spread awareness. In the leaflet titled 'What is ALRA?' published in 1964, of which 36,000 were distributed, ALRA defined their public aims as followed:

to secure such changes in the law as will provide a registered medical practitioner may lawfully terminate a pregnancy at the request of the patient or her guardian:

1. When it is necessary for preserving the physical or mental health of the women,
2. When there is a serious risk of a defective child being born,
3. When the pregnancy results from a sexual offence (such as rape, incest, or intercourse with a girl under sixteen
4. 'And added in '65, when the pregnant woman's capacity as a mother will be severely overstrained'<sup>53</sup>

ALRA's breakthrough came when MP David Steel, decided to introduce the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill as a Private Member's bill in 1967. ALRA had already taken a much more pragmatic approach and stepped away from the idea of 'abortion on demand' as they needed the support of the medical profession and their views were more conservative. The medical profession, logically, focussed on protecting medical practitioners from prosecution and focussed less on the right of the woman. Despite their already pragmatic stance, ALRA did insist on a so-called 'social clause', which would allow a pregnancy to be terminated if 'the pregnant woman's capacity as a mother would be severely overstrained by the care of a child or of another child'.<sup>54</sup> This clause was part of the bill as it was originally presented to Parliament it was, however, not included in the final Act. David Steel took a realistic approach and was willing to compromise for the sake of reform. It was thus that he opted to medicalise the abortion bill and took in consideration the joint statement of the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which proposed medical control and rejected social grounds for abortion.<sup>55</sup> Steel also managed to appease the Roman Catholic

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<sup>52</sup> Brooke, "The Sphere of Sexual Politics", 90.

<sup>53</sup> Archive of the Abortion Law Reform Association (hereafter: ALRA), 'What is alra? An introduction to the Abortion Law Reform Association', presumably 1967, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/BCC/C.7 [reference used by the Wellcome Collection].

Dilys Cossey, "Campaigning for Abortion Law Reform." *Abortion Law and Politics Today*. (London 1998), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert Hart, "Abortion law reform: The English experience." *Melb. UL Rev.* 8 (1971), 399.

<sup>55</sup> Melanie Latham, "Reform and revolution: the campaigns for abortion in Britain and France." *Abortion Law and Politics Today* (London, 1998), 136-7.

Church, which was the main opponent to the bill, and allowed an amendment in which nurses and doctors could refuse to perform an abortion on grounds of conscience.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, the main clause of the original proposal was widened considerably. Initially, the clause had proposed that an abortion was allowed if there was a 'serious' risk to life or a risk of 'grave' injury to physical or mental health, as a clarification of the already existing law.<sup>57</sup> Both 'serious' and 'grave' were taken out in the committee stage of the bill,<sup>58</sup> which allowed much more freedom in using this clause as a condition of legal abortion. The Abortion Act passed into law on 27 October 1967,<sup>59</sup> and with it ALRA finally achieved what it set out to do in 1936.

Except, how successful was ALRA really? If we consider the definition of success by Gamson, where a movement is successful if they are accepted as a valid spokesman for its desired constituency by their antagonist and have gained the advantages, it set out to,<sup>60</sup> ALRA does seem to have achieved a measure of success. The passing of the 1967 Act significantly broadened the legality of abortion and the ALRA accomplished their pragmatic and, self-proclaimed, limited aims. Madeleine Simms, in 1998, puts it as follows:

As a result of the passing of the Abortion Act there has been much research and immense strides forward in screening techniques and in preventative medicine generally in this field. Some 50,000 women have been spared the tragedy of having a severely handicapped child, and most of them have been able to go on and have healthy children thereafter. I shall always regard this as one of the greatest triumphs of abortion law reform.<sup>61</sup>

However, through the Abortion Act, abortion had become a medical issue. The law does not give women the choice in whether or not they want an abortion, but rather put this in the hands of her doctor. Or as Brookes puts it 'in effect the 1967 Abortion Act served to strengthen medical autonomy and left women reliant on the profession's goodwill.'<sup>62</sup> Initially, ALRA was content with the law seeking its shortcomings in administration, attitudes and available facilities and were of the opinion that 'further reform of the law will not alter these factors in the slightest.'<sup>63</sup> ALRA's attitude, however,

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<sup>56</sup> Latham, "Reform and revolution:", 136-7.

<sup>57</sup> Hart, "Campaigning for Abortion Law Reform.", 399.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, 399.

<sup>59</sup> Simms, "Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s", 5.

<sup>60</sup> Gamson, "Defining Movement 'Success.'", 350.

<sup>61</sup> Simms, "Abortion Law Reform in Britain in the 1960s", 7.

<sup>62</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, 156.

<sup>63</sup> ALRA, Newsletter 1968, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/BCC.C.8.



changed throughout the 1970s, and became critical of the law and, once again, sought to reform the law.

What did make ALRA successful, conforming to Gamson's definition, is that ALRA was and is recognised as a major player in the abortion reform debate and functioned as an authority on the matter, to which people turned if they needed accurate information. Despite the apparent success the Abortion Act in 1967 was for ALRA, and abortion reform in general, it left much to be desired. Thus it might be unsurprising that ALRA continued its efforts after the passing of the Abortion Act. In fact, ALRA stayed active throughout the years, and merged in 2003 with the National Abortion Campaign to form Abortion Rights, which still exists.<sup>64</sup> How and why this was possible will be answered in the following chapters.

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew Hilton, et al. *A historical guide to NGOs in Britain* (Basingstoke 2012), 79.

## ALRA and the ‘environment’ after the Act.

ALRA did not immediately stop its efforts after the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act. As mentioned in the last chapter, this was because ALRA itself was not entirely satisfied with the outcome of the Act. This ties in with Staggenborg’s theory on SMO’s, as she says that while goal accomplishments may lead to the dissolution of single-issue SMO’s, it can also mean that new issues are raised and the movement may enter new arenas of struggle.<sup>65</sup> This seems to be the case for ALRA. The new external social and political ‘environment’<sup>66</sup> created after the passing of the Abortion Act made it possible for ALRA to keep participating in the abortion movement industry. This environment consists of the government, other movements and countermovements, established organisations, the mass media and other actors relevant to the movement.<sup>67</sup> In ALRA’s case the most influential actors in their environment were parliament, reinvigorated countermovements and the Catholic Church, various medical organisations, and mass media. They had to take into account how those actors influenced public opinion in particular. This chapter will thus focus on ALRA and how the above mentioned groups influenced the environment and how ALRA reacted to this. It is important to understand that in a social movement environment all actors are linked and every action warrants a reaction by multiple actors, it is therefore difficult to give a clear distinction between all different groups. This chapter, however, will try to do this by first describing the countermovements, which includes the Catholic Church and the established medical organisations, and will then focus on their influence on the media and public opinion, as well as ALRA’s. Lastly this chapter will discuss how these actors influenced parliament and how ALRA reacted to this.

To this day, the biggest anti-abortion institution in the UK is the Catholic Church. During the debate surrounding the Abortion Act the main opposition consisted, unsurprisingly, of the Union of Catholic Mothers, the Catholic Women’s League and the Catholic Doctors Guild.<sup>68</sup> They were, however,

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<sup>65</sup> Staggenborg, "Organizational and environmental influences on the development of the pro-choice movement., 207.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, 206.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, 206.

<sup>68</sup> Melvyn D. Read, "The pro-life movement." *Parliamentary Affairs* 51.3 (1998), 447.

uncoordinated and lacked coherence. It wasn't until January 1967, when the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) was founded to specifically oppose the Bill, that this opposition was strengthened.<sup>69</sup> SPUC was founded by Phyllis Bowman and Elspeth Rhys Williams who were endorsed by prominent gynaecologists who, together with the Bishops of Exeter and of Bath and Wells, formed the core of its Council.<sup>70</sup> SPUC was adamant that they were not simply the front organisation for the Catholic Church. The Church was, however, its main benefactor and most of SPUC's members identified as Catholic.<sup>71</sup>

SPUC came too late to stop the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967, but continued its efforts to abolish the Act or at least restrict it. Their main methods included large public demonstrations, statements by leading clergy, lobbying of political representatives, and, most of all, propaganda.<sup>72</sup> In the 1970s SPUC had managed to organise itself within the Church and this was mirrored by some gains in Westminster and various Bills attacking the Abortion Bill were introduced in Parliament. LIFE, another anti-abortion group, was formed in 1970 by dissidents of SPUC, who supported 'total pro-life action' and thus wanted to offer positive alternatives instead of just being anti-abortion.<sup>73</sup> SPUC and LIFE make up the core of the anti-abortion movement and are both still active today.<sup>74</sup> 1970s anti-abortionist took an offensive approach and tried to highlight the 'abuses' of the Abortion Act. These 'abuses' were often perceived and not completely factual. These abuses consisted of foreign women travelling to England to procure an abortion and private medical facilities still charging high amounts of money for the procedure.

ALRA closely monitored the actions by their adversaries. They especially singled out SPUC and LIFE as their main opponents. When looking at minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting (ECM) of ALRA through the 1970s, SPUC and LIFE are a recurrence as specific points on the agenda. Their actions are explained and consequently a discussion on whether these actions warrant a

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<sup>69</sup> Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, 'who we are', <https://www.spuc.org.uk/who-we-are-main>.

<sup>70</sup> Read, "The pro-life movement.", 447.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, 447.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, 448.

<sup>73</sup> LIFE charity website, 'History', <https://lifecharity.org.uk/the-charity/history/>.

<sup>74</sup> LIFE charity website, 'History' <https://lifecharity.org.uk/the-charity/history/>; Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, 'who we are', <https://www.spuc.org.uk/who-we-are-main>.

reaction was held. For example, in the minutes of an ECM on October 19th, 1976, the EC discusses new ‘some very good – i.e. pernicious and dangerous’<sup>75</sup> pamphlets, which are, according to ALRA, full of lies. The developing tactics of SPUC and how to counter them are also discussed by ALRA and other pro-abortionist groups in their co-ordinated group.<sup>76</sup> ALRA also send members to SPUC rallies to obtain counter information.<sup>77</sup> After the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act anti-abortion groups, especially SPUC and LIFE, forced ALRA to go on a defensive and reactionary course. Despite a lack of tangible success on the anti-abortion side, ALRA recognised that they would not give in or as was conveyed to its members in ALRA’s newspaper through Madeleine Simms words in 1982: ‘they are not dead and constant vigilance is the price we will have to pay for liberty, health, privacy and confidentiality.’<sup>78</sup>

As propaganda was one of the most important tools used by the opposition, one of the main arenas in which the abortion debate was held, was the media and, consequently public opinion. SPUC and LIFE often presented their arguments as fact to the media, however much of these facts were later disproven. It was ALRA who, disproved the often, misused and partially quoted medical evidence and emotive facts that SPUC represented to the press. This was one of ALRA’s main concerns when it came to countermovements. They diligently reacted to almost every piece of misinformation that was spread by the anti-abortionists. For example, a newsletter from 1976 describes how ALRA anticipated that SPUC and LIFE would give false evidence to the Select Committee<sup>79</sup> and called a press conference immediately after the Committee hearing to discount ‘some extremely alarmist and dishonest evidence given by the anti-abortion groups’ in which ALRA claimed to be somewhat successful.<sup>80</sup> In an ECM held in July 1976 it ALRA explicitly agreed to ‘expose the inconsistencies of SPUC as much as

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<sup>75</sup> ALRA, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, Thursday October 6, 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>76</sup> ALRA, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, Thursday October 6, 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>77</sup> ALRA, Organiser’s report for the annual General Meeting of ALRA, August 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>78</sup> Charlotte Page and Fiona Simpson, ‘Health Conference Joint Success’, *Breaking Chains* No. 26, March April 1982, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27..

<sup>79</sup> The Select Committee was a Committee established by the government in 1976 to assess the proposed Abortion ‘Amendment’ Bill.

<sup>80</sup> ALRA, Occasional newsletter, March 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

possible'.<sup>81</sup> Other examples of ALRA's responsive attitude towards its countermovements is partaking in pickets. For instance, when SPUC presented a petition to the prime minister.<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that when informing its members of this occurrence it is explicitly stated that this picket got good press coverage insinuating that this was the desired outcome.

The anti-abortion groups were loud in their attempts to restrict the Abortion Act and ALRA tried to counter this by issuing independent opinion polls for the public, and also for medical professionals to counter arguments put forward by the opposition. For example they had the NOP poll Doctors' opinions on the Abortion Act in a Survey of General Practitioners in 1970. Public opinion generally favoured abortion, however, there are discrepancies caused by the wording of questions.<sup>83</sup> Both the anti- and pro-abortion groups commissioned commercial polling which influenced questions as they were after different results.

The overall conclusion is that the majority of Britons are 'situationalist' in their opinions on abortion, distinguishing between traumatic or elective reasons for abortion.<sup>84</sup> For example, there has always been public support for women that procure an abortion when the mother's health is at risk but when asked if abortion should be available on demand the results are more negative.<sup>85</sup> One of the main results that the anti-abortionist used was the uneasiness the public had with late abortions after the 24<sup>th</sup> week. This approach to restrict the Abortion Act was backed up by medical advancements that made it possible for foetuses to be born at earlier gestation.<sup>86</sup> ALRA took the threat of the growing anti-abortion movement serious and saw the results of its professionalisation. They remarked in 1976 that 'there was amazing ignorance about abortion and SPUC's propaganda had created a lot of concern.'<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> ALRA, Minutes of the Executive Meeting, Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>82</sup> ALRA, Organiser's report for the annual General Meeting of ALRA, August 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>83</sup> Ann Furedi, "Wrong but the right thing to do: public opinion and abortion." *Abortion Law and Politics Today* (London 1998), 440.

<sup>84</sup> Furedi, "Wrong but the right thing to do: public opinion and abortion.", 436.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, 435 and 437.

<sup>86</sup> Ben Clements, and Clive D. Field. "Abortion and public opinion in Great Britain: a 50-year retrospective." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 39.4 (2018), 429.

<sup>87</sup> ALRA, Minutes of the 1976 Annual General Meeting, May 14, 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

This professionalisation of the anti-abortion camp improved their lobbying and with some success. Between the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967 and 1989 there were 15 attempts to change, mostly to restrict, the Act.<sup>88</sup> Not all attempts garnered major debates within parliament or the public, but some warranted considerable action on ALRA's part. From the moment the Act came into force, its workings were scrutinised by the medical profession, the public, the press and Parliament.<sup>89</sup> This scrutiny was possible, because for the first time there were concrete numbers for abortions and these numbers were high. In the first full year over 54,000 women procured an abortion, and this number kept rising.<sup>90</sup> ALRA responded to this scrutiny by writing reviews of the working of the Act per year, where they gathered the numbers and provided them with an explanation and comment and releasing a *Guide to the Abortion Act 1967* which they circulated among interest groups.<sup>91</sup> These reviews, however, did not stop the influence of the anti-abortionist lobby and the Act was repeatedly attacked through Private Member's Bills. Interestingly, abortion never became a party policy and both Conservative and Labour MPs were swayed in the anti-abortion lobby.<sup>92</sup> However, even during the Thatcher years which were not favourable to social reforms in general,<sup>93</sup> the Abortion Act was only attacked by individuals. Thatcher even made clear, in an interview with the *Catholic Herald*, as reported by ALRA in their newspaper, that she was not prepared to abolish the act and that she had voted favourably to the pro-abortion lobby in the past.<sup>94</sup>

One of the most important developments in the abortion debate in Parliament was the emergence of the Lane Committee 1971-1974, which was established as enquiry into the working of the Act as a result of the above mentioned scrutiny the Act received.<sup>95</sup> After three years of gathering evidence, given by both ALRA and SPUC among others, the Lane Committee offered unanimous support for the

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<sup>88</sup> Munday, "Twenty one years of legal abortion.", 1233.

<sup>89</sup> Ashley Wivel, "Abortion Policy and Politics on the Lane Committee of Enquiry, 1971–1974." *Social history of medicine* 11.1 (1998), 109.

<sup>90</sup> Munday, "Twenty one years of legal abortion.", 1231.

<sup>91</sup> ALRA, 'A Guide to The Abortion Act 1967', pamphlet, 1970, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/BCC/C.1.

<sup>92</sup> Read, "The pro-life movement.", 451.

<sup>93</sup> Sylvia Bashevkin, "Tough times in review: The British women's movement during the Thatcher years." *Comparative Political Studies* 28.4 (1996), 545.

<sup>94</sup> 'Thatcher's view', Breaking Chains No.12, March/April 1979, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

<sup>95</sup> Wivel, "Abortion Policy and Politics on the Lane Committee of Enquiry", 109.

Abortion Act and was firmly against any major legislative change.<sup>96</sup> This came as a surprise for both the anti- and pro-abortion groups as several members of the Committee had not been in favour of liberal access to abortion in the past.<sup>97</sup> The positive outcome of the Lane Committee did, however, not deter the anti-abortion lobby and various Bills to restrict the Abortion Act were introduced to the House. The Bills that received most time both in the House and outside of it were the White Bill and Benyon Bill both in 1977, the Corrie Bill in 1979-80 and the Alton Bill in 1988.<sup>98</sup>

ALRA had a more or less similar response to each of these challenges to the Act. In a way it was during these attacks that ALRA thrived and managed to thwart any real danger to the Act. ALRA closely monitored the Private Members Bill ballot and had composed a list of all MPs and their stance on abortion. In this way, ALRA could anticipate a Bill if the ballot had favoured an anti-abortion MP. If a anti-abortion Bill was proposed ALRA started their defence campaign, which consisted of mailing all MPs about the proposed Bill and why they should not support it, rallying their members to do the same and publishing information pamphlets on the Bill to the relevant parties and the public, issue opinion polls and release press statements. Unsurprisingly, the anti-abortion lobby would take similar actions and in this way the back and forth between the two camps only intensified during these high stake periods. The MPs that proposed these restrictive Bills were often backed by SPUC and so misinformation was often used as propaganda, which ALRA had to rectify. This role as an informant and gatekeeper of the truth about the Abortion Act and abortion itself was generally what ALRA did after the passing of the Act in 1967. They were accepted as an authority on the subject as press often turned to them for clarification, were asked as speakers at events and were mentioned during Parliamentary debates.<sup>99</sup>

The success of the Act meant the strengthening of the anti-abortion lobby in parliament and also a bigger platform in the media. The Act had invigorated the anti-abortion groups, who used propaganda to influence the media and public opinion. Through these efforts and a general conservative climate a

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<sup>96</sup>Wivel, "Abortion Policy and Politics on the Lane Committee of Enquiry", 110.

<sup>97</sup> Ibidem, 110.

<sup>98</sup> Munday, "Twenty one years of legal abortion.", 1233.

<sup>99</sup> ALRA, Organiser's report for the annual General Meeting of ALRA, August 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

new ‘environment’ around abortion reform was created and ALRA had to adapt to this. There was no room for ALRA in this environment to introduce any positive amendments, instead they found themselves as constantly having to defend the Act. They did this rather successfully as the only significant amendment was a reduction in the upper limit of abortion from 28 to 24 weeks under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act in 1990.<sup>100</sup> This amendment was in line with advances in the medical field as it was now possible for a foetus to live outside of the womb at an earlier stage of gestation.<sup>101102</sup> This defensive role took a toll on ALRA, or as it was put by ALRA at an AGM in 1977: ‘Lack of widespread support for the campaign has led to a certain demoralisation of the people involved at the centre.’<sup>103</sup> In the next chapter we will focus on how ALRA managed to keep going despite this negative environment.

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<sup>100</sup> Clements, "Abortion and public opinion in Great Britain", 429.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem, 429.

<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately there are no ALRA records available from this campaign period.

<sup>103</sup> ALRA, Organiser's report for the annual General Meeting, Analysis of the year of ALRA, August 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.



## ALRA and the Abortion Social Movement Industry.

There are several forms of SMIs with a multitude of different SMOs that make it up. In order to understand how the abortion SMI influenced ALRA's continuance after the 1967 Act we need to understand ALRA's role in the abortion SMI and what kind of SMO ALRA was on a structural level and how this determined ALRA's future after the '67 Act. Therefore, in this chapter we will first focus on the emergence of the abortion SMI and ALRA's position in it. And secondly try to explain this position through ALRA's structural developments.

When ALRA emerged they were the only SMO in their industry. Even in the 1960s and era that is often described as a decade of social change,<sup>104</sup> ALRA was the only pro-abortion organisation. It wasn't until after the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act that the abortion SMI developed. On the one hand this can be explained by the new environment that the passing of the Act created.

Abortion had come to the foreground as a debate through the emergence of countermovements that competed with ALRA for media coverage and public opinion. With this attention more pro-abortion groups were established and an SMI was born. It is not necessarily true that SMOs in an SMI for coalitions and work together. While SMO's might work towards a common or similar goal there can be ideological differences that make coalitions difficult. On top of that, within a SMI organisations often have to compete for resources and legitimacy.<sup>105</sup> Times where a coalition is probable when there is an environmental opportunity to be taken advantage of, or when there is an environmental threat.<sup>106</sup> It is at times like these that resources tend to be plentiful and shared goals take precedent over individual ideology.<sup>107</sup> In the case of the pro-abortion SMI, it was the environmental threat created by the emergence of an organised opposition that led to the emergence of the SMI in the first place but also to the collaboration within said SMI.

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<sup>104</sup> Staggenborg, "Organizational and environmental influences", 211.

<sup>105</sup> Suzanne Staggenborg, "Coalition work in the pro-choice movement: Organizational and environmental opportunities and obstacles." *Social problems* 33.5 (1986), 375.

<sup>106</sup> Staggenborg, "Coalition work in the pro-choice movement: Organizational and environmental opportunities and obstacles.", 380.

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, 380.

Initially, as discussed in a previous chapter, ALRA was satisfied with the outcome of the '67 Act. This satiated and conservative attitude had two consequences. First it allowed the anti-abortion movement to gain support in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>108</sup> And secondly, the emergence of other pro-abortion groups. ALRA had always been regarded as an elitist group or, as Barr puts it, a 'Hampstead group of professional men who can spare the time for its work and the otherwise unemployed wives they can afford to support'.<sup>109</sup> ALRA's conservatism did not sit well with the second wave feminists that had adopted abortion as a vital part of the women's movement agenda.<sup>110</sup> It was in this environment that the women's movement started to pay attention to the abortion debate and that new single-issue pro-abortion groups were formed.

The most notable is the National Abortion Campaign (NAC), which emerged in March 1975 after a protest march against the White Bill, which was to serve as a grassroots movement. Holger Nahring describes the formation of NAC as a direct consequence of insufficient lobbying results of ALRA and a lack of radicalism.<sup>111</sup> This view that seems to be predominant across the secondary literature on the subject, however they neglect to acknowledge ALRA's role in the forming of NAC. ALRA describes the forming of NAC in its newsletter in 1977. There it is written that ALRA was directly involved in convening the first meeting that led to the forming of NAC and that they welcomed it. Going so far as helping NAC's Steering Committee with providing information and their address list and being a part of its National Steering Committee.<sup>112</sup> In a speech given for the National Women's Liberation Conference in April 1976, ALRA even had to clarify what the relationship between the two was, as there was apparently confusion over this.<sup>113</sup> This was mainly due to the fact that NAC adopted the a Woman's Right To Choose (WRTC) campaign/slogan which ALRA had launched in January 1975.

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<sup>108</sup> Alan Henry Clarke, *The abortion campaign: a study of moral reform and status protest*. Diss. University of Nottingham, (1984), 18.

<sup>109</sup> J. Barr, "ABORTION BATTLE." *New Society* 9.232 (1967), 342.

<sup>110</sup> Sheldon, "The Abortion Act 1967: a Critical Perspective.", 43.

<sup>111</sup> Holger Nehrning, "The growth of social movements." *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939–2000* (2005), 391.

<sup>112</sup> ARLA, Recent campaign History, Breaking Chains No.1, May-June 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

<sup>113</sup> ALRA, A Woman's Right To Choose Campaign Paper for the National Women's Liberation Conference, Newcastle, 24 April 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

Despite its initial satisfaction with the '67 Abortion Act, ALRA changed with its time. In the May-June 1977 issue of *Breaking Chains* the EC writes that ALRA had progressed through a revolutionary cycle and that it had been time for change. With the departure of Diane Munday, one of the leading voices behind the '67 Abortion Act, a new EC took over. This new EC explicitly stresses that they are all 'committed feminist'<sup>114</sup> aligning themselves with the broader sentiments within the women's movement at that time. ALRA changed its constitution in 1976 to reflect these new ideas, clearly stating the desire to 'secure a change in British law such as will allow medical termination of pregnancy on wider grounds'<sup>115</sup> reaffirming the desire to change the law instead of defending the status quo. Another reflection of this new ideology was the launch of the WRTC campaign in January 1975. The aims of WRTC was to legislate abortion on request up to 12 weeks' pregnancy, something that at the time was still seen as something to radical for the media and public opinion. This new approach also had structural consequences as it grew ALRA's membership and engagement from its members as ALRA managed to maintain its position of informant concerning abortion.

Regardless of this more liberal approach it is important to note that ALRA did continue to see itself as less radical than NAC and 'thought that differences in their identity should be emphasised so that ALRA would win the middle ground'.<sup>116</sup> This could be explained by Zald and McCarthy's theory that SMOs in an SMI compete for legitimacy and that authorities prefer to deal with organisations which seek less extensive forms of change.<sup>117</sup> ALRA trying maintain the middle ground could give them more legitimacy than NAC in, for example, parliament, as its position there had, up till that point, not been threatened. It must also be said that ALRA, all throughout the available archive material, does not paint NAC, or any other pro-abortion group, as the competition. ALRA only focuses on the countermovements as threats and seems very willing to work with other groups. Similarly to how ALRA kept track of their opposition, very AGM and ECM have separate points on

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<sup>114</sup> ARLA, Recent campaign History, *Breaking Chains* No.1, May-June 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

<sup>115</sup> ALRA, Annual General Meeting, Constitution, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>116</sup> ALRA, Minutes of the 1976 Annual General Meeting, May 14, 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>117</sup> Mayer N. Zald, and John D. McCarthy. "Social movement industries: Competition and cooperation among movement organizations." (1979), 11-12.

the agenda for other groups, keeping track of their activities and ALRA's role in them. However, ALRA's relationship with other SMO's in the SMI goes further, providing speakers for their conferences or organising joint conferences, organising joint demonstrations and organising Day-Schools to discuss positive legislation.<sup>118</sup> In 1981 ALRA even expressed the desire to further develop links with other pro-choice groups. Saying in its AGM that there had been an agreement 'on the necessity of building on the links which already have been established with the other pro-choice groups by regular discussion and supportive action.'<sup>119</sup> Following up on this desire ALRA, NAC and the Labour Abortion Rights Campaign (LARC) discussed in what practical ways they could work together in different areas, including positive legislation and even met with the Minister of Health of the time, Kenneth Clarke, as a united front.<sup>120</sup>

ALRA was thus not alone in this desire for collaboration. The Abortion SMI in the 1970s was one of intensive collaboration in general. The constant threatening environment made the pro-abortion camp unite and overcome competition among themselves. The perfect example of this collaboration is establishment of the Co-ordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act (COORD) in 1976. Which at its peak, in 1980 against the Corrie Bill, had over 50 member organisations including ALRA, NAC, Christians for Free Choice, Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion, Tories for Free Choice (TFC) and the main abortion charities.<sup>121</sup> ALRA regularly attended COORD meetings and generally used it as a platform to pitch new campaign ideas to see if these new ideas would get support from other groups. Throughout the years ALRA relied on this support of other SMOs to launch new campaigns as ALRA as an organisation on its own no longer had the means to invoke big change as it had with the '67 Abortion Act.

This can be explained by how ALRA's internal structure developed after the '67 Act. ALRA can be described as a bureaucratic organisation as it fits in Zald and McCarthy's definition as an organisation which has 'several levels of membership, lists of members, and some kind of written document

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118 ALRA, Annual Report 1977, Breaking Chains No. 3, September/October 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

119 ALRA, Breaking Chains No.23, July August 1981, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

120 ALRA, Breaking Chains No.26, March – April 1982, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

121 Clarke, The abortion campaign: a study of moral reform and status protest, 22.

describing the structure of the organisation.<sup>122</sup> In ALRA's case there was only one kind of membership, even though they did consider introducing life-long memberships at one point, however there was a difference in members that were involved in the running of the organisation and passive members. ALRA's written document was a constitution initially adopted at the AGM on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1964, which was amended at the AGM held 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1976.<sup>123</sup>

ALRA never had a massive membership, peaking in the 1960s with circa 1000 members. With the arrival of new pro-abortion groups, ALRA had to compete for members and funds. The competition for resources, be it members or funds, is inevitable in SMI's as SMO's have to share the same pool of said resources as they share goals. The intensity of this competition is dependent on resource availability, the demands asked of their constituents and the diverseness of these supporters.<sup>124</sup> In ALRA's case there was a lack of diverseness in supporters among the pro-abortion camp. While on the one hand TFC and LARC may have had a clear distinction between its supporters, the vastness of pro-choice groups thinned out the members pool. The number of ALRA members directly correlated with ALRA's financial situation. ALRA's main income came from membership fees and selling publications on abortion. Throughout the years however it becomes clear that this is insufficient. The relentless attacks on the Abortion Bill throughout the 1970s forced ALRA to launch defense campaigns, which cost money. In 1976 ALRA pleads with its members to donate money saying 'We must have money to carry on. It's up to you' and 'ALRA will soon be forced to close [...] unless people like you help us to keep on fighting.'<sup>125</sup> In 1977 ALRA's campaign organisers quit, giving the grave financial situation as one of the reasons 'I am not prepared to spend the majority of my time working of fundraising events to raise my own salary. This is not what I was employed to do'.<sup>126</sup> This grave financial situation was caused by the debt procured during the Benyon campaign,

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<sup>122</sup> Zald, and McCarthy. "Social movement industries: Competition and cooperation among movement organizations.", 3.

<sup>123</sup> ALRA, Annual General Meeting, Constitution, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>124</sup> Zald, and McCarthy. "Social movement industries: Competition and cooperation among movement organizations.", 5-6.

<sup>125</sup> ALRA, 'We must have money to carry on. It's up to you.', Pamphlet, 1976, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2.

<sup>126</sup> Sue Heal, Letter of resignation to the Chairperson of the Executive Committee of ALRA, June 13<sup>th</sup> 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2/.

which was the second campaign ALRA had to launch that year.

To give ALRA a steady and reliable income, the 400 Club was introduced. Which was a lottery where for 1 pound a month members could win up to 30 pounds.<sup>127</sup> Other ways of procuring funds was through socials, selling publications at conferences and individual donations. Campaigns cost money so the rapid succession of restrictive Bills introduced in Parliament throughout the 1970s and 80s cost ALRA a lot of money, however this was also the periods where they would attract new members as the people were inclined to take action and join a pro-abortion organisation. The struggle for funds remained an issue for ALRA. In 1992 ALRA issued a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Appeal for donations saying that ALRA relied on ‘a small, committed membership who feel strongly enough about this issue to help fund an organisation.’ and ‘our needs for funds is crucial now if we are not to drastically reduce our spending’.<sup>128</sup> Unfortunately there is a lack of documentation available after this year until 2003. It is in that year that ALRA and NAC decided to merge and stop the competition within the SMI. Many of the pro-abortion groups active in the 1970s and 80s have dissolved or have changed objectives, as they were part of multi-issue organisations. However ALRA and NAC have not changed their aims and still fight for women’s abortion rights. In 2003 ALRA and NAC merged to form the, now, UK’s only pro-choice organisation: Abortion Rights, which is still active today. By their own admission in a letter to the Rowntree Reform Trust, ALRA and NAC struggled to attract funds and decided that by ‘pooling rather than competing for resources, expertise, membership and contacts’<sup>129</sup> they claim to be a stronger and bolder organisation than its predecessors. By this merger the abortion SMI has effectively been disbanded, as AR is now the only pro-abortion SMO in the UK and thus stopped the competition within the SMI, making it possible for a dedicated few to maintain one organisation.

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<sup>127</sup> ALRA, Annual Report: Financial report 1977, Breaking Chains No. 3, September/October 1977, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/B.27.

<sup>128</sup> ALRA, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Appeal pamphlet. 1992, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/CCD/J/2/2/.

<sup>129</sup> Abortion Rights, ‘Letter from Alice Richardson and Barbara Chandler Co-Charis Abortion Rights to Tina Walker Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust’, Abortion Rights Charter for abortion access and quality provision, 2003, Wellcome Library Archives, (London) SA/ALR/H.77.

## Conclusion

In conclusion there are four conditions that can determine whether a single-issue SMO has the possibility of continuing after a success. First of all its dependant on the level of success in the first place. Secondly, the environment needs to change in such a way that action by the SMO stays required. Thirdly, the position the SMO has in the SMI and the extent of collaboration and competition for resources within the SMI determine whether the SMO can still take part in the SMI. Lastly, a SMO is dependant on how well it can adapt to these changes internally.

What happened to ALRA after the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act can thus be explained by looking at how successful the Act was in ALRA's eyes, how the legislation changed the environment and what role ALRA had to take on in the Abortion SMI and what consequences this had to ALRA's internal structure.

Firstly, while the 1967 Abortion Act was one of the first pieces of positive legislation on abortion in the world, it had its obvious shortcomings. Especially, when one looks at it from a feminist perspective. The Act gave all the agency in the choice for an abortion to the medical professionals, instead to the woman herself. ALRA initially saw this outcome as a success, as it had purposefully played up the health aspect of abortion. This had been necessary because the general attitude towards abortion was still quite hostile and ALRA's biggest chance of success lay with aligning themselves with the medical arguments. The outcome of the Act is therefore not surprising, but with the emergence of Second Wave Feminism the Act did not hold up and ALRA earned a reputation of being not radical enough.

The environment changed drastically after the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act. While countermovements had been too late to organise to offer any real resistance to the 1967 Abortion Act, the passing of the Act invigorated the anti-abortionists. SPUC and LIFE developed as the main pro-life organisations, managing to gain a considerable following, manipulating the media and public opinion through propaganda and professionalise their lobbying. This resulted in a succession of amendment and/or restrictive Abortion Bills introduced in the House throughout the 1970s and 80s. This

environmental threat caused ALRA to go on the defensive and instead of liberalising the Abortion Act, had to defend its very existence.

Another consequence of this environmental threat was the mergence of other pro-abortion SMOs resulting in a vast Abortion SMI. Before the passing of the Act ALRA had been the only pressure group in the pro-abortion camp and the growing number of other pro-abortion SMOs had both positive and negative consequences for ALRA. First of all, ALRA welcomed the support of other pro-abortion SMOs. Especially NAC, which would work on a grassroots level, became one of ALRA's main collaborators. On the one hand this vast SMI meant a professionalisation of the pro-abortion camp but on the other hand it also meant competition for resources. This competition led to dwindling members, a lack of funds and debts. This eventually led to the merger of ALRA with NAC to Abortion Rights, the only pro-choice organisation that's left in the United Kingdom.

ALRA's case is a specific one and leaves room for questions regarding other single-issue SMOs. The debate around abortion is unique in a sense that it is very much still alive today and will probably not go away anytime soon. The longevity of this debate certainly influences the ability of organisations that solely focus on abortion to keep going over such an extended period of time. It would therefore be interesting to look at other single-issue SMOs that are part of a different debate to fully understand the influences on continuance of said SMOs. Along these lines it could be valuable to compare two abortion SMOs and their SMI in different environments, be that different societies or different social movements.

Even just focussing on ALRA there are still some difficulties in drawing a true conclusion. Unfortunately the archives available to this study were limited by time and access. It is therefore that the majority of documents accessed are from a certain time period which leaves gaps in information. We therefore do not know exactly what happened in the period between the late 1980s and the merger in 2003.

The archives at the Wellcome Collection on this topic are extensive, also holding NACs archives and other SMOs part of the abortion SMI, which would have painted a more complete picture of the social movement as a whole.



Nevertheless, what we can conclude is that ALRA managed to adapt and overcome considerable obstacles to keep going after the 1967 Abortion Act. The passion and dedication of a few makes it that women in the United Kingdom still have an organisation in their corner that continues the fight for their reproductive rights.

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## Attachment 1: Example of ALRA source:

the abortion law reform association  
 88a islington high street, london, n.1. tel. 359 5200/9  
minutes of executive committee meeting, thursday 6 october 1978

present - antonia cannon, charlotte page, moya mcdonald, caroline hutton, sharon  
 Spiers, david flint, catherine jacob, lori streich, colin page, sally  
 hesmondhalgh, judy cottam

apologies - tess woodcraft, madeleine colvin, jane roe, hilly jackson

nb. minutes taken by lori. apologies for lack of capital letters - the shift key on  
 my typewriter just isn't shifting!

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1. threatening letter we received an extremely threatening letter from the 'christian  
 liberation army' telling us, basically, to cease operation  
 by january 1978, or else become military targets, etc. the  
 letter arrived on 4 oct., and was opened by moya, who fervently pursued the matter  
 through realms of red tape, unhelpful policemen, post office bureaucrats - who only  
 deal with peices of paper, not people! - and so on - basically, the police will only  
 deal with such matters after its been to the post office complaints dept, but they  
 only deal with things referred on to them by the police -for full details, see the  
 office log book.  
 the committee felt that it would be totally irresponsible to dismiss the letter as a  
 hoax. it was agreed to take the address list down from the office wal; also, david  
 knows someone in the correct dept. at the p.o., so wexx will seek professional advice  
 through this contact. antonia will contact f.p.a., b.c.c., etc, to see if they  
 have received similar letters.  
 press release sally and judy will draft a press release - to be agreed at at tonites  
 meeting, this will then be passed on to tess w.; we agreed that she should speak  
 first to martin walker - guardian - and offer it to him as an exclusive; if hw doesn't  
 want it as such, press release it in the normal way. also, pass on the whole thing  
 on to time out, inc. details of the police/p.o. thing. it should not be released til  
 aftervthe weekend.  
 see appendixes for text of letter and press release.

2. folk concert the folk concert will be held on friday 14th oct. at  
 the old theatre, l.s.e., houghton street, w.c.2.  
 with pirate jenny, team 2, and peggy seeger.  
 leaflets and posters and tickets were designed, very well, by keith.  
 helpers from the committee needed for on the day - catherine, sally,  
 judy, antonia offered from the meeting - also, of course, caroline, moya  
 and lori - who are getting it all together! more help needed - contact  
 moya or lori with offers.  
 all committee members to take tickets to sell, and publicise in all ways  
 possible.

3. minutes of previous meeting


a. what is alra leaflet - no further news on this. lori will get in touch  
 with jacquie; also ask her about the idea for a  
 conference jointly organised with the f.p.a.

b. list of mp's - sharon is about 1/2 way through this; she had divided the  
 country into -the standard political- regions, and is  
 noting on the list, m.p., constituency, party and majority -that's the  
 easy part! - followed by voting record since '67 - that's not so easy -  
 and for this she needs help - it will involve about 4 or 5 people - the  
 more the merrier and quicker! - for a few hours one evening, to  
 go through the voting records and write them up onto the master-sheets.  
 this will be on tuesday 18th october, at 6.30 at the office. antonia and  
 acharlotte offered.  
 more committee members, and volunteers, needed for this.  
 target to get ut all finished by the ned of the month, inc. costings,

c. life report they've been producing some very good - i.e. pernicious  
 and dangerous pamphlets; one facts about the 1967 act  
 is full of lies; one is for conservative voters, which has just the right tone

Attachment 2: example of ALRA source

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1983 No. 32 20p.



# BREAKING CHAINS

**ALRA**

THE NEWSPAPER OF ALRA - THE ABORTION LAW REFORM ASSOCIATION

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## LATEST POLL ~ HUGE SUPPORT FOR CHOICE

**ALRA EXCLUSIVE**

A major new poll conducted by Gallup for ALRA this month shows that despite widespread and hysterical propaganda in the national press by the anti-abortion movement, public support for abortion rights continues to be overwhelming. On pages four and five of this issue, Dr. Colin Francome provides a detailed analysis, exclusive to *Breaking Chains*, of responses to five questions on abortion.

\* Nearly three-quarters of the population believe that "the choice whether or not to continue a pregnancy should be left to the woman in consultation with her doctor." This indicates that, although there has been a slight fall in support since the peak figures of 1982, ALRA's platform of a woman's right to choose continues to command enormous public support.

\* Voters from all political parties support choice. For the first time, Labour voters have overtaken Conservatives in their support for choice. The fall in Tory acceptance of the principle that women should have the right to control their fertility may reflect a general hardening of attitudes within the Conservative Party — with its emphasis on returning to Victorian values. Members of Parliament in all parties should, however, take note that their constituents support abortion rights. There are no votes to be gained by pandering to the anti-abortionists.

\* Both sexes, all social classes, and all age groups support choice. The pro-choice movement can be confident of broad based support for its fight for adequate, safe facilities and a woman's right to choose in law.


**ALRA SURVEYS MP's**

ALRA is currently conducting a comprehensive survey of the new House of Commons. We are sending a questionnaire and a copy of the new poll to all M.P.s. Although there is no bill in Parliament at the moment this will help us to build up useful information on the views of the members of the House of Commons and identify new supporters.

If you have any information on your M.P.'s views on abortion, please do let us know. Every bit of information is useful.

**what we've been waiting for?**

Chinese scientist have developed a safe, convenient, effective, and economical medicine to induce abortions, according to a recent report in the *People's Daily*. The medicine, developed from the Chinese herb trichosanthes, is said to be 92% effective during the first three months of pregnancy. We'll let you know if we find out any more.



**contents**

Founded 1936

GALLUP POLL EXCLUSIVE  
 IRISH REFERENDUM  
 AGM REPORT  
 LATEST FIGURES  
 NHS CUTS AFFECT FAMILY-PLANNING SERVICES  
 SPAIN  
 CANADA  
 GILLICK CASE

## a woman's right to choose