

Abortion and animal rights

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The second half of 1989 saw a dramatic turn in the fortunes of the protagonists in the abortion wars. Up to that time the prolife forces were in the ascendancy, gaining ground on the judicial as well as on the legislative fronts. It seemed only a matter of time before the moral majority would reverse the 1973 supreme court decision recognising women's rights to abortion. And indeed an increasingly conservative court had ruled in June that the states had the right to pass restrictive antiabortion laws. It was expected at the time that most states would act accordingly, once more driving abortion underground, so that again young women would be dying in the backstreets of sepsis and haemorrhage. But nothing of the sort happened because it quickly became apparent that the majority of Americans were prochoice.

Firstly, the congress voted by a large majority and over the president's objections to restore federal funding for terminating pregnancies caused by rape and incest. Then the Florida legislature refused to pass the restrictive laws that it had been specially convened to vote on. Even the so called strict antiabortion laws passed by Pennsylvania and Michigan merely boiled down to prohibiting termination of pregnancy after 24 weeks or requiring parental consent for teenagers. Then in October 10 governors filed a friend of the court brief urging the supreme court to reject further efforts to restrict abortions; and several antiabortion efforts in other states were said to have "dissipated." All this was accounted for by a shift in public opinion, epitomised by the speaker of the Florida legislature, who said "the people do not easily give up their rights, whether it be freedom of the press, of speech, or of choice."

Others commented at the time that the climate indeed had changed, that the abortion rights forces were on a roll. Legislators were now seen to be casting their votes according to the perceived wishes of their constituents, in some cases bowing to pressure from their wives. "There was a silent majority out there all along," admitted one legislator. "I'd be a fool not to listen to my constituents," said another.

Yet the issue is by no means settled. "Don't think for a moment that the antiabortion people are going to crawl under a rock and go away," said the president of the Planned Parenthood Association. Meanwhile, all this could prove damaging to some of the politicians running for re-election, especially on the Republican side. Already in Virginia and New Jersey prolife Republican candidates were beaten soundly by their prochoice opponents. Elsewhere candidates from both parties are reconsidering their position, some softening their stand, others trying to avoid the issue, but some adhering to their principles. Facing the greatest dilemma is the Republican party, whose official antiabortion platform has been said to place it in danger of "courting permanent minority status." The President himself, a relative latecomer to the antiabortion camp, has to tread carefully in order not to alienate the conservative and liberal wings of his party.

Yet political observers have noted that success in the abortion wars has so far been ephemeral, one side's victory tending to energise the losers, so that one side is in the ascendancy at one time and one at another. But

now most Americans clearly support a prochoice position with reasonable restrictions; and it is becoming increasingly unlikely that a strident minority will succeed in imposing its wishes on the majority of Americans. Meanwhile, political pressure and product liability laws have virtually halted research and development of new contraceptives. Pressure groups will also keep the French miscarriage inducing pill off the market for the foreseeable future—for this is the way of the political process in America.

The 10 million prepared to forgo valuable research

Also exemplifying the squeaky wheel process are the recent activities of the radical fringe of the animal rights movement. Arising out of the reasonable concerns about not inflicting pain or suffering on animals, activist groups of animal worshippers have become increasingly militant and not averse to using violence. They represent the tip of the iceberg of some 10 million people of a wide variety of beliefs organised in some 7000 groups. One of the largest has a membership of 250 000 and a yearly budget of \$5 million. The most extreme groups, acting in the tradition of the old antivivisectionist societies, are the animal worshippers and liberators, who have committed terrorist activities against laboratories, stealing or releasing animals, damaging equipment, destroying scientific records, or making death threats against scientists. Some groups are more subtle and have allied themselves with environmentalist and antiestablishment groups, preventing the development of research facilities, causing delays in the granting of building permits, or persuading local government to pass stringent controls and regulations to stifle research by making it impractical, too expensive, or administratively impossible. Already federal regulations require complex standards, reviews, inspections, and a whole layering of bureaucratic controls. But while 77% of Americans believe that animal research is necessary, the animal rights groups are prepared to do without the kind of work that led to the development of vaccines, antibiotics, insulin, and vitamin B₁₂.

Beyond medical research, animal activists have directed their anger at other perceived abuses against animals. Furriers and ladies wearing furs have been their most recent object, leading in recent months to angry and sometimes violent confrontations. It was lately reported that Harrods' department store in London had caved in to activists by closing its fur salon. But in Aspen, Colorado, the residents voted by a two to one margin not to declare their city a fur free town. "It is a matter of them pushing their religion on us," said one of the town's residents while one of the national papers characterised the movement as antidemocratic, highly primitive, and irrational, its members showing less love for animals than a hatred for their own fellow beings. It may be no small coincidence, we were recently reminded, that the Nazis in Germany made antivivisection part of their platform in the early 1930s; and it remains a challenge for this society how to deal with activist minority groups that wish to impose their beliefs on the majority.