

'Family Planning' and Fertility Control

Family Planning in Canada: A Source Book. Edited by Benjamin Schlesinger. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974. Pp. 291.

Morality and Law in Canadian Politics: The Abortion Controversy. Alphonse de Valk. Dorval: Palm Publishers, 1974. Pp. 184.

Two new books dealing with fertility control in Canada have recently been published: Family Planning in Canada and Morality and Law in Canadian Politics. The former is concerned with all aspects of family planning, focusing primarily on contraception, and includes a chapter on abortion. Morality and Law in Canadian Politics is solely concerned with the status of the abortion laws in Canada, presenting an analysis and explanation of the forces that brought about the current legal position on abortion.

Family Planning in Canada is called a source book and is an anthology of readings said to be prepared in response to a request for provision of "curriculum, materials, and courses in family planning and family life education, in education, social work, health and other university faculties." (p. xi) No more specific statement of purpose is ever offered and it seems none was adopted. The book is divided into six rather diverse categories: "An Overview," "Professionals and Volunteers," "Government Reports," "Contraception," "Adolescents and Young Adults," and "Abortion."

The major flaw of the book is that it is a hodge-podge of articles varying widely in subject matter, sophistication and quality. While some of the articles--most notably Nancy Garrett's "Choosing contraceptives according to need"--are informative and well-written,

many others seem aimed at junior high school health classes. Such unevenness, together with frequent repetitions of details left me with the strong impression of reading a rather hastily assembled collection. Who, after all, is this book aimed at? The jacket says it is intended for "all engaged in counselling, research, or professional training," but surely it is inappropriate to include a three page article on venereal disease which denies such diseases can be contracted from toilet seats for such an audience? And why an outdated 1967 article describing the contraceptive options available in a paragraph or two apiece? The articles are all too brief and superficial for any sort of responsible decision-making by lay people, let alone professionals. For further evidence of the editor's ambivalence as to his audience, glance through the glossary provided at the back where we find such definitions as "copulation: sexual intercourse," "penis: male copulatory organ," and "sexual intercourse: an encompassing term indicating all forms of sexual relations."

Like the rest of the book, the section on abortion is frustratingly brief and scattered and hence does not deal seriously with the major issues involved. The morality of abortion is addressed only in a selection from the rhetorical political statement of the Alliance for Life Association. Throughout, abortion

is treated as a distasteful back-up system of birth control. All the authors seem to agree with Susan Watt that "unquestionably, abortion is a financial, medical, and social disaster as a method of birth control." (p. 220) However, there is now available a procedure called menstrual extraction which makes simple, inexpensive abortion a feasible option. This is a technique by which the contents of a woman's uterus are vacuumed out each month in a quick clinic procedure. If conception occurred that month, the embryo is removed along with the menstrual blood and in those circumstances an abortion would have been performed (though probably no one would have been aware of it). The procedure is highly controversial at the moment, but it does present the option of abortion as a serious means of birth control and should have been addressed in a book with such a large scope.

Since the book seems to be primarily concerned with contraception and abortion, that is with the prevention of unwanted children, it is disturbing to have it titled "Family Planning" and to find so many of the authors speaking as if sex and conception can only occur between husband and wife. The issues and resources under discussion are of interest to many individuals as individuals and not as part of any formal couple unit.

Presumably, the book is intended as a survey book to direct readers to other

works in particular areas, but I found it too superficial to be of much value in even this way. Materials on all the subjects addressed are so readily available, that it seems unnecessary to be collecting these superficial accounts for professionals.

In contrast to the brief discussion abortion receives in Schlesinger's anthology, Morality and Law in Canadian Politics offers a very careful, precise documentation of the changing attitudes to abortion in Canada which led up to the 1969 revision in the law.

Many of the arguments put forward by both sides are sensitive and sophisticated. The debate acknowledged the distinction between law and morality, recognizing that we should not attempt to treat something as illegal simply because we feel it to be immoral. Thus we find some people arguing for the legalization of abortion even though they personally feel abortion to be an immoral act. In considering changing legislation on contraceptives, the Catholic Bishops of Canada argued that a wrongful act should be dealt with by law only if (1) it injures the common good, (2) such a law is enforceable, (3) the burden of such a law does not fall on one group in society alone, and (4) the law itself does not give rise to greater evils than the law was designed to suppress. (p. 30) Given such a position, it is hard to understand how it is that the Catholic Church was able to oppose

abortion reform at all. Laws against abortion seem to violate every one of the four conditions.

However, the abortion debate centred mostly on the fourth condition, with those in favour of abortion reform arguing that laws against abortion resulted in serious harm to many women and also to the children who are born but not wanted. No one denied these evils, but the anti-abortion people saw the consequences of liberalized abortion laws as being of yet more serious harm. Those who viewed the fetus as a person in the full moral sense of the term worried that abortion entails a disrespect for human life which does harm the common good. Illegal abortions may result in human deaths, but the anti-abortion forces did not feel that the state was building in as fundamental a devaluation of life in outlawing abortion as they feared it would in legalizing it. Both sides argued from humanitarian concerns.

The main forces that de Valk sees behind changing the law were the public opinion campaigns raised in the liberal presses, primarily by Chatelaine and The Globe and Mail, together with a series of wide-ranging social reforms by the Trudeau government concerning family and sexual matters. Also, Britain had recently adopted a bill legalizing abortion, thereby setting a legal precedent, and the Canadian Bar Association and the Canadian Medical Assoc-

iation adopted stands in favour of liberalized abortion laws. Moreover, certain religious groups provided solid support for this liberal move, most notably the United Church of Canada. The only organized source of opposition came from the Catholic Church. However, the Church was in the midst of a political and theological crisis at that time and its energies were being absorbed in internal examination and conflict. Hence public opinion in favour of abortion was able to build very quickly with no systematic counter-attack.

De Valk's analysis of the changing abortion situation seems sound. He presents fairly the arguments of all the leading participants. But he is not interested in simply recording an historical event. The last section of the book is a "Postscript and Personal View" in which he tries to show what a serious mistake it was to permit abortion for reasons of health. There he presents in greater detail the religious view that the fetus, of course, has a soul and, hence, that its life is of infinite value and cannot be terminated even in the interests of another human being. He argues that Canada is a Christian country and that our laws ought to reflect our religious origins; an odd claim given the secular foundations of this country and also the disagreement amongst Christians on this issue.

He may be right to criticize the pro-

abortion claim that "every child has a right to be well born and in some cases this means the right not to be born at all," on the grounds that rights are possessed only by the living, not by what has never come into existence. (p. 144) What he overlooks is that if this means that a fetus cannot have this right because it never came into existence as a person, then it similarly means that it cannot have any other right either. The notion of rights is frequently appealed to by proponents of

all positions on abortion, but it is such an ambiguous, abused concept that it is more likely to confuse the issue than to settle it.

De Valk's book is an important one to read these days when political pressure is mounting on both sides for another change in the Canadian abortion laws.

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