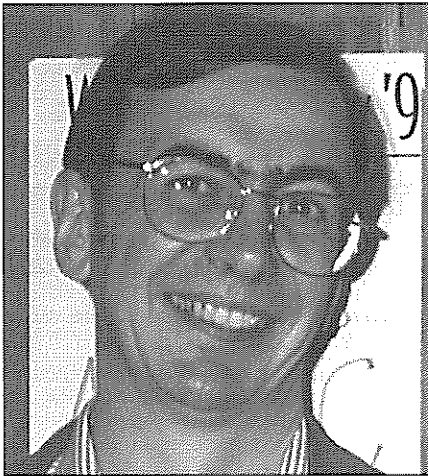


# Abortion and the American right



By Martin Durham

IT IS important to be as accurate as possible about the anti-abortion or anti-gay groups in America. I think these groups are often misdescribed, in the *Guardian* for instance — which probably lots of us use to find out what's happening over there. If I wanted to be really provocative, I'd say a lot of left-wing writers "lift" the bourgeois press. Because of a lack of resources left-wing groups often rewrite a piece they see in the *Guardian* or the *Economist*, or whatever, and give it a left-wing conclusion.

But the bourgeois press is often unreliable about right-wing politics — especially if they're liberals. Conservatives may be more accurate but then they're diabolical when talking about left-wing or liberal people.

In six week's time the Republican Party will hold their convention, confirm their presidential candidate as Bob Dole, and pick a vice-presidential candidate. They'll decide on their platform, their manifesto. Unless their party managers are incredibly good, or incredibly fortunate, or both, it's going to be a bloodbath.

There are going to be three groups arguing that the Republican Party has got to be very, very, very hardline on abortion and that Bob Dole must not sell them out.

Although these three groups overlap and often co-operate, they are separate groups with different priorities.

The first group dates back to the late '60s and early '70s and calls itself the pro-life movement. We know it as the anti-abortion movement.

The second group dates back to the late '70s and they call themselves the pro-family movement. We know them as the Christian right.

The third is the most recent and dates back to the early '90s. These are the supporters of Pat Buchanan. I will deal with the history of the first two groups here.

The so-called pro-life movement dates back to the late '60s when people were trying to liberalise abortion law in some

states, like California and New York. In 1973 the Supreme Court liberalised abortion law substantially. In the first three months the law would not restrict abortion. Later on there could be some laws but not very restrictive ones — until the last minute of the pregnancy. This infuriated anti-abortionists.

Shortly after that decision the anti-abortionists came together to create the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) which they made formally separate from the Catholic church in order to appeal beyond the Catholic church's constituency. This is the dominant anti-abortion organisation in America.

How was the Christian right created? First, there are an incredible number of born-again evangelical Christians in America — as many as a quarter of all Americans. They created their own sub-culture which the secular media has not really noticed: their own magazines, their own radio stations, their own TV programmes, colleges, schools and universities. By and large they kept clear of politics — some of them on principle. They have also lost many of their churches to what they call moderate liberal Protestants.

They found their attempt to separate themselves off from secular America was not working, and this point was coming home to them with a vengeance. For instance they were worried sick about their kids' enthusiasm for rock music and for watching TV, about the availability of *Playboy* magazine. They get outraged about abortion, about the rise of a gay movement, and at the rise of feminism.

In the '70s some of them got involved in different political campaigns, for instance the *successful* campaign to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment.

Under Jimmy Carter, himself a born-again Christian but one that they often regarded as a moderate or a liberal, the American tax inspectorate, the IRS, got interested in so-called home schools, the Christian schools. They started looking into these schools. They were suspicious that these schools were an excuse for segregation, an attempt to escape racially mixed schools, as well as a way to avoid taxes. And so the evangelicals felt further threatened by the way the state was having a go at their Christian schools.

Finally, in the early '70s, what we then called the New Right was launched. Once called four men and two computers because they were a small group of conservatives, they were fed up about losing to the moderate wing of the Republican Party or to the Democrats.

They wanted to create a strong conservative movement in America. They pioneered very vicious adverts, direct mailing, to say, the members of the National Rifle Association. They said, if I write to everyone who loves guns and tell them lib-

eral politicians hate guns and if I write to everyone opposed to abortion and tell them liberal politicians hate babies, I'm in.

By this "scientific method" of direct mailing targeted audiences, they found that they could get people out voting, and get in donations! Of course they targetted the born-again Christian community and persuaded key figures in that community, like Gerry Falwell, a prominent TV evangelist, that they should launch political organisations. And so in the late '70s the new Christian right was created. It appeared most famously in groups like "Moral Majority", but also "Christian Voice".

The new right was a bit disappointed with the anti-abortion movement. They found it very difficult to get the anti-abortion movement on board for the full conservative argument. In the late '70s the new right tried to encourage a *right wing* of the anti-abortion movement. Such a group was the American Life lobby — now American Life League. The ALL was not only against abortion but also permissiveness, liberals and so on.

The new right had found a section of the anti-abortion movement that was closest to them but they still had different priorities from each other.

The two groups were by and large pleased that Reagan was elected in 1980 and they supported him. However, they were worried from early on that Reagan was not pursuing everything they wanted. Hard as it is to imagine now, the new right denounced Reagan as a "useful idiot for Marxism" in the late '80s because he believed in Gorbachev's reforms!

The anti-abortion movement felt Reagan did not prioritise their issues. But he was better than the Democrats, and they supported him in 1984. They also supported Bush in 1988 — even though they took the view that his conversion to a pro-life view was not shared by his wife and was politically judged rather than because of an inspiration from God or an ethical consideration.

The Christian right were also dissatisfied with Reagan. But contrary to what the left has suggested they *did not* get the things they wanted — on abortion, sex and so on. As Sarah Diamond, a left-wing writer who has written about the Christian right in America, argues that one reason the Christian right stayed on board in the 1980s is because of their foreign policy and *not* because of their no sex, no drugs and no rock and roll policy. They were anti-Sandinista but not because they found somewhere in the Bible a reference to support for Contras.

The Bush years were bad for these groups. He annoyed the Christian right because he invited gays to the White House. He worried the opponents of abortion because he was regarded as potentially soft on abortion not least because from 1989



Aftermath of attack on abortion clinic

onwards the Republican Party was worried that being anti-abortion cost it votes.

The argument had always been that if a small number of people felt strongly enough about your anti-abortion campaign, they could swing you the vote. This assumption was doubted by the Republicans from 1989 until about 1992 because some surveys suggested there may be enough feminist voters or pro-choice voters to swing the vote in the opposite way.

From 1989 until 1992 the Republicans talked about the "big tent": the Republican Party is opposed to abortion, but we're a "big tent" and we respect people with votes who aren't against abortion. They also employed "narrow casting". This is where you go to, say, an evangelical church and say "we are against abortion, support us"; and then you go to another arena and say "vote for us, we're open minded on abortion". You just hope no one spots you've been lying.

Also they try to finesse the abortion line. You'd say "I'm against abortion but the law isn't really the answer, changing people's minds is the answer." It's an attempt to find an abortion line which will not alienate the anti-abortionists but will also win over pro-choice libertarian liberals with economic concerns and others who are not anti-abortion but whose votes the Republicans wanted.

But in 1992, the hardliners won. In 1992 Bush ran on a hardline anti-abortion programme — but lost the election. The hardliners said "without us you'd have done even worse". The moderates said "if you lot had kept your gobs shut we could have done better". After the 1992 result there was some ill-feeling between the Christian right and the Republican leadership.

The Clinton administration is by and large pro-choice. If you read anti-abortion literature, or conservative literature, they'll often say that the "Feminist Over Choice" group is the only one Clinton has ever kept his promises to! And that may be right. And so the calculation that you see again in the Republican Party is: is it going to damage our candidate in the 1996 election if we're seen as hardline on abortion?

You get this wonderful stuff. Bob Dole gives a series of speeches. Speech one: let's have a party platform that's against abortion but let's have a little bit up the front saying you don't have to agree with us. Speech Two: let's have it in the party platform next to the little bit. Speech Three: let's have it at the front, and say there's loads of things you don't have to agree with at all.

Dole is frantically trying to keep the Christian right and the anti-abortion movement with him, but can he keep the pro-choice and moderate voters with him? There *are* people who argue that Republicans should be pro-choice — like Republicans For Choice.

In the late '80s the Christian right was in trouble. One of its key TV channels — "Praise the Lord", or as it's brutally called, "Pass the Loot" — was found to be not completely good about the money it received from the saved. It was spending it in the wrong way, it was misleading them.

Then Jimmy Swaggart [gospel singer and cousin of Jerry Lee Lewis] who's like a caged tiger on stage, telling people they've sinned and making people cry, obviously heard the Lord's suggestion that he should go down among the prostitutes and took it fairly seriously. But he didn't get the gist of what the Lord meant by suggesting this, and poor old Jimmy Swaggart fell in a very public way and had to admit he'd sinned.

Pat Robertson, a prominent TV evangelist, fought against Bush in 1988, but lost. Finally "Moral Majority" was in such a financial crisis that it closed down.

It looked bad but after a couple of years they emerged again, in a new constellation. Pat Robertson organised a new group, "Christian Coalition". Christian Coalition in their training schools use admirable slogans: "think like Jesus, fight like David", "lead like Moses, run like Lincoln". Basically they trained Christians to take over the Republican Party and win elections. They now have 1.7 million members.

They are passionate to get out of the enclave of white born-again Christians. Recently they offered \$1 million to pay for black churches that have been burnt in America. Also they've now got a Catholic

auxiliary organisation — Catholic Alliance. For a long time in the born-again movement, they said Catholics were going to burn severely, Mormons were going to be turned into cinder, and mainline Protestants were going to be sent to Hell. Nowadays it's only liberals who are going to burn. As long as you're conservative, you're okay. They've been very successful within the Republican party. One estimate says that they control 13 state parties and are strong in 18.

That's the Christian right in general. They're not a united movement in every way. Above all, Christian Coalition is the moderate wing! The Christian Coalition drew from the 1992 Clinton victory the conclusion that being seen as obsessed with sexual issues was a loser, and instead you have to be a *broad* conservative movement.

They would campaign for Republicans who were against *some* abortions on the grounds that their opponent was for *all* of them. At least a Republican who was for restrictions on abortion was better than a Democrat who was for no restrictions on abortion. They also played down the anti-gay aspect but there has not been a good explanation in print for why this is the case.

So what on earth could be *less* moderate than the Christian Coalition? There are smaller groups in the Christian right who think that Christian Coalition is selling out. There is also a group, of equal importance to Christian Coalition, who think they are selling out. This is "Focus On the Family", a movement which has become very strong — by giving advice to Christian parents about MTV, about what do I do when they come home with the unsuitable boyfriend. "Focus on the Family" is run by James Dobson and advises parents on what to do to keep their family safe in modern America.

Dobson's built up a massive following amongst born-again Christians and part of his activity *has* been political. He has a mailing list, (but not members), of 2 million. Of those 2 million many of them will do what he tells. When he tells them to send a letter to Newt Gingrich saying "don't sell out" (exactly what he thinks of Newt Gingrich!) they write a letter to Newt Gingrich saying "don't sell out".

When he tells them that Bob Dole may be about to betray them on abortion and so they should perhaps go for a third party then quite a few of them will listen to him although. I don't think in the end he will form a third party however.

What we've got is a couple of movements which emerged in different situations: the anti-abortion movement of the early 1970s, the Christian right of the late 1970s, and they come from different developments. The Christian right is part of the Republican Party, a crucial part, and is supporting Dole but not with complete confidence. A significant minority of it may be willing to desert the Republicans thinking that it will betray them this year. ■

● Martin Durham was speaking at Workers' Liberty '96.