

Fighting to Choose: The abortion rights struggle in New Zealand

Alison McCulloch

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This book is a must-read for all who work in the field of abortion care. Understanding the present requires knowledge of the past, particularly in an area as politically precarious as abortion care. I believe New Zealand (NZ) has exceptionally good abortion services, but this book is a reminder of their fragility. Abortion remains a political football worldwide and NZ is no exception.

Alison McCulloch has produced a thorough and readable review of the NZ abortion struggle from the 1970s to the present day. Alison is well qualified to write this book. She has a PhD in Philosophy and has worked as a journalist here and in the US for 20 years. She is a supporter of the pro-choice movement and is currently on the national committee of the Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand (ALRANZ), the only extant group supporting liberal reform of the abortion laws.

The book is a fair and insightful analysis of the efforts to reform our abortion law. Alison takes us through the history of the key groups involved, from the more radical pro-choice women's liberation movement represented by the Women's National Abortion Action Campaign (WONAAC), the more moderate ALRANZ, and the anti-abortionists led by the *Society for the Protection of Unborn Children* (SPUC) and the Catholic Church. She describes the range of their efforts to influence the Royal Commission and members of Parliament.

The important story of the setting up of the Auckland Medical Aid Centre (AMAC), Parliament's efforts to close it down, the police raid on the clinic and the trial of Dr Woolnough is told in some detail.

Alison's sources include material from most of the protagonists in the fight, starting with

WONAAC who provided the funding for this book, ALRANZ, AMAC's early papers and Raewyn Stone's PhD thesis on abortion politics 1970–75. Marilyn Pryor's papers in the National Library provided a rich source of material about the anti-abortion side, SPUC in particular. Alison also interviewed many of the individual participants involved.

I lived through this time and was an active participant in many of the battles. I was fascinated to read this material and see it from different perspectives. Many of us will have our own memories and stories of this time, which remain untold. There are pieces of the history in which I was involved that still need telling, in particular the struggle for the medical profession's support.

The outcome of the 1970s' struggle resulted in the cumbersome bureaucratic structure imposed on a restrictive criminal law that we now have. When the present law was passed in 1977, the anti-abortion movement was certain it had won a victory, although not getting all that they wanted. The pro-choice movement knew that they had lost. Now neither side is certain.

The second half of the book covers developments subsequent to the passing of the law. Alison recounts the legal actions and other protests that brought about minor changes to make the law workable but have continued to threaten the provision of abortion services. She also discusses the dilemma of campaigning on the basis of the woman's right to choose rather than health need for provision of abortion services.

One of the delights of the book are the photographs from WONAAC archives and the acknowledgement at last that these women were responsible for the Double Standard posters of political satire that adorned Wellington in the 1980s.

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