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Book Review: Fighting to Choose: The Abortion Rights Struggle in New Zealand

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Alison McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose: The Abortion Rights Struggle in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013).

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Feminist political scientists have long since acknowledged that ‘few issues in modern politics have been more divisive and apparently less capable of purely political resolution than abortion’.¹ Alison McCulloch’s history of the struggle for abortion rights in New Zealand speaks to this claim with rich detail and a passionate voice, reminding us that women’s reproductive rights and their right to bodily integrity are yet to be fully recognised in law or practice. The introduction uses powerful imagery to draw readers in, from a description of backstreet ‘solutions’ with often lethal consequences, to the representation of current-day practice, where women ‘creep’ to clinics and hospitals and run the gauntlet of anti-abortion protesters. It is here that McCulloch makes her own position clear – she is dissatisfied with the political and policy inertia around abortion rights and is seeking a historical explanation for this, through an in-depth review of the battles that occurred between the anti-abortion ‘movement’ and various liberal and radical feminist activists. She labels her analytical approach as ‘feminist pro-choice’ and her objective is to provide answers to two key questions: given the influence of the Women’s Liberation Movement, why did progressive pro-choice public policy not result? And, given this failure, what change might be possible in the future?

The 15 chapters that follow are collected into two loosely chronological parts – the 1970s and the 1980s – with the ‘wars’ of the 1970s receiving the most attention. This does not preclude McCulloch delving into the abhorrent practices of the more distant past, and the various government-commissioned reports of the 1930s–1950s that ultimately come to inform the 1975–1977 Royal Commission, the Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977, and the various Crimes Act amendments (Chapter 8). This structural flexibility ensures that the reader understands the dynamics of the abortion rights debate, but also speaks to the relevance of this issue to generations of women, feminists and human rights activists. Within this chronology, key actors are identified, and grouped into ‘The Protagonists’ (Chapter 2) and ‘The Anti-Abortionists’ (Chapter 3). The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), the Catholic Church and conservative parliamentarians (from both National and Labour) are included in the latter group, while it is the Women’s National Abortion Action Campaign (Wonaac) and the Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand (Alranz) that represent agents of progressive change. Within these and other chapters, there are a number of interesting revelations for those new to the debate,

1. K. Lane Scheppele, ‘Constitutionalising Abortion’, in M. Githens and D. McBride Stetson (eds) *Abortion Politics: Public Policy in Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29; see also V. Woodman, ‘The Impact of Political Institutional Factors upon the Regulation of Legal Abortion Provision in New Zealand’ (unpublished honours thesis, University of Auckland, 2012).

for example: the power of elected officials to deflect debate on this issue within their political parties (Muldoon and Kirk were both guilty of this); the insidious insider networking opportunities open to the anti-abortion activists; the questionable impartiality of the Royal Commission (Chapter 7); the friction between the raft of feminist positions and within the anti-abortion camp; and the marginalisation of those who identified as both feminist and socialist. McCulloch's position on the role of the media, however, reads as ambiguous, if not contradictory. At various points in the book, the media is quoted as reinforcing the conservative position, by portraying the pro-choice activists in a negative light. Yet, at others, the media is praised for encouraging debate and highlighting the extent to which politicians were out of touch with more liberal public opinion.

There is also a tendency to refer to feminist analysis and strategy in the singular, when feminism has always been pluralistic, with both reformists and radicals operating in the same political space. McCulloch seems to conclude that the liberal (feminist) position of pursuing incremental reform is as much to blame for New Zealand's lack of progressive abortion rights as the conservatives' stranglehold over the halls of power in the 1970s and the 1980s. However, it is difficult to conclude that a more radical strategy would have resulted in anything more progressive, and it is impossible to test the counterfactual in the New Zealand case. Indeed, Yael Yishai's comparative analysis of abortion policy in four diverse countries (Sweden, the US, Israel and Ireland) reveals that women's groups have had limited impact on policy output. Although abortion policies in these countries vary, they share one common denominator: a reflection of widely shared beliefs about established gendered social roles.² Yael argues that few, if any, abortion policy wins have resulted when abortion is defined in terms of women's liberation.

There is much to recommend this book to political scientists. McCulloch pulls together a wide range of historical materials that reveal potential points of departure for further empirical analysis and theory building on a topic that she correctly recognises as being under-researched. For example, McCulloch's methodically documented policy trajectory reveals a degree of institutionalised path dependence, which the opening of The Clinic (Chapter 4) and The Trial of Dr Jim Woolnough (Chapter 5) disrupt. These two events could be interpreted as critical junctures that galvanised more intense action on both sides, ultimately leading to policy change. An interpretive policy analysis of this issue, focusing on the relative power of particular discursive frames (abortion on demand, pro-choice, pro-family, pro-life, etc.) in directing the debate and harnessing public opinion, would also offer fruitful insights into explaining New Zealand's policy inertia. Finally, McCulloch's work demonstrates that partisan politics matters. Comparative public policy scholar Francis G. Castles has pointed to the importance of parties in understanding variation in social policy across countries and over time. In particular, he has argued that the weakness or fragmentation of parties on the Right helps to explain the progressive nature of welfare state development in some countries.³ His model, in reverse, could be applied here: the

2. Yael Yishai, 'Public Ideas and Public Policy: Abortion Politics in Four Democracies', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1993), pp. 207–228.
3. F.G. Castles (ed.), *The Impact of Parties. Politics and Policies in Democratic Capitalist States* (London: Sage, 1982).

strength of the Right – in terms of dominance in Parliament over time and in cabinet, and in terms of cohesive interest representation – might best explain the limited progress of the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, the declining power of the Catholic Church and the recent swathe of liberal legislation allowing gay marriage, decriminalising prostitution and removing section 59 of the Crimes Act suggest that McCulloch's concluding call to arms, and to remain vigilant, may be overstated. Yet, with the emergence of the Conservative Party in 2011, and National's explicitly expressed interest in seeing Conservative Party representation in Parliament from 2014, perhaps feminists need to take lessons from the anti-abortion lobby of the 1970s and get organised now.

Miriam J. Laugesen and Robin Gauld, *Democratic Governance and Health: Hospitals, Politics and Health Policy in New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2012), 214 pp.

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New Zealand is unique worldwide in having had elected boards separate from local government responsible for public hospitals without interruption since the 19th century, except for a brief period in the 1990s when appointed boards were introduced as part of an attempt to introduce private sector corporate governance into the public hospitals. So claim Laugesen and Gauld, two New Zealand-trained political scientists, the former expatriate in the US and the latter at the University of Otago, both with a long-term interest in the political dynamics of health systems. There seems little reason to doubt the veracity of their starting point. From there, they set out to explain why elected boards have survived so stubbornly despite the transformation of the nature of hospitals and health services in the interim, and the shift from local sources of finance to general taxation levied by central government. They also take a critical look at the performance of elected boards, particularly in their current incarnation as District Health Boards (DHBs) since 2001 and the 'representative model' of public sector governance that DHBs exemplify. They end by drawing lessons from their analysis of elected representation in the health care system and ask whether DHBs should be retained. They accomplish this by drawing on a mix of secondary sources, material from the National Archives in Wellington and, in the case of elections to DHBs, their own original research on candidates and voter behaviour. The history and analysis is framed in terms of 'path dependency' and the impact of wider social and economic events on the way in which health system governance is considered in different periods.

Laugesen and Gauld explain the persistence of the elected hospital board in three main ways: the boards long pre-dated the advent of national health insurance in 1938 and so were able to limit New Zealand's first Labour government's reforms to 'a system of