



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 2, 2013

U.K. Parliament Targets Policy Allowing 40-Week Abortions of “Disabled” Babies

An investigative commission within the U.K.’s Parliament has recommended changes to a law that allows for abortion as late as 40 weeks for babies who may be “severely disabled” when born. The UK’s [Telegraph](#) newspaper reported that, according to the commission chaired by Conservative MP Fiona Bruce, the rules for when a pre-born baby may be deemed severely disabled are being applied “haphazardly” and in some cases may be used as a convenient way to end the life of a baby that a mother or couple do not want to deal with. In other cases, the commission reported, parents are being “steered” toward aborting potentially disabled babies without being fully informed about available alternatives to them once a baby is born.



In some examples, reported *The Telegraph*, use of the rule “has led to fetuses being aborted purely because screening has detected a cleft lip or club foot, conditions which can be dealt with after birth, according to the committee. Under the 1967 Abortion Act, a termination can be carried out up until 24 weeks gestation if two doctors agree that the physical or mental health of the woman or the child would be at risk if the pregnancy were to continue.”

The special policy is supposed to be used in cases — up to 40 weeks into a pregnancy — in which a doctor believes there may be a “substantial risk” that a child will be “seriously” handicapped. According to [The Tablet](#), a weekly U.K. Catholic publication, the number of abortions performed because of a supposed disability in the pre-born child has risen by 14 percent over the past year. “Records released by the Department of Health show that 2,692 abortions took place last year due to diagnosis of a medical abnormality, compared to 2,307 in 2011,” reported the Catholic publication. “Termination of pregnancies in which Down syndrome was diagnosed increased by six per cent (from 512 to 544). Abortions for other medical conditions, such as cystic fibrosis and multiple gestation, also increased by 33 per cent — with four pregnancies terminated due to diagnosis of a cleft palate.”

According to the British government, the total number of abortions in England and Wales decreased by two and one-half percent, from 189,931 in 2011 to 185,122 in 2012 — a number that is still over five percent higher than the number of abortions performed in the U.K. in 2002.

“It is time to review the moral, ethical, legal, and practical framework within which this provision of the Abortion Act operates and how the law applies to a fetus beyond the age of viability,” the commission’s report recommended. “Given the changes in domestic and international law and societal attitudes in recent years which are influencing views on disability, we recommend that Parliament reviews the question of allowing abortion on the grounds of disability.”



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Mike Sullivan of [Saving Downs](#), a New Zealand-based advocacy group for people with Down syndrome, applauded the report, predicting that repealing the policy “would be the abolition of eugenic abortions against our people.” Sullivan added that such a repeal would represent “a defining moment for the Down syndrome community in the UK,” and would likely have “downstream effects in countries such as New Zealand and Australia, as the screening and disability selective abortion programs in those two countries mirror the UK ones.”

He concluded that only time would tell “how the recommendations develop into changes, but we can be sure that this is a momentous and historic stepping stone towards full social justice for our community.”



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