



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on April 1, 2024

## U.K. Lawmakers Hope to Eliminate Provision Allowing Down-syndrome Babies to Be Aborted Up to Birth

Forty Members of Parliament (MPs) in the United Kingdom have endorsed an amendment that would reduce the length of time during which unborn babies with Down syndrome may be aborted.

Under the U.K.'s 1967 Abortion Act, "normal" babies can be aborted as late as 24 weeks, but babies considered to be disabled — a category that includes those with Down syndrome — can be aborted up to the moment they exit their mother's womb.

The proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, introduced by Sir Liam Fox, would eliminate the Down-syndrome exception to the 24-week abortion limit. While far from ideal, it at least puts babies with Down syndrome on an equal legal footing with their non-disabled peers and will surely save some lives.



Andrii Panchyk/iStock/Getty Images Plus

The MPs signing the amendment, some of them quite prominent, run the gamut of political persuasions: Fox's Conservative Party, the Labor Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

"There is considerable cross-party support to remove an anomaly in U.K. law which allows those with Down's syndrome to be aborted up until 40 weeks," Fox, a former physician, told [Catholic Herald](#).

"Many of us believe this is utterly against the purpose of our equality legislation and treats those with Down's syndrome as second-class citizens when it comes to their rights."

"My amendment would remove an anomaly which many were not aware even existed and send a signal about the values that we share across the political system in our country," he added.

Thanks to disability-rights activists, more U.K. residents have become aware of the "anomaly" in recent years.

In 2017, for example, a poll [found](#) that more than half of them opposed the Abortion Act's disability exception. That same year, Lord Kevin Shinkwin, who was born with brittle-bone disease, introduced legislation similar to Fox's only to see it blocked by his peers.

"What I don't understand is how after birth I can be good enough for the Prime Minister and the Queen to send me to the House of Lords but before birth I'm only good enough for the incinerator," Shinkwin said at the time. "I'm part of a group of people with congenital conditions that is being systematically killed."

In 2021, Heidi Crowter, a young woman with Down syndrome, sued to overturn the Abortion Act's



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disability exception. Another plaintiff in the case, Máire Lea-Wilson, was pressured to abort her son at 34 weeks when he was diagnosed with Down syndrome. According to the [BBC](#), the plaintiffs' attorney, Jason Coppel, "said the effect [of the exception] was to stereotype life as a disabled or seriously handicapped person as not worth living and as having less life value than an able-bodied person."

After two U.K. courts handed down unfavorable decisions, Crowter vowed to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights "because it is downright discrimination that people with disabilities are treated differently," the [BBC](#) reported.

There is good reason to believe that Down-syndrome babies are being targeted for extinction, as has [already happened in Iceland](#). For many years, about 90 percent of such babies have been aborted in the U.K.

*Catholic Herald* writes:

The most recent full-year abortion statistics for the [year ending 31 December 2021](#), show there were 859 abortions when a baby had Down's syndrome in 2021, an increase of 24 per cent from 2020.

The actual numbers may be higher than reported due to underreporting of disability abortion statistics, according to [Don't Screen Us Out](#), a group of over 17,000 people with Down's syndrome, their families and supporters who are working to ensure that "people with Down's syndrome are equally valued and have an equal chance of being born" in the UK.

A [2013 review](#) showed 886 abortions for Down's syndrome in England and Wales in 2010 but only 482 were reported in abortion statistics from the Department of Health and Social Care. Such underreporting [was confirmed](#) by a 2014 Department of Health and Social Care review.

Despite all these statistics, criticism of the Abortion Act's disability exception from a [UN committee](#) and the U.K.'s own [Disability Rights Commission](#), and the findings of a [2013 Parliamentary Inquiry](#), the exception remains on the books.

But maybe that is about to change. Don't Screen Us Out spokeswoman Lynn Murray, mother of a 24-year-old woman with Down syndrome, told *Catholic Herald* she has high hopes for Fox's amendment.

"This is an important change to the law and it's fantastic to see so many MPs are getting behind this change," she said. "Very few people are aware of this discriminatory part of our law that singles out babies with disabilities including Down's syndrome allowing them to be screened out by abortion up to birth."

Murray said she sees "every day the unique value she [her daughter] brings to our family and the positive impact she has on others around her."

"The provision in the Abortion Act harks back to a time when we thought it was better for people with disabilities not to be part of our society," she contended. "We live in a far more inclusive and progressive society now, where we celebrate diversity, and all of our laws should reflect that."

When there's a conflict between "diversity" and abortion privileges, however, diversity is sure to take it on the chin: Some Labor Party MPs have introduced their own amendment that would [legalize abortion](#)



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