

## OBITUARY

## Vera Houghton

Lady Houghton, CBE

Vera Houghton (Lady Houghton, CBE), who died on 30 November 2013 at the aged of 99, was a birth control pioneer and one of the most powerful national influences on family planning and abortion legislation. Yet, because of her intense dislike of personal publicity, she was rarely recognised as such. As the first Executive Secretary of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (1949–1959), Chairman of the UK Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) (1963–1970), founder of the Birth Control Campaign and Birth Control Trust in the 1970s, and National Council member (1968–1975) and Vice-Chairman (1973–1975) and subsequently Vice-President of the Family Planning Association (FPA), she laid the legal foundations for the national provision for the family planning and abortion care that we know today and the international structure for developing and supporting family planning policy and services worldwide.

She was born Vera Travis in Southall, Middlesex, UK on 14 October 1914. Vera went to Haberdashers' Aske's School in Acton and subsequently attended Kerr Sanders Secretarial College in Piccadilly. In 1934 she went to work for the Association of Officers for Taxes, initially as a 'dogsbody' but then as secretary to the editor of the journal, *Taxes*. It was there that she met her husband, Douglas Houghton, founder and General Secretary of the Association of Officers of Taxes. They married in 1939.

My first meeting with Vera was in Autumn 1963 when I was interviewed for the post of Secretary of ALRA, then re-energising itself to join battle on abortion law reform. A charming, well-dressed and friendly woman in her late 40s, she already had a substantial career behind her. During the Second World War she had worked with Douglas, her husband, on his weekly BBC radio advice programme 'Can I Help You?', which made him a household name. Vera's perception of people's problems was heightened not only by the variety of personal difficulties revealed in their huge weekly mailbag, but also by the direct experience of an office colleague who had an illegal abortion.



Vera Houghton in the 1960s.

In 1949 Douglas was elected to Parliament as the Labour Member of Parliament (MP) for Sowerby. Not long afterwards the FPA offered Vera a job as Secretary to the fledgling International Committee on Planned Parenthood with four founder members, today the IPPF with 152 member associations – “and that's how I started”, she said. For the next 10 years Vera worked with the early pioneers: Margaret Sanger, Elise Ottesen-Jensen, Helena Wright and Margaret Pyke. Remarkable personal qualities were needed in this demanding environment. When she left in 1959, Dr C P Blacker, IPPF Vice-Chairman, paid tribute to her “exceptional qualities – her intelligence, energy and shrewd sense; her tact, imaginativeness and good humour; her resourcefulness and courage – her charm”.

Vera brought these qualities to ALRA when she was elected Chairman in 1963. ALRA's new younger generation of members wanted to see change and shrewdly assessed that Vera was the right person for the job. With her innate ability to put people into the right slot she forged a highly effective campaigning team from a small group of inexperienced unknowns. The meticulous preparation inside and outside Parliament, hard work, attention to detail and care with approaching MPs, all organised under Vera's guidance, were undoubtedly key factors for the young David Steel MP (now Lord Steel) considering possible options in 1966 when he won third place in the ballot for private members' bills. And in October 1967, after a long Parliamentary battle, the Abortion Act reached the statute book. In their book *Abortion Law Reformed*, Hindell and Simms summed it all up: “Her work for the cause was more important than that of any other personality in the whole of the campaign”.

It was my good fortune to continue working with Vera when in 1970 I took on the job of General Secretary of the Birth Control Campaign with the aim of making birth control free of charge on the National Health Service (NHS). She and Alastair Service, ALRA's leading lobbyist, had identified in a conversation during the last stages of the abortion law reform debates the anomaly that abortion would now be available on the NHS while contraception was not. This led to the setting up of the Birth Control Campaign (1970) and in 1972 the Birth Control Trust. Free birth control on the NHS became a reality in 1974.

Attacks on the Abortion Act started almost as soon as it was passed. This opposition built up in the mid-1970s, when Vera had the inspiration to establish (1976) a broad-based coalition of voluntary organisations with one aim: defence of the 1967 Abortion Act (Co-ord: the Co-ordinating Committee in Defence of the Abortion Act, serviced by the Birth Control Trust).

In 1985 Vera finally ‘retired’ from her voluntary commitments. But even after that she supported Douglas (a member of the House of Lords since 1974) in his masterly examination of legislation clarifying the grounds for late terminations, the outcome of which was finally incorporated into the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act.

Her private life with Douglas was in their Surrey cottage, with a huge garden, cats and a badger family in the next field. She was a good cook and generous with garden produce and sharing recipes. In 1986 she was awarded a CBE. In the last decade of her life her health became frail and she moved to a Royal National Institute of Blind People residential home in Hove. Douglas had died in 1996.

Lord Steel called her a doughty warrior and a great inspiration. Former colleagues have spoken movingly of how Vera helped change the world and the lives of those who worked with her, learning from her outstanding organisational and advocacy skills. This remarkable, self-contained, private woman was all that, and remains in the hearts of all of us who knew her as generous, considerate and quite simply kind.

**Dilys Cossey**, OBE, Hon FFSRH

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