

Abortion debate has much to learn from equality referendum

When it comes to abortion, constructive discourse is often sacrificed for 'balance' and this has got to change



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The Oireachtas Committee debates on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, admirably led by Fine Gael TD Jerry Buttiner, proved that we can provide space for civilised debate

Is there anything to be said for having a mature, compassionate conversation about abortion? Politicians, terrified of losing their seats, have ruled out any constitutional or legislative change this side of the general election.

But you would think we are in the final days of an abortion referendum and I'm exhausted even thinking about it.

Yesterday, pro-life and pro-choice supporters took to the streets of Dublin, staging rallies and counter-rallies to maintain/repeal the Eighth Amendment.

Human Life International is organising a "training school" for Catholic pro-life activists for the autumn and one online medical abortion service (Women on Waves) says it may attempt to drop illegal abortifacient pills into Ireland via drones as it has recently done in Poland.

All around us, voices old and new, familiar and foreign, moderate and hysterical, are gearing up for the mother (sorry, ladies) of all battles.

Family & Life, one pro-life organisation, has warned - recklessly, in my view - that any repeal of the Eighth will lead to euthanasia of the sick and elderly and "ultimately the killing of babies born with 'defects'" after birth.

This kind of needless, inaccurate scaremongering (part of a fundraising drive) is profoundly unhelpful. But it's a taste of things to come.

The abuse and vitriol - sadly, I'm speaking from personal experience here - unleashed at anyone who dares express a view on the operation of Article 40.3.3 is real and visceral and serves to silence experience, nuance and reason.

To secure "balance" our media, especially our broadcasters, end up giving platforms to shouty voices at far ends of the spectrum, producing the very antithesis of a constructive debate.

The culture of censorship that runs like an ocean current through much of Irish public discourse, as well as the oppressive tactics hurled at those who contribute to this debate, are incredibly effective.

Together they ensure that the voices that must be heard - of women, clinicians, men who have been affected by abortion, as well as those genuinely conflicted about the issue, to name but a few - are utterly silenced.

It is not unusual for moral issues to dominate election campaigns, here and elsewhere. But the intractable issue of abortion has dominated Irish politics like no other.

Can we have a mature conversation about abortion? Is there a way to ensure that looming debates on the Eighth are not as polarised as before?

Our Republic has been in existence since 1949: can we get over our post-colonial inferiority complex and stop exporting our difficult issues to our next-door neighbours? Can we make up our own minds?

I may be proved wrong, but I'm feeling tentatively optimistic that maybe, just maybe, this time we can.

The Oireachtas Committee debates on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, admirably led by Fine Gael TD Jerry Buttimer, proved that we can provide space for civilised debate, even - and especially - with those whose views we disagree with.

The recent marriage equality referendum also provides a template for how things might be done.

In the US, the Supreme Court justices who wrote blistering dissents on that court's decision to extend marriage equality to same-sex couples, complained bitterly that seismic societal shifts should be left to the ballot box, not to judges.

I agree.

But, more often than not, we burden our courts with difficult issues such as abortion because our legislators fail inexcusably to act and we - the voters who elect them - do not insist that they do the job they are elected to do.

What was striking about the marriage equality campaign was not just the efficacy of its coordinated, well-funded grassroots and social media operation: the tailwinds of social change nurtured over generations

helped, of course.

Its success wasn't down to politicians jumping on the bandwagon or a rejection of the Catholic Church, which ran a halfhearted campaign leaving it up to more feverish foot soldiers to sow what at times felt, to me, like fear and loathing.

It wasn't just the personal stories from gay children and their grandparents. It wasn't even the contributions from celebrities and the intervention of former President Mary McAleese that brought us out in record numbers to vote for something that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago.

The campaign was a success because the debate was different, a measured one that reached out across generations, gender and mindsets.

Critically, the campaign succeeded because it reassured those fearful of the consequences of marriage equality, especially in respect of children, that some form of reproductive Armageddon would not befall Ireland.

The marriage equality campaign floundered somewhat on the issue of children, but Ms McAleese dealt decisively with many red herrings when she said the only children who would be affected were Ireland's gay children.

Poll after poll shows that there is strong support for abortion in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormalities (FFA).

Tectonic plates have shifted, but can that change be debated constructively and compassionately?

The pro-life side must realise that shrugging their shoulders indifferently at the plight of victims of sexual violence, suicidal women or parents with FFA pregnancies returning home from the UK with the remains of their unborn in Jiffy bags will no longer be tolerated.

Equally, the pro-choice side must provide reassurance that there are alternative legal structures that meet valid concerns for all sides - such as rationale, thresholds, viability and conscientious objection - that can be put in place if the Eighth is repealed.

The drumbeats of a perennial war are growing louder, but we don't have to march to the beat of a weary drum.

The one thing that we cannot do is wait for the death of yet another woman to force us to confront the reality of abortion.

Ireland, it's time to talk.

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