

# Repealing the Eighth and the right to autonomy over ones' own body

'The right to bodily autonomy, just like the right to equal pay, is a fundamental right'

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This week Insider is going to address one of the most contentious issues in society. For 33 years, the Eighth amendment has been an issue which has split the people right down the middle - which is why most mainstream politicians have shied away from outlining their position on it.

However Irish society has been in a process of transition over the course of the last 10 years or so, both socially and politically, which has brought the abortion issue to the centre of debate once again. The historic marriage equality referendum last year was a major breakthrough in social terms, while politically there has been an incremental shift away from the two historically dominant parties of FF and FG - despite the fact that they have managed to cobble together a government between them, however much FF would like to maintain the illusion it is in opposition.

In real terms however support for both parties has significantly declined to the point where they now have less than 50 per cent support between them. This is in stark contrast to the 80 to 90 per cent support they would have commanded in the past. What this suggests is a real hunger among a significant section of the population for real change, to break once and for all with old politics and the old institutions that have dominated political and social life in Ireland since the foundation of the State.



The Eighth amendment (which equates a woman's life to that of a fetus ) and a woman's right to choose is at the cold face of this social divergence. It is therefore no coincidence this issue has come to the fore at the same time as we are witnessing a new wave in the movement for woman's rights in general, not just here in Ireland but internationally. The now annual March for Choice has seen growing numbers year on year, made up predominantly of young women, many of whom were not even born the last time there was a referendum on this issue. The march in Dublin in September to Repeal the Eighth saw approximately 25,000 attending.

This pressure that has built up around this issue has even forced the political establishment to concede that the Eighth amendment is something that will have to be revisited sooner rather than later, though this has not stopped them employing stall tactics such as the citizens assembly which is due to begin deliberating later this month.

Before this however Ruth Coppinger TD and the Anti Austerity Alliance will bring a Bill before the Dail on October 18 for the outright repeal of the Eighth amendment. This is likely to ratchet up the pressure on Government and opposition TDs alike, particularly for Catherine Zappone and others who have expressed their pro-repeal views in the past.

## Pro-choice is not the same as pro-abortion



Now, Insider is going to lay his cards on the table. Insider is writing this from a pro-choice perspective which is not the same as being pro-abortion as some may disingenuously suggest. Being pro-choice is an acknowledgement that abortion is necessary in various different circumstances. The Constitutional ban on abortion does not stop it from happening, all it does is isolate those who find themselves in such a difficult position, and in many cases prevents them from having the support of friends and family by their side as they are forced to travel alone to Britain or elsewhere.

Above all else, this is, in Insider's opinion, an issue of individual freedom, about the right to have autonomy over one's own body, about the right to make the choice that each individual feels is best for her in any given circumstance. The main problem Insider has with the anti-choice ("pro life" ) side of the debate is the totalitarian nature of what it represents.

In effect it enforces the domination of one person's view upon another. Being pro-choice does not impact on the individual rights of anyone to self determination, but anti-choice however does. The usual response to this argument is "What about the rights of the fetus?" This is where the debate usually gets bogged down in technicalities and scientific opinion about at what point the embryo, or the fetus for that matter, becomes an individual in its own right.

There is basically no general consensus on this question. However if we look at the abortion laws in all other EU countries, the point at which abortion is no longer permitted is on average between 12 and 14 weeks. Everyone is going to have a different opinion on this so it is next to impossible to get consensus, hence reference to the European average.

Religion is often another motivating factor which suggests life begins the minute the sperm and egg unite. Insider has no time for this view as it again revolves around a set of beliefs, held by some, who seek to enforce their view on everyone else via institutions such as the Church and State. If you are religious, be it Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or whatever, that is your business and Insider respects your right to believe and practise your religion as you see fit, as long as you do not try to enforce your beliefs on others.

What Insider is outlining here is not a far left radical view, these are basic fundamental tenets to liberalism, yet they are principles that have never been enacted in this State. Ireland likes to perceive itself as a modern 21st century country, yet we have laws and social practises that are still hanging over from feudal times. The role of the Catholic

church and the domination it still holds over many of the key institutions in society, such as education and health care, but also within the law, are a major contributing factor to this.

## The right to bodily autonomy



Historically Ireland never underwent a revolutionary break between feudal and capitalist relations due to colonial oppression, but even after Independence these mutated social relations have continued up to the present. This is due to the historic weakness of the Irish capitalist state that has, and continues to, passed off social responsibility in terms of education, health care, and to a large extent social welfare, to the church and other NGOs. What we are witnessing now in social terms are these contradictions playing out, and the fight for individual self determination and bodily autonomy are central to this.

Nevertheless advancements in medicine could make Ireland's abortion ban all but redundant in any case as abortion pills can be purchased online through websites like Women On Web which will provide women with these pills following a brief online consultation. Attempts to try to police this practise or to criminalise women who partake of this service would be futile and in reality would only act to strengthen the determination of those fighting for the right to choose.

It is however also a matter of principle. The State should not, and can not, continue to enforce such draconian laws. It is vital for any country serious about equality to remove barriers that prevent such equality coming about. The right to bodily autonomy, just like the right to equal pay, or the right to wear clothes you see fit without judgment, should be basic fundamental rights in any society that likes to see itself as progressive. Let us hope Ireland can catch up in this regard over the next period and not let the forces of reaction continue to hold us back.

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