

The Guardian

Leo Varadkar to campaign to liberalise Irish abortion laws

Henry McDonald *Ireland*
correspondent

set date next week for referendum on repeal of 8th

Sat 27 Jan 2018 10.50 GMT



Demonstrators march in Dublin to demand change to Ireland's abortion laws. Photograph: Tom Honan/PA

Ireland's taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has confirmed he will campaign for the liberalisation of Ireland's anti-abortion laws in an upcoming referendum.

The prime minister had faced criticism for appearing ambiguous about the referendum on abortion, particularly the suggestion that terminations in Irish hospitals should be allowed up to 12 weeks into the pregnancy.

Varadkar said on Saturday, however, that he would fully support the reforms proposed in the referendum.

"We will have that referendum, hopefully in the summer, and we should be in a position to

make a decision on that in government next week,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.



Leo Varadkar. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

Asked if he would be campaigning for the abortion laws to be relaxed, Varadkar said: “I’ll be campaigning for them to be changed and to be liberalised, yes.”

He had been expected to make his views known before a special Irish cabinet meeting on Monday evening to discuss the referendum and its timing. It is expected the vote on whether to abolish the 8th amendment to the country’s constitution will happen in May.

The amendment was added after a referendum in 1983. It recognises the equal rights to life of a foetus and the mother during pregnancy.

Pro-choice campaigners say the amendment creates a “chill factor” in the health system, preventing medical teams from carrying out abortions even when a woman’s life may be at risk if the pregnancy continues. They say it causes fears that physicians could be prosecuted and jailed if they carry out terminations even in extreme cases, such as when women are suicidal or are made pregnant through rape.

Varadkar was asked on Saturday if his opinions on abortion had shifted.

“I think it’s fair to say that my own views on this matter have evolved, but I think sometimes that the terms pro-life and pro-choice can be misunderstood. I think even people who are in favour of abortion in certain circumstances are pro-life. I still believe in life but I understand that there are circumstances under which pregnancies can’t continue,” he said.

Varadkar faces divisions in his Fine Gael party, with Dáil deputies from more rural, conservative constituencies opposed to changing the law.

All deputies in the parliament will get a free vote. Fiánna Fail, the main opposition party, is also split over the issue.

Micheál Martin, the opposition leader, shocked many in his party last week when he came out in favour of repealing the 8th amendment and allowing abortions in limited circumstances in the health system.

On Friday an opinion poll found a clear majority of Irish people in favour of dropping the clause. It also revealed that a majority supported the introduction, via legislation, of

abortion up to 12 weeks into a pregnancy.

The Irish Times/MRBI opinion poll found that 56% of respondents favoured repealing the amendment and allowing abortion up to 12 weeks.

Participants were responding to the question: “Will you vote to change the constitution so that the government can legislate for abortion up to 12 weeks, or will you not vote to change the constitution?”

The 1,200-person survey found that 29% said they were not in favour of change while 15% said they did not know or had no opinion.

Since you're here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading The Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall. We want our journalism to remain accessible to our global audience. Our readers' contributions enable us to maintain this openness, so we can all access accurate information and analysis.

The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

I appreciate there not being a paywall: it is more democratic for the media to be available for all and not a commodity to be purchased by a few. I'm happy to make a contribution so others with less means still have access to information. Thomasine, Sweden

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as €1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Ireland
- Abortion
- Leo Varadkar
- Europe
- Health
- Women
- news