

No Abortion Here

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IN OCTOBER the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a DUP motion opposing a measure which they believed would make abortion more widely available in the province. The motion was supported by Sinn Fein, demonstrating that when it comes to a real issue, both extremist parties are still living in a fantasy world.

Belfast has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the UK and last year more than half of all births were to unmarried mothers. 40 women a week travel out of Northern Ireland to access abortion services. They are of course the women who can raise the money (perhaps £1000) to pay for a private abortion. They are not likely to be from the 50% who are below the poverty line. Effectively, therefore, there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. But at least the DUP and Sinn Fein are united. Isn't that just great!

The 1967 Abortion Act in Great Britain was not extended to Northern Ireland, so the law is covered by the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act which makes abortions illegal. There are two exceptions. The 1929 Infant Life (Preservation) Act was extended to Northern Ireland in 1945 and allows abortion to preserve a mother's life, while the Bourne judgement of 1938 allows abortion in circumstances of risk to mental or physical health. In practice, abortions are only performed when there is a serious risk to health or life.

In the Republic of Ireland abortion is also illegal under the 1861 Offences against the Person Act, though an opinion poll in October found that 54% of women believed the state should legislate to allow abortion, and 40% said that, in all circumstances, the woman should have the right herself to decide whether to have an abortion. In the X case in 1992 thousands of people marched to support the right of a 14-year-old girl, pregnant and suicidal after being raped, to travel to England.

The Irish Catholic bishops recently issued a statement reaffirming their opposition to abortion. They begin with a quote from the Gospel of Luke where Elizabeth addresses Mary, the mother of Jesus: "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb". This, they argue, was a recognition by God that life is sacred, from the moment of conception to death. But this is a far-fetched interpretation. In the context all it means is that Elizabeth thinks the infant in Mary's womb is someone special.

Then the bishops make the following assertion: "The Christian principle of respect for human life at every stage of its existence is firm, clear and continuous". This bold statement displays an astounding ignorance of the history of Christianity, which has sanctioned slaughter on an immense scale down the millennia, including Jews, Muslims, fellow Christian 'heretics' or 'natives' in conquered lands. Where is the strong condemnation of violations of the sanctity of life when US planes blow Iraqis or Afghans to bits? Where was the excommunication of terrorists involved in killing fellow Irish people? What about animal slaughter?

The truth is that women are easy targets. Religious leaders can impose their will more effectively in this area because they meet with little resistance. Most women passively accept the authority or moral blackmail of the churches and indeed are often their strongest supporters. It is only when they are personally affected that they begin to fight for their rights and then they realise that they are treated as second class citizens.

In many other countries safe legal abortion is available. This has been the case in Denmark, for example, for 30 years, and their abortion rate is actually at its lowest and still falling. The reason



Cartoon by Tim Sanders (reproduced with permission)

is quite simple: there is not only legal abortion but also a comprehensive sex education programme which starts in primary schools. All the evidence indicates that proper and full sex education from an early age leads to a decline in teenage pregnancies and therefore abortions. Ireland's high rate of teenage pregnancy is in no small part the product of sexual ignorance.

In the space of 20 years Ireland's ban on contraceptives, divorce and homosexuality have all been overturned as the society has become more liberal. In the matter of abortion, however, if anything, the process has been reversed. In 1983 the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution granted the 'unborn' a right to life equal to that of the pregnant woman. This is sheer madness and places Ireland alongside Portugal as the only European union members that have strict laws against abortion.

The Northern Ireland Assembly vote on 22nd October indicates that the Six Counties are taking the same reactionary anti-abortion road as the rest of the island. Orange and Green may disagree on many things, but they are united in denying women full citizenship and the control over their own bodies. In Ireland, irrespective of political opinion, a poisonous patriarchy still rules. □