

Decades of organising wins new abortion referendum in Ireland

Constitutional ban in place since 1983 to be repealed if referendum passes

Andrew Flood

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The announcement that there will be a referendum to decriminalise abortion in Ireland is the product of decades of active campaigning. Pro-choice campaigners built for repeal ever since the hated 8th amendment was entered into the Constitution in 1983, putting a ban on abortion, which was already illegal in the country, into the constitution. If at first this seemed like a distant demand now repeal looks by far the most likely outcome in May. The story of how this happened illustrates how change comes in general. That is not through elections but through people getting organised to demand that change, regardless of which politicians happen to be running the show in any particular year.

After all few would have predicted that it would have been a Fine Gael government supported by Fianna Fáil (the largest parties in Ireland, both traditionally conservative and centre-right) that would finally move forward on the referendum to repeal the 8th. We can say this with great certainty because when Labour were thrown out of power in the last election a range of pundits from the right and the left, including the Labour Party, tweeted very definite declarations that this meant there could be no referendum. How wrong they were, but fortunately most pro-choice organisers stepped up their activity rather than waiting for the next election.

Who is in power is, of course, not completely irrelevant but significant changes are far, far more dependent on people organising themselves to demand change and forcing politicians to implement that change. Almost every significant change in political policy in Ireland, from the abolition of water charges to Repeal of the 8th has been an outcome of people organising together and mobilising to force change. Within this direct action played a key role in ensuring politicians cannot simply stick their heads in the sand.

With the water charges campaign which defeated a new flat rate austerity tax, it was mass non-payment and the disruption of meter installations that forced the politicians who insisted the charge was inevitable to abolish it. With the pro-choice movement it has been thousands of people per year, carrying unwanted pregnancies obtaining abortion pills for themselves and taking them in Ireland, despite being at risk of a 14 year prison sentence. Before and during the 1991 'x-case' when the state injected a 14 year old she so could not travel to England for an abortion 'illegal' distribution of abortion information and huge marches demanding X be allowed

travel played the same role and forced the politicians to call the 1992 referenda that saw the bans on abortion information and travel for abortion overturned.

Politicians have always been excellent at stepping in front of the cameras, right at the moment that movements, built by others are on the edge of success. Political careers are made or broken on the basis of the timing of this decision. There is of course some courage involved in that decision due to the risk being taken but the subsequent focus on the politician can give the impression that they are the reason for change, and not the movement they have stepped in front of.

The current wave of organising that won the holding of this referendum inherited the work of others but otherwise began in the protests against the Youth Defence billboards targetting women who had abortions set up by the anti-choice group Youth Defence in the summer of June 2012. Not for the first time arrogant attacks from anti-choice bigots galvanised an angry backlash and a new generation of resistance. In a similar but smaller way in the late 1980s the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children brought together the organisers who put together the x-case march when SPUC went after students providing abortion information in guidebooks.

In the early Autumn of 2012 Savita Halappanavar, an Indian woman living in Galway, died from septicemia after being denied an emergency abortion. When the horrific news of her death circulated the pro-choice organisers of the Dublin demonstration knew each other from the protests against the billboards and were able to quickly organise. And after the initial protests they did not go home and wait for the next tragedy but started to do the ground work in preparing the movement that emerged – in particular through the creation of the Abortion Rights Campaign and the annual March for Choice that rapidly grew to mobilising 10s of thousands. Last year's #Strike4Repeal, a huge grassroots protest which blocked O'Connell bridge and brought Dublin to a halt for the afternoon, turned up the heat in demonstrating there could be consequences to politicians thinking they could simply ignore this growing movement.

There will be time after the referendum victory to write a detailed history of this movement but here we wanted to open this campaign by pointing out that it is not Prime Minister Leo Varadkar or even the Citizens Assembly (a panel set up to deliberate on the issue and make policy recommendation) that is forcing change but the work of a mostly unknown set of organisers over the last few years. This understanding will matter in the aftermath of the referendum when we move on to fighting the problems in the legislation that will be introduced (and there will be problems). But it also matters to how we understand that we can collectively change all aspects of the world we live in. Solutions lie not through the selection of politicians but through the building of sustainable movement that are willing to take action to achieve their goals.

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