

Irish parliament blockaded by 100s after 3rd refusal in 6 months to legislate for X-case

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Contents

Media access	3
Fury	4

Last night saw hundreds of pro-choice activists blockade the gates of the Dáil after TD's once more refused to pass X-case legislation. Twenty years after the X-case and one month after the death of Savita Halappanavar women in Ireland were told once more that the politicians had not had enough time. The political parties, in particular the Labour Party, were once more engaged in a cynical game of playing politics — a game that leaves pregnant women at continued risk in Irish hospitals.

In 1992 after similar mass protests the Supreme Court overturned an injunction that was preventing a 14 year old rape survivor from leaving the country for an abortion. It also ruled that, even under the republic's anti-women constitution, women's whose lives were threatened because of pregnancy, including if it was because an unwanted pregnancy was making them suicidal should be able to access abortions in Ireland. What should have happened then was simple, the politicians should have legislated so that doctors could be confident about when an abortion under such circumstances was legal.

The refusal of TD's to legislate for X for the third time in 6 months, with two of those refusals happening after the death of Savita Halappanavar, illustrate the bankruptcy of electoralist politics. On two separate occasions, in 1992 and 2002, governments have held referendums, in both cases to try and overturn the requirement to legislate for X. In both cases those referendums were defeated but 20 years later, after the people 'expressed their will' in the streets and then in the ballot boxes even Labour TD's refuse to pass that legislation.

Of course we understand that what we are seeing is not a democratic system in operation but a complex political game. A game that is all about power, control and optics. Under the rules of this game so called pro-choice Labour Party members can't bring themselves to support a bill from the rival ULA or Sinn Féin. Those who have the power in this game are not the people — 20 years of failure to legislate could not provide a clearer illustration that the people's will is almost incidental to the playing of that game. The force from the streets is now so great that it is likely Labour & Fine Gael will legislate in the next months, introducing a bill similar in form to both the ULA and Sinn Féin ones — just months later.

Media access

Also yesterday, Youth Defence held its first public protest demanding women be kept down since news of Savita's death broke. Only around a dozen adults turned up, numbers bulked out for the photo as is traditional with children. Three hours later the 4th pro-choice protest in 15 days took place. Despite it being a freezing night around 1,000 people turned out. Yet every panel discussion of Savita's death has had either a Youth Defence spokesperson on it or someone from one of the other equally marginal pressure groups of the catholic far right. Few panels have had **any** pro-choice spokesperson at all, instead 'balance' is supposedly created by having medical & legal experts being barracked by ideological loons endlessly repeating misleading studies, statistics and weird word formulations designed to describe black as white. Inevitably the one-sided criticism of women's choices that emerge from such a set up has an effect on public opinion even if the obvious political lunacy of the so called pro-life panel guests offset this. But it does lock us into a debate that is forever about how suicidal a women has to be and how this can be accurately measured rather than one about the rights of women.

Since the news of Savita Halappanavar's death broke it became clear that large numbers of people are furious with women's bodies being used in this political game. Thousands and thousands have poured into the streets for protests in a way that makes clear they don't really care just who has called them. The demonstrations have been organised but they have also felt raw and spontaneous. There is an atmosphere of contained fury that I remember from the X-case march but which is a long way from many routine protest and their careful choreography of whose banners go where and which politicians speak before each other.

Fury

Last night after the vote was announced the container of that fury broke for a while. The call for what was intended as a token blockade of the Dáil gates, with a banner demanding the repeal of the 8th Amendment up front, quickly turned into hundreds pressing their bodies against the gates as a human barrier. Dáil workers and Yes voting TD's were allowed to leave but when a man suspected of being a Fine Gael TD tried to do the same the crowd closed in, jostling him, and it took 5 Gardai to charge in and clear a path. On the Kildare street side the Garda expressions quickly went from finding the blockade an amusing break from routine to visible concern as to how to contain a mob of hundreds. Soon even the foot entrance was locked down.

On the Merrion Square side a small contingent tried to blockade the gates but without the huge numbers on Kildare Street quickly received a much rougher treatment from the Garda. Photographs show people being pushed, shoved and dragged about. In both cases the TD's within must have felt something of the rage outside, a rage that at least for a while forced them to the relative safety of the Dáil bar. Later that night one No-voting Dublin 7 TD, Paschal Donohoe had the word COWARD scrawled on his constituency office.

That fury is not so much a demand for the X-case legislation — everyone recognises that this is too little too late — but rather a fury at political game playing. What those on the streets actually demand is very simple — let women decide. Any woman who wants an abortion should be able to access one without concerns about where she will find the money or having to face a panel of experts to quiz her motivations.

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