Poor turnout in Ireland for Vigil for 'Life' despite massive spending

Andrew Flood

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Saturday in Dublin saw another desperate attempt by the anti-choice coalition to prevent legislation coming to the Dail (Irish parliament) to allow abortion where a women's life is under threat. Despite months of preparation, a spend that must have ran close to a million euro, and the parish priest at every mass in the country telling catholics they should attend, less that 15,000 turned up. Compared to the 150,000 women who have had to travel to obtain abortions in the last ecades this amounts to almost nothing, a handful of bigots bussed in from all over the country.

There are always rows about numbers in the aftermath of such gatherings and we are not going to claim to have counted the crowd — neither did anyone else as we didn't see any counters there despite the fact that the very controlled entry point would have made this easy to do. What we can however say is that the space the demonstration took place in is far too small to fit the initial 25,000 both Caroline Simmons and Eoin de Faoite, the normally secretive leader of Youth Defence, proclaimed from the stage. Some hours after the demonstration the organisers decided it was smart to claim an even more ludicrous 30,000 plus probably because of the ease with which they got the media to swallow the 25,000. The Facebook page of Youth Defence front 'Family & Life' went so far as to claim the crowd 'looked like' 50,000.

There is nothing new in this, Youth Defence also tries to multiply the number of people who attended their demonstration in November by a factor of 3 to turn a very poor turnout of 2–3000 into 10,000. In anticipation of this, a group of WSM members went to the Vigil for Life and walked though it from end to end several times to estimate crowd density, see who was really there in order to be able to offer a reasonable estimate of the total number of those so bigoted in Ireland that they would want to deny women a life saving abortion for religious reasons.

Our members there made the following points

- the first thing that was noticeable was the vase amount of money that had been spent. Two giant concert screens had been erected as well as a huge stage. These items alone would have cost many times the total amount that the pro-choice network had available for the organisation of the similarly sized Savita Halappanavar vigil back in November.

- there were enormous piles of expensive full colour pre-printed placards. No one was being allowed in with their own placards, our members witnessed one angry woman arguing

with three stewards who were refusing to allow her enter with a placard that read 'The 'Kingdom' says no to abortion' (pic below). Garda appeared to be helping with this operation, we saw stewards confiscate a giant cross from a red cloaked figure and the cross was then carried into a tent (see photo) by a Garda. We are not sure quite what law the guard concerned imagined he was enforcing.

- the vast majority of the crowd was elderly people and their grand children. It was noticeable that there were very few women who were actually of the age where they might become pregnant but also as with previous events those that were present had been pushed towards the front to create misleading photos & video for propaganda use by Youth Defence and other organisers.

- there were groups of Spanish, American & British anti-choice activists present and according to twitter at least one such US activist said that his airfare to Dublin had been paid for in order for him to attend. Not enough to make any difference in numbers but it does remind us of the way the fight to deny women control over their own bodies is seen as a crusade by the so called 'pro-life' movement internationally.

- the street (Merrion Sq South) was sealed off at both ends by very large numbers of stewards who were looking everyone over who entered the area and refusing entry to some people. It was not clear to us what law allowed them to claim the right to deny entry to a public street.

Actual numbers

In terms of the numbers present our members reported that the crowd was not at all closely packed and that the entire footpath on the south side was sealed off by crowd barriers, reducing the available width of the street considerable. They also reported that from about 15 minutes after the 4.30 start time repeated announcements were made asking the crows to move back because there was a crush at the front but that no such crush was reported by a photographer from Rabble who was on the stage. Presumably this was simply to get the limited attendance to move back to appear to fill more of the street. By they time our members left the area some 22 minutes after the advertised start time the back 1/3 of the street was still pretty empty (see photo) — and there were only limited numbers of people still arriving.

The maximum area occupied was thus defined as being between the two stewards barriers at either end of Merrion Square South. Some of that space was taken up by a number of tents, the huge screens and the large stage. And as above, the footpath on the south side was entirely blocked off behind barriers. So there was a very definite maximum space that could have been occupied.

Our members present used the Crowdsize app on a Smartphone to estimate how many people might have been present (see picture above). This is a simple process of pulling up a map of the area, drawing a box around the area occupied — very easy in this case as it was entirely enclosed by crowd control barriers and then entering a density estimate for the crowd. We were actually very generous and went for the maximum available density despite the fact it was obvious the crowd was not packed in that tightly. As can be seen below this suggests a maximum crowd size of 14,370. There is no physical way to fit 25,000 people into the available space without them being on each other shoulders — and the Vigil for Life crowd were really not up to such rock

concert conditions. 30,000 or 50,000 are simply ludicrous estimates that would have required stacking people three high.

One could argue that there was considerably less than 15,000, due to the stage, screens and tents but lets accept it for now. In the last decades 150,000 women have had to 'vote with their feet' by making the expensive and often difficult journey abroad for an abortion. For every ten of those women only one bigot was wiling to spend an hour in Merrion square to demand that women in future should also have to undertake that journey. Very, very few of those bigots were women of child bearing age.

Given the enormous amount of money spent, and the order from the alter last Sunday that catholics should attend, this small turnout is a disaster for the anti-choice movement and for the catholic church. Despite laying on buses from every corner of the country only a tiny, tiny percentage of catholics listened to their priests and attended. The organisers are highly secretive of their funding both in terms of how much is spent and where that money comes from, but it is no exaggeration that if they had hired people for a tenner an hour to stand and listen to their speeches they would have bought a crowd two or three times the size of the 15,000 that attended.

On a positive note Saturday also saw a national meeting of pro-choice activists in Dublin which launched the 'Abortion Rights Campaign'. This intends not only to make sure the government legislate for X but much more importantly to fight for all women by demanding that access to abortion should be free, safe and on request as part of a funded public healthcare system. Those who gathered in Merrion Square are the fading ghosts of the grim Ireland of yesterday, the future belongs to those fighting for womens' rights and against the religious bigots who have dominated social policy in Ireland for far too long.

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