

Miriam Lord: Stoney-faced silence from anti-abortion absolutists

Not a peep from retainers as Varadkar calls their bluff over concern for hard cases

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[Miriam Lord](#)

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Taoiseach Leo Varadkar speaks to Irish Times political reporter Sarah Bardon after canvassing for a Yes vote with other Fine Gael members in Tullamore, Co Offaly

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Because everyone was so busy being respectful, it seemed inappropriate to start up a chant in the chamber when the awkward silence descended.

But, as the ditty goes, they were all very quiet over there.

The truth hurts.

After years and years of pouring cold words from closed hearts, the absolutists had nothing to say when called out on their fake concern for the hard cases.

When [Leo Varadkar](#) and Mary Lou McDonald nailed their rank hypocrisy, they kept schtum.

For over 30 years they, or those like them, had plenty to say about those hard cases when fighting with every fibre of their being to have them cast out of their own country, along with their less deserving, casually exiled sisters.

Then five years ago, they deliberately turned their backs to the hard cases when vehemently opposing every syllable in the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (PLDPA). Despite

their unstinting efforts inside and outside Leinster House – the histrionics, the filibustering, the pressurising of colleagues, the unfounded scaremongering – that legislation passed into law.

Just one tiny concession and they railed against it, vowing to overturn it if ever there came a chance. That Bill recognised just one hard case, the hardest case of all: women who will most definitely die unless their pregnancy is ended.

But even the PLDPA was a step too far for the politicians who voted against it and were proud of the fact.

A death's door directive for a gravely ill woman.

And they voted against it.

And they have remained implacable in their refusal to give any comfort to women who have been raped or women carrying a baby which won't live outside the womb and who want to end their pregnancies.

Gullible doctors

Because you can't trust women, who will be lining up to pretend they're dying in order to procure abortions. And if they aren't acting out death scenes in surgeries the length and breadth of Ireland, they'll be pulling the wool over gullible doctors' eyes by being suicidal all of a sudden.

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As late as last weekend, Senator Rónán Mullen was sounding troubled about what exactly constitutes mental health, particularly where it pertains to a woman who may be experiencing a crisis pregnancy.

There is “a lack of evidence that mental health is health” was his astonishing remark while he ruminated on “the suicide thing” and other aspects of the PLDPA during an appearance on RTÉ's *The Week in Politics*. It so angered his fellow Senator Grace O'Sullivan that she called for him to come into the Upper House “to explain to us why he said that he does not believe that mental health is health”.

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The Green Party politician told the Seanad on Tuesday, “I don’t know what utopia he lives in but I live in a world where mental health is a real health issue to which we in this country . . . are not giving enough time.”

Meanwhile, back in the Dáil, the Sinn Féin leader was determined that people should not forget the doom-laden words and actions of politicians and anti-abortion campaigners who stood in total opposition to the PLDPA before it was enacted.

These same people are now trying to say that they supported it and that it gives more than adequate protection to women, but sure if it doesn’t, it mightn’t be a bad idea to take another look at the hard cases again.

And grant them their fervent wish that the Eighth Amendment remains in place.

“In the course of this debate, it is important that we deal in fact,” she told the Taoiseach during Leaders’ Questions. “I have heard assertions from the No campaign and its spokespersons that what they call hard cases, pregnancies as a result of rape, for example, or a pregnancy with a diagnosis of fatal foetal anomaly, that these cases can be dealt with under the current constitutional framework, and that is patently untrue.”

Mary Lou McDonald is right.

The Taoiseach absolutely agreed with her.

‘Hard law’

“I would contend that it is actually our hard laws that create those hard cases,” replied Varadkar. “And the Eighth Amendment is too hard and forces a very hard law on Irish people and Irish women.”

He reminded the Dáil of the amendment’s “eloquent” wording.

“It says that the right to life of the unborn is equal to that of the mother, so the right to life of a foetus of only a few days’ gestation is equal to the right to life of your mother, your sister or your female friends and co-workers.”

Mary Lou didn’t want anyone to forget that the people now suddenly aware of the hard cases are the “very same people” who “themselves campaigned against the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill”.

Remember, she said, that they talked about “the floodgates” opening and abortion become widely available as a result.

“They were wrong on this matter just as they are wrong now not to acknowledge that the Eighth Amendment blocks any action to legislate for what they call the hard cases. And how do we know this? We know this because we have tried.”

To suggest there is another solution is “entirely disingenuous”.

Leo Varadkar was alive to the pivoting of the previously unshakeable anti-abortion politicians and activists.

“What I see now, in the dying days, in the final days of this campaign is a tactic, a tactic by the No campaign to try and make out that there is some sort of alternative amendment that we could put into our Constitution,” he began, looking across the floor to the Fianna Fáil benches, where a majority of TDs voted against holding a referendum and even more are against repeal.

He had a question for them and the anti-abortion absolutists who now say repeal is not the answer.

‘Alternative amendment’

“I would ask those people, 30 years after that amendment was put into our Constitution, why in those 30 years has nobody put forward an alternative amendment that would deal with all of these hard cases? Why, only three days from the vote, are people suddenly raising that as a realistic argument and alternative?”

There was silence in the chamber. The Fianna Fáil TDs who are not backing their leader Micheál Martin’s position sat stony-faced. Not a peep out of one of them.

Which is when we contemplated our little chant about them all being very quiet over there.

But the Taoiseach filled the gap, answering for them.

Because what they are scrambling to propose “is not a realistic alternative; it is just a tactic”, declared Leo.

“And I believe the Irish people will see through that.”

Once again, not a sound from the people who turned a blind eye to the hard cases when they could have acted with reason and compassion. Because they knew in their hearts that the Taoiseach was speaking the truth.

They had 35 years to act on their concerns for women and their babies. Thirty-five years to do something about supporting the hard cases. Thirty-five years to show they care about more than just the fate of the foetus.

But they did nothing.

Now their bluff has been called and compassion is suddenly conjured up for the hard cases, along with more baseless predictions about floodgates opening and the whole country going to hell in a handcart.

They have cried wolf once too often.

Do they seriously expect anyone to believe anything they say anymore?

Miriam Lord: Yes, Yes, Yes. A resounding, emphatic Yes

Suffocating old certainties, unrepresentative lobby groups and celibate clerics swept aside

Fri, May 25, 2018, 23:00



[Miriam Lord](#)

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- [Video](#)
- [Images](#)

Voters arrive at Dublin Castle where the official abortion referendum results will be announced later today.

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Yes, Yes, Yes. A resounding, emphatic Yes. And what a way to say it – the only way to say it: with conviction and clarity. This massive vote to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution leaves no doubt. The Irish people have taken ownership of their abortion issue. They have taken it out of the hands of unrepresentative lobby groups and celibate clerics and decided how they want to approach it.

On Friday, with steely assurance, a new generation of all the generations faced down the suffocating old certainties and swept them aside. On Friday, May 25th, 2018, they stood up and were not afraid to be counted. Because those days are gone now.

The official result has yet to be declared, but the exit polls point only in one direction, and it is going to be a monumental change and a major milestone in modern Irish history.

You could feel it in the air in the last week of the referendum campaign. Something had changed and something big was about to happen. It was there in the faces of the younger people – out there agitating, unashamed to be seeking basic rights for Irish women, because they were in the right.

Have their say

It was there in the noncommittal comments of older men and women. People misinterpreted them as the words of No voters who didn't fancy being ridiculed for bucking a liberal trend. Instead, they were merely keeping their counsel and waiting to have their say.

Thirty-five years is a long time to wait for a divisive and dangerous clause to be excised from the Constitution. But for those who waited decades to see those lines equating the life of a foetus from conception to its living, breathing mother, the 15 hours it would take for the nation to vote probably felt like a lifetime.

There couldn't have been a better day for a vote. The sun shone on the island, welcoming back the thousands of men and women who traversed the globe and returned to vote. The sight of them arriving at ports and airports with their "Repeal" jumpers and wheelie cases moved the most hard-hearted observers to tears.

The gift of choice

These were the children of the women who had no choice, returning home from far-flung places and bringing back the gift of choice.

All day, up and down the country, the voters streamed into polling stations, exceeding turnout expectations from early morning. The huge number of young people, young women in particular, many with babies and toddlers, did the heart good. You could sense the mood of charge in their faces as they came into the polling stations, anxiously scanning the tables, eager to hand over their cards.

"I was torn, but I voted for my daughters," said one woman.

"We were only exporting the problem," said her husband.

The Taoiseach voted in his local school in Castleknock. Scoil Thomáis was swarming with photographers when Leo Varadkar arrived.

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Abortion referendum: Counting the votes



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Podcast: Exit Poll Analysis

He said he was confident.

“The lads at my gym all told me they are voting Yes.”

Many more were in rural locations around the State. These were the men and women from the big international photo agencies, hoping to capture the image of Catholic Ireland voting away the vestiges of church authority from their private lives.

Voting nuns

The presiding officer in Knock had to tell them to leave. With its shrine and place as the pilgrimage capital of Ireland, they descended on the Mayo village in the search of voting nuns, but they were unsuccessful. They had been told there was a big mural of the Blessed Virgin in Knock, but that has been painted over. They were most annoyed.

If the smiling women and the reticent men and the huge numbers voting in Dublin and other major urban areas was an indicator of rapidly gathering change, there were worries in more rural areas.

“The voting is very brisk, but everyone is very elderly. I think they’re being bussed in. I’d be worried,” said an acquaintance in Roscommon.

But everywhere the change was happening.

As the day wore on, and the figures climbed, the staying hand of pious history was always there in the background. There have been disappointments before. Powerful interests who exert huge influence in Irish political and social life were not going to lightly give up the fight.

In the headquarters of Together for Yes, they had run out of posters and people were offering to walk the city streets wearing sandwich boards. Minister for Health Simon Harris called in to see them for the first time.

Artwork along one wall of their offices – quieter than ever they have been in the last three months – had a quote from WB Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

Slaves to a dark past

Education is the enemy of those who would work to keep Irish men and women slaves to a dark past.

The volunteers were optimistic, and a little teary. But, sure, who wasn’t.

They recounted trips to the airport to welcome those who were home to vote. One overseas camera crew was trying to find a No voter to balance their report. They couldn’t, until somebody noticed a plane from Medjugorje was due in.

They waited for the passengers to come through and finally came up with three people who would be voting No.

Yes, the signs were there. Driving into town, groups of volunteers gathered on roundabouts were being cheered and beeped by passing motorists. Joggers gave the thumbs-up. But on a flyover, a group of anti-abortion campaigners were getting nothing from the cars travelling below.

The Taoiseach wore his little Yes badge on his lapel. He said in the Dáil during the week that if there is a vote for repeal “Ireland will still be the same country it was before the vote. It will just be a little bit more compassionate.”

And some who have been around since 1983 will be a little bit more emotional.

Our morning started with a trip to the Phoenix Park to see Michael D Higgins vote. The then senator Michael D was fiercely opposed to the “callous” referendum on the Eighth Amendment in 1983, when he was president of the Labour Party. He said the TDs promoting it were “monumental in their hypocrisy”, and then quoted Michael Davitt: “If the Irish had a weakness worse than drink, it was moral cowardice.” Not any more.

After he voted, he got into his car and prepared to leave. Then he saw me and got out again, striding over to say hello. We shook hands and there was a little embrace and kiss from Sabina.

I told him it was all getting a little too much and I was so glad to see him. The President said he misses meeting a lot of people he used to see. I mentioned that 1983 speech and all the things he said and wrote back then. He was, of course, right. Michael D smiled and said softly "I'm above all that now."

But I swear, I know it, there were tears in his eyes.

Yes. Finally, Yes.

Miriam Lord: It took 35 years to build this stunning result

Cheers and tears greeted the verdict – a just reward for decades fighting the good fight

Mon, May 28, 2018, 02:33

[Miriam Lord](#)

- [Video](#)
- [Images](#)

Thirty-five years after it was placed into the Constitution, the electorate voted for the Eighth Amendment to be repealed and for provision be made for the regulation of termination of pregnancy. Video: Kathleen Harris/ Enda O'Dowd

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It took 35 years to build a landslide.

Repealing the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution was neither quick nor easy, despite what the margin of difference might say.

Sixty-six per cent said “Yes”. Makes it look simple.

But that two-thirds majority conceals hard history and hard-fought battles behind a stunning final result.

Woman by woman, story by story, year upon year, day after day. The rocks and pebbles of countless unjust ordeals and small personal tragedies piled up after each furtive trip to Liverpool and beyond.

Brave campaigners for basic abortion rights did everything they could to increase the pressure, their efforts ignored and condemned by priests and politicians and that tiresome class of pious people who live in terror of the slippery slope.

They thought they could hold back a landslide. On Friday, gravity kicked in. The slippery slope did for them in the end.

The Eighth Amendment, which guaranteed a foetus the same right to life as the woman carrying it, is gone from the Constitution. Good riddance to it. It brought nothing but difficulty and despair to Irish women in times when they desperately needed proper care and compassion at home.

It was a wonderful morning on Saturday in the RDS when the boxes were opened and the votes counted. It was a wonderful afternoon in Dublin Castle when crowds filled the courtyard to hear the official declaration. It was a wonderful day for Irish women.

A day made even better in the happy knowledge that the vast majority of Irish men are looking out for them and want only the best for them. By voting in their droves to repeal, they placed the concerns of women far above the fears of ideologically-motivated crusaders who prize saving souls above having a heart.

With repeal looking the likely outcome, there were calls from some quarters for a muted and dignified response. Perhaps it was the reason why there was neither screen nor public address system for the huge crowd at the castle.

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But no. For all the decades of all the women who suffered, and for all the women who fought and agitated for change, we had to celebrate this historic turning-point in modern Irish society.

Some never thought they would live to see the day. Some, like Monica Barnes and Mary Holland and Nuala Fennell and many more, didn't. The celebration was for them too.

It was for Ailbhe Smyth, who never stopped fighting. It was for senator Ivana Bacik, Catherine Murphy, Joan Burton, Catherine McGuinness and many more who were there from the start.

Political rivalries were cast aside for the day. "Oh, c'mere to me," said socialist Bríd Smith, giving Fianna Fáil's Timmy Dooley a hug.

Obstetrician Peter Boylan, looking very cool in his shades turned up and it was like George Clooney had just rambled in, such was the clamour which greeted his entrance. The three co-directors of Together4Yes – Ailbhe Smyth, Orla O'Connor and Gráinne Griffin – arrived to rapturous welcome.

Senators Lynne Ruane and Alice Mary Higgins were in floods. Ruth Coppinger was hugging for Ireland. Katherine Zappone, who demanded the referendum as her price for supporting the Government, was ecstatic.

"Oh God, I told my husband I'd give up the fags if there was a repeal," said Fine Gael's Kate O'Connell, one of the party's most active campaigners, as she ran out for a smoke.

Brendan Howlin arrived in just after Mary Lou McDonald's big entrance. The Labour party was fighting the cause when all the others didn't want to know. "We never get the credit," said Howlin, shrugging. "We carry the flag, but then in comes the fresh faced Leo to take all the glory."

Maybe not. Health Minister Simon Harris pretended to be embarrassed by the "I fancy Simon Harris" poster, but he was secretly thrilled. Wherever he went he was mobbed. No wonder Leo stuck close by him.

As Micheál walked through the crowd, tearful young women hugged him

Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin maintained a low-key presence, but his early intervention and support for repeal and the proposed legislation was a pivotal point in the campaign.

It was a courageous move which now sees him on the right side of history and one half of his parliamentary party stranded on the other.

As Micheál walked through the crowd, tearful young women hugged him. A man and woman approached. "We're one of those couples who had a fatal foetal abnormality," the women said to him. "Thank you. Just, thank you," she sobbed.

Meanwhile, back in the RDS, the Attorney General was chatting to former Supreme Court Judge Catherine McGuinness.

She had had eye surgery the day before but the doctor gave her a special dispensation to attend the court. “Theoretically I should have a patch over my eye today.”

At Dublin Castle, Frank Crummy (81), who set up Ireland’s first family planning clinic, was resplendent in his repeal jumper, alongside his wife Evelyn.

There was a lot of discussion about why so many politicians and pundits called the campaign so wrong. The Together4Yes team remains amused by the old school, outmoded metric used by some of them to evaluate their very effective efforts. It was as if they were affronted at the idea that people outside the Kildare Street bubble might actually know more than they do about what the electorate really wants these days.

Independent TD Clare Daly, a politician hugely deserving of credit for the part she played, decided to stay away from the castle bunfight. Instead, a number of Johnny Come Lately politicians with a weakness for self-publicity preened and waved from the platform.

It’s always the same.

Thanks, but no thanks. We’ll take it from here

A third of the electorate voted No. “I feel like I’ve lost my country,” a woman told us amid the celebrations in the RDS. She was very sad. She couldn’t be consoled.

Cheers and tears and champagne greeted the announcement. The sky fell in briefly when a few drops of rain fell. Everyone danced.

Because it was a monumental day. The day when the intelligent, compassionate citizens of Ireland turned to the Catholic Church and the retreating fundamentalists and firmly said: “Thanks, but no thanks. We’ll take it from here.”