

Simon Coveney: Here's how my thinking shifted on the Eighth Amendment



Tánaiste Simon Coveney. Photo: Mark Condren

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For most people in Ireland, abortion is not something they want to talk about. It is deeply personal and involves conflicting values.

People's views are coloured by the most joyous or painful moments in their lives, experienced either alone or with loved ones. For some their position on abortion is a religious belief sincerely held, for others it is a human rights issue. This is a subject that divides society like few others.

We are two months away from a national decision on whether or not to change our legal approach to sexual health and abortion or to stick with the status quo in place since the 1980s.

For me, it's about how the State responds to those desperately hard choices, in deeply private moments of vulnerability and responsibility.

There are two questions in people's minds: Should we change the Constitution and what will that mean in law?

As Tánaiste, I strongly support removing Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution.

The Eighth Amendment has had unforeseen and tragic consequences for many Irish women. We need a more supportive woman-centred approach, learning lessons from our past inadequacies.

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Removing the equal right to life of the unborn from our Constitution is not something I easily or immediately supported. I say this as a husband and father of three beautiful young girls. I have spent many months discussing and consulting widely on what system needs to replace the Eighth Amendment.

It worries me that I have heard people who raise legitimate questions about the right to life of an unborn child being dismissed as dinosaurs or anti-women.

This referendum campaign needs fewer media cheerleaders or scaremongers and more facts and reassurance. It is easy to see why many people won't engage in the debate at all, but wait and have their say privately in the ballot box.

That is why I believe what the Government is going to do tomorrow at Cabinet is crucial to show people the limits and scope of the law we propose to pass if they vote 'yes' to repeal.

In February I expressed doubts about unrestricted access to abortion up to 12 weeks. Since then I have been overwhelmed by the numbers who have stopped me in supermarkets, on streets, in Leinster House or in public to say they share similar concerns.

In recent weeks the Health Minister and senior clinicians have worked with me on the safeguards and structures to the proposed law that I hope will enable those unsure to vote 'Yes'. The legislation Minister Harris will bring to Cabinet tomorrow will not give unrestricted access to abortion at any point in pregnancy.

We need a law based in reality that recognises that thousands of Irish women have abortions every year, at home with drugs purchased online or abroad without support. The place to start is a new comprehensive package to address sexual education and free access to contraception to reduce the number of crisis pregnancies, estimated at 13pc of all pregnancies, and better supports for those who did not plan to have a baby.

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I could never support a law that allows for late-term abortions. The Government will move to close off any suggestion of that happening by stating that a baby who could survive outside the womb will not be aborted in any circumstance.

In cases of fatal foetal abnormalities, I believe the State needs to step up to its duty for all women and couples in these heart-wrenching situations. A woman who chooses to carry a baby with a fatal abnormality should have access to expert palliative care for her child and a woman who wants to deliver a baby with a fatal abnormality early should be able to do so surrounded by support and dignity.

When it comes to prescribing abortion pills early in pregnancy, I have struggled most with this issue. If we do nothing, we know pills will continue to be purchased online and taken without medical advice or supervision. We cannot knowingly allow this to continue, given the dangers involved. I will say at Cabinet tomorrow that I could support a law that allows access to such medication up to 12-weeks gestation, effectively 10-weeks of pregnancy, if it is coupled with strict medical guidelines - resulting in a "clinical protocol" to be followed in every case when an abortion is requested. Twelve-weeks' gestation is the

recommendation of the all-party Oireachtas committee, despite some of the commentary that has followed it. Importantly, I am satisfied we will not be enabling testing for disabilities if the law is capped at a maximum of 12-weeks gestation.

Clinicians have assured me such a protocol should be based on the principle of 'informed consent' and would require a doctor to lay out all information and options in an impartial way to a woman who requests an abortion. The process of informed consent would include access to impartial counselling, if necessary, on the advice of the doctor. There is clearly also a need to ensure medical guidelines provide that where there is any doubt about the term of a pregnancy or where a pregnancy is more than nine-weeks' gestation, access to secondary care, such as scanning, would be required.

Only after the protocol is certified complete by both doctor and patient should a doctor be able to prescribe a pill for an abortion. I believe a pause period is appropriate at this juncture and expect Cabinet to consider between 48-72 hours, to ensure a fully considered decision. I believe a woman who proceeds with an abortion after receiving the support and information through a protocol such as I've described is very likely to have travelled to the UK or accessed a pill online in the absence of such a system being available in Ireland.

However, the protocol will allow the State to outline the alternatives to abortion and support women who choose those alternatives.

This is not an easy issue, many of us have seen our views evolve as the facts and cruel inadequacy of our current laws are exposed. We need to support and respect women in a much more comprehensive way than we have to date. However, we must also ensure the magnitude of the decision to end a pregnancy is factored into any new legislation. Life and the creation of life is a precious thing. So balancing Ireland's responsibilities to women and children is complex. However, I believe if people vote 'Yes' in this Referendum and allow the Government to legislate we will get that balance right and protect women in the appropriate way.

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