



UK 5 APRIL 2016

## We shouldn't be surprised by Northern Ireland's abortion conviction

We have allowed ourselves to believe that the exceptions – the women with plane tickets and friends who won't shop them to the police – are the rule.

BY  
[BARBARA](#)  
[SPEED](#)



n modern society, we're used to the idea that the letter of the law and its execution are two different things. Since 1839, it has been illegal to shake out a doormat on a UK street after 8am. It is, for some reason, illegal to handle a salmon under “suspicious circumstances”. Euthanasia, streaming pirated videos and smoking marijuana are each, in their way, illegal in the UK, but offenders are rarely prosecuted.

This status quo perhaps explains why we reacted with shock and horror to the news that in Northern Ireland, a woman has been handed a two month suspended sentence for ordering abortion pills online after her flatmates reported her to the police. Unlike in the rest of the UK, abortions are illegal in Northern Ireland unless the life or mental health of the mother is in danger. The court's adherence to this law earned the case headlines all over the world.

Perhaps it isn't surprising that we are surprised. Women in Ireland, as in many abortion-unfriendly countries that lie near more liberal ones, obtain abortions all the time – they order drugs online and don't get caught, or else they fly to England or another country where the procedure is not restricted. In 2001, the charity **Women on Waves** visited Ireland from the Netherlands to distribute abortion pills from the deck of a ship.

This use of loopholes (loopholes often heavily laced with privilege, and the price of an air flight abroad, and flatmates who won't report you when they find the remains of your abortion in a bin) has lulled us until we are shocked that a woman was convicted under a law specifically designed to restrict her access to choice.

Donald Trump remarked last week that if abortions were recriminalised in the US, there should be "some sort of punishment" for women who obtain them. The peculiar thing about the resultant outrage was that it did not focus on the root problem – that many people in the US, including Trump, want to criminalise a woman for choosing what to do with her body – but the fact that he would take this law to its logical conclusion. Why are we too scared to directly legislate in favour of women, rather than protect the loopholes that sometimes allow them rights over their body? Is a situation where abortion is criminalised such that it can't be provided safely, yet women can somehow escape direct punishment, really the best we can hope for?

It is a trope within liberal thinking (and, perhaps, all political thinking) to assume that once everyone you know is convinced of a truth, that everyone else is too. As a result, we begin to think that top-down legislation isn't necessary. This is perhaps why we must be reminded, over and over again, that the

anti-abortion lobby isn't "over there" – it's in Ireland, a flight or a ferry way. And it's in the Commons, where challenges to the abortion laws come regularly, in various guises, but always to the same end: to restrict access. Women in Scotland, England and Wales already need the signatures of two doctors before they can apply for the procedure.

We should have learned by now that thinking something that most of our friends think, and assuming others agree, is not enough. When we hear that rape within marriage only became illegal in 1991, we tut at the slow, antiquated legal system, rather than acknowledging the reality: that until the rights we agree on are encoded from the top down, they may as well not exist. We don't want to realise that in their heart of hearts, many men believe they have a right to extract sex from their wives. It's far easier to argue over specifics with those you broadly agree with than it is to face the fact that large chunks of the world do not, and would happily wrench your freedoms from you given half the chance.



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Women's refuges – currently subject to a back and forth debate within the feminist community over who precisely can use them – currently face existential threats in the form of government cuts and a lack of societal support. That's not to say that both debates shouldn't go on concurrently, but that we can't afford to be in any way optimistic about society's views on women's services and women's rights. Any help given to women appears to some as an attack on male privilege, and as a result, we must keep fighting those who want that privilege back even after it seems like the rights have been won.

Those attacking women's services are now often switched on enough to claim they do agree with your *principles*, even as they take away the concrete expressions of them. George Osborne was charitable enough to agree that domestic violence shelters need more funding, before diverting only the taxes women pay on tampons, because women should pay

for male violence, I assume. Jenny Smith, who was one of the first women to shelter from her husband in a woman's sanctuary in the 1970s, told the *Guardian* that “**women are suffering more than ever**”.

The sad reality is that rights for women we have fought for don't just stay put once we take our eyes off them. We can't afford to accept loopholes as "good enough" while we let the law lag behind. In journalism, it's a truism that "dog bites man" is not

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the case of abortion rights, we have allowed ourselves to believe that the exceptions – the women with plane tickets and relatives and friends who won't shop them to the police – are the rule, and we report on the convictions, or apparent exceptions, as though each comes as a surprise.

Yet conviction for abortion in Ireland is, quite literally, the rule, even if it is still relatively rare. It's not "this one crazy time a woman was convicted for seeking an abortion" – it's a set of laws **more common than not around the world** that systematically degrade a woman's rights over her own body.

*You can get involved with Ireland's Abortion Rights Campaign [here](#) and sign Amnesty International's petition to decriminalise abortion in Ireland [here](#).*

Barbara Speed is a technology and digital culture writer at the *New Statesman* and a staff writer at **CityMetric**.



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THE STAGGERS 5 APRIL 2016

## When is it fair to criticise a politician's family?

Politicians don't choose their parents – which makes it difficult to decide whether they are culpable for their deeds.

BY HENRY  
ZEFFMAN





t may be better remembered now for his baffling

**I** decision to hurl a copy of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book across the despatch box at George Osborne, but there was a line in **John McDonnell's response** to the autumn statement last November that has some relevance to the Labour Party's behaviour over the coming days. The shadow chancellor said: "When the chancellor and the prime minister were first elected to their current positions, they were attacked for being 'posh boys'. I disagreed with that strongly. People do not choose the class that they are born into, or the wealth that they inherit."

The question of the prime minister's background, and the background to his wealth, is more relevant today than it has been at any point since May 2010. After **the Panama Papers** were released yesterday, domestic attention quickly turned to the revelation – old though it may be – that David Cameron's father, who died in 2010, used offshore firms in Panama and Geneva to avoid paying tax in the UK.

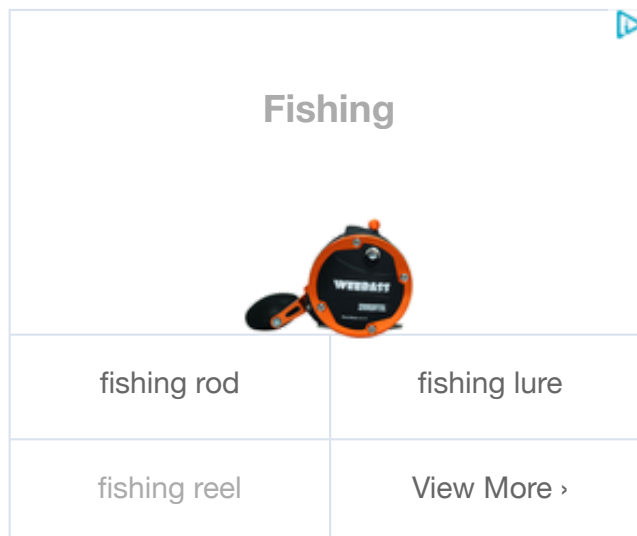
Jeremy Corbyn probably crossed his shadow chancellor's line today. Though he didn't mention Ian Cameron by name, **the Labour leader said** at the launch of Labour's local elections campaign in Harlow that "it's not a private matter if tax has not been paid" and called for "an independent investigation".

The prime minister has **since responded** to the controversy **by stating** that he has “no shares, no offshore trusts, no offshore funds”. Of course, this non-denial denial leaves open the possibility that his mother, or other members of family, do still hold interests in offshore companies, and that he may stand to benefit from the proceeds at some point in the future.

But before we get too bogged down in the intricacies of the extended Cameron family's tax affairs, we need to ask whether we should care. When, if ever, does a politician's family become fair game?

Let's start with parents. You don't choose your parents, as McDonnell noted in November. In Cameron's case, it's not only his father who has provoked an embarrassing political row. His mother, Mary, signed a petition in February protesting against cuts to children's services in Oxfordshire.

Plenty on the left took that as jubilant evidence of their rectitude: *even* the prime minister's own mother doesn't support his cuts. Many of the same people will now be eliding Cameron's views and actions with those of his father.



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Perhaps the most striking parallel is with the case of Ralph Miliband. In October 2013, the *Daily Mail* ran a **thunderous comment piece** by Geoffrey Levy, describing the father of the then Leader of the Opposition as “The man who hated Britain”. The polemic provoked a furious response from Miliband junior, **who said** “I'm not willing to let my father's good name be besmirched and undermined in the way that the *Daily Mail* are doing”, and drew condemnation cross the political spectrum.

What Ed Miliband objected to was the substance of the article. He said that it was “perfectly legitimate for the *Daily Mail* to talk about my father's politics”, but questioned their conclusion that his father hated the country that took him in as a refugee.

To many, though, what was unforgivably gauche was not the *Daily Mail*'s interpretation of the admittedly complex link between Marxism and

patriotism, but the mere fact of an article denouncing a politician's dead father. On that score, coverage of Ian Cameron's tax arrangements might not be fair game. He died just months after his son became prime minister, and is not around to defend himself, which leaves it to the prime minister to perform a delicate dance between (understandably) not wanting to renounce his father, with whom he reportedly had a close relationship, and attempting to conclusively distance himself from any tax avoidance. There is no evidence that David Cameron ever had any knowledge of his father's tax arrangements, before or after he became prime minister – he simply has to answer these questions because he became prime minister.

One counter-argument is that the PM's father's wealth is inseparable from his position as prime minister. Ian Cameron used tax havens for several decades, meaning that money that would otherwise have ended up in the Exchequer funding public services instead paid for young David's school fees, without which he likely wouldn't prime minister today.

But if you subscribe to that argument, then you probably have to see the *Daily Mail's* 2013 attack on Ralph Miliband as fair game, even if you disagree with its hostility. Just as Cameron's material inheritance undoubtedly smoothed his path into

politics, Ed Miliband certainly benefitted from his youthful exposure through his father to many of the leading academics and thinkers on the left – a kind of intellectual inheritance.

If it's difficult to work out how we should treat politicians' parents, their siblings – who they also do not choose – are thornier still. You don't have to delve too deep into the murkier corners of Twitter to find Labour supporters so consumed by hatred of the Conservative Party that they will use George Osborne's brother and John Whittingdale's half-brother – the former was struck off the medical register after conducting an affair with a vulnerable patient, the latter committed a string of sex offences on young boys – as sticks to beat them with. Still, it's unlikely they consider Jeremy Corbyn to be culpable for his brother's questionable **views on Israel** and on climate change.

Whatever your perspective on the connection between a politician's thoughts and deeds and their family's, consistency is vital. If you find yourself convulsed by rage at Ian Cameron's tax affairs but abhorred the *Daily Mail's* approach to Ralph Miliband, you might want to reflect on whether anything other than blind partisanship explains the difference.

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