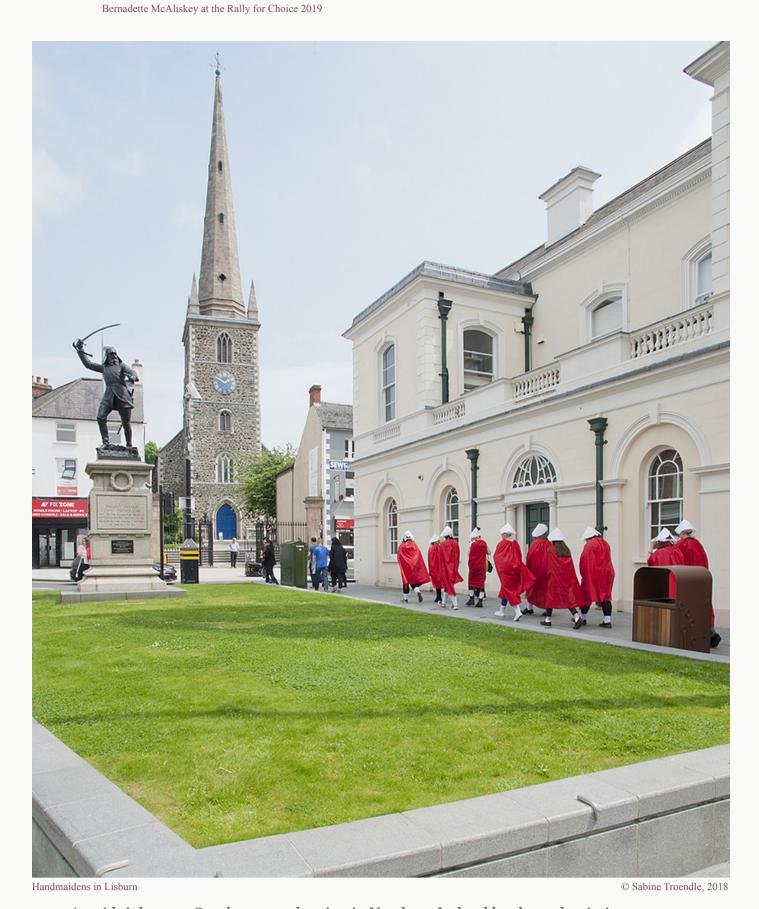


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"The fundamental issue is not not that they speak for the voiceless. That voice has thundered through the ears of women for hundreds and thousands of years. That point of view is not voiceless. It has been the predominant voice of Hierarchies, of Church, of Patriarchy, of State, of Imperialism, of Racism, of Capitalism, for as long as they have been here. These people who control that voice, why are they afraid?"



At midnight on 21 October 2019, abortion in Northern Ireland has been decriminalised. The Victorian-era, 158-years-old Offence Against the Person Act (1861) had to bundle up and leave the stage and the agonies of a woman facing a jail sentence of up to five years for obtaining online abortion pills for her teenage daughter – or in the words of the charges 'procuring and supplying a poison with intent to procure a miscarriage', were over. For the first time in six years, the woman could go back being the mother she was before the weight of the looming judgement started to hang over her every minute of every day of her and her family's life. She could finally move on.

Refusing bodily autonomy leads to nothing but suffering. In 2012 Savita Hallapanavar was diagnosed with an unavoidable miscarriage but was denied an abortion because the doctors were afraid to intervene as long as there was a foetal heartbeat. They could have faced prosecution for illegal abortion. That climate of fear cost Savita her life.

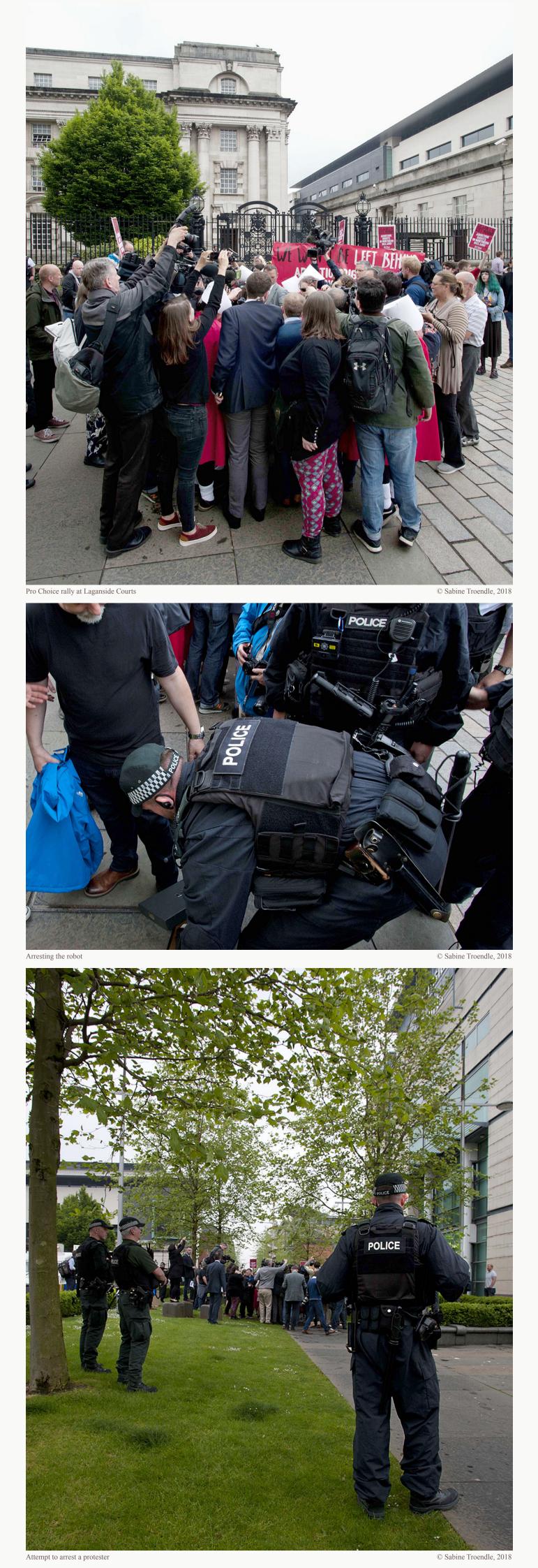
In 2014, a pregnant woman was declared brain-dead but again, because there was a foetal heartbeat, the doctors could not switch off the life support system as this would cause the death of the foetus. Instead of having an end of life with dignity, the woman's body became an incubator for the foetus. The family had to go to court to end that grotesque situation.

Nevertheless, in 2019, the unimpressed DUP health minster in the north tried to alter the prison sentence for health professionals who failed to adhere to the restrictions or didn't report (suspected) illegal pregnancy terminations from five to ten years.



It was a momentous and historic day, the 25th of May 2018, when the south of Ireland repealed the 8th Amendment and made abortion accessible to pregnant people and it was clear by then: the north – the only place in Europe besides Malta still dwelling in earlier centuries – is next. The fight against the establishment, against sexism, against austerity and against oppression has seen the formation of one of the most dynamic and youthful movements in Ireland. A movement that unites Protestants and Catholics alike.

The fight for the basic human right of bodily autonomy has seen protest marches, acts of civil disobedience, artistic comments and performative activism. The socialist-feminist group ROSA was aiming to raise awareness of the availability of abortion pills online by staging a protest at the Belfast Laganside Court where the trials of the women who took or procured the abortion pill took place. Some activists took safe but illegal abortion pills in public. The police tried to arrest one of the women but had to give up with all the commotion going on around the protest and contented themselves with arresting the robot that deliver the pills instead. To be honest, I don't think their heart was really in it.



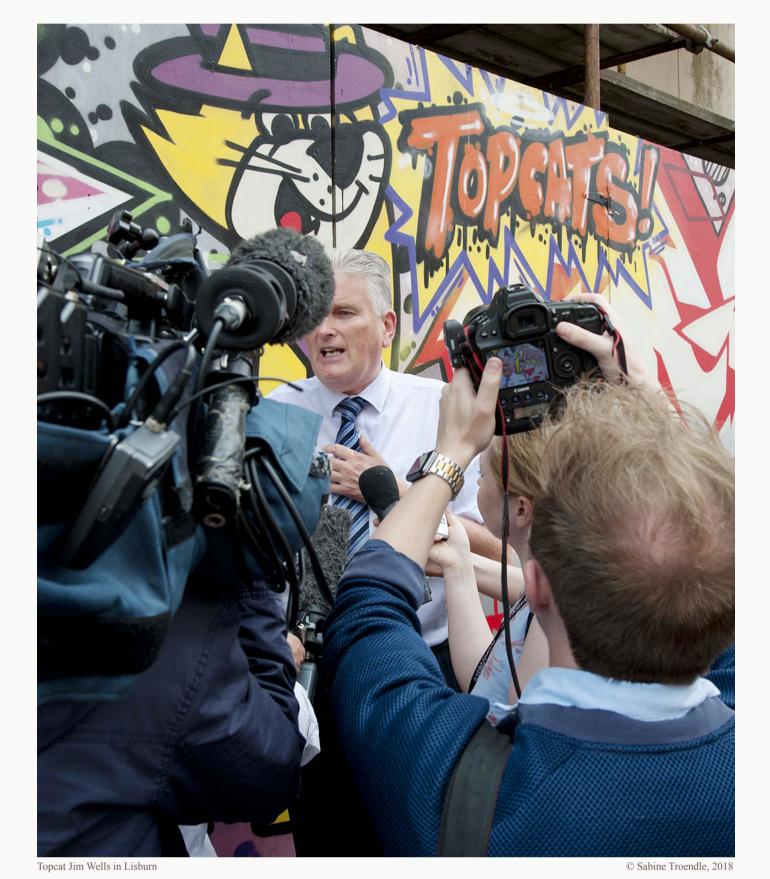
You cannot force people to be pregnant when they do not want to be. Yet, all executive parties except for Sinn Féin are either quiet or openly against the law that since 31 March 2020 allows abortions under all circumstances up to twelve weeks. And yet, even for Sinn Féin to join the pro-choice campaign took quite a while. Gerry Adams made it quite clear that only if it can be of use to Sinn Féin's primary cause – a united Ireland – will they campaign for other issues like abortion:

"I merely point it out as an example of an issue which cuts across the strategy of a successful national liberation movement which must be to rally the broadest mass of the people around certain fundamentals and upon an easily grasped programme of points on which people can agree. We need to avoid issues which are too local, partial or divisive." Gerry Adams Ok, that was in the 1980s and Sinn Féin have changed their stance on several issues meanwhile, but nevertheless, it only jumped the pro-choicewagon once it was well rolling and once it realised that its original anti-

abortion stance doesn't sit well with their younger voters.



Sinn Féin MLA Francie Molloy missed the train. He kept loyal to his views, opposing abortion even in the case of risk to health for the pregnant person. His stance earned him a visit from the handmaidens who were travelling on ROSA's Bus4Choice through the north towards Derry. Sadly he wasn't in his office when they arrived in Cookstown, nor were his co-dinosaurs Edwin Poots, Paul Givan and Jefferey Donaldson from the DUP in Lisburn. Thank god for the likes of Jim Wells, who in his one-man performance explained that dinosaurs never have existed and that every pregnancy was a gift of God. The irony of the dinosaurs was lost on him and so was Topcats – God love him.





Jim Wells sounds like I choir boy when you have to listen to other DUP officials such as Ballymena councillor John Carson who claimed that the coronavirus pandemic was God's judgment on Northern Ireland for introducing abortion and same-sex marriage and that the Covid vaccines were made from the stem cells of aborted foetuses. And whilst Arlene Foster, the DUP leader and First Minister of Northern Ireland admitted that Carson was wrong, she affirmed that they will do everything in their conscience to protect the lives of the unborn. (I find it very interesting how the DUP and cohorts demand to have parity with the UK and seem to accept new threats of violence if the Irish Sea Border is going to stay, now that Brexit-reality starts to dawn on them, yet, they cry the

loudest when it comes to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland which treats the people of Northern Ireland equal to the people of Britain. One people, one Union. A United Kingdom. This deserves deeper scrutiny.) Even though abortion on request up to 12 weeks is now legal, abortion services have not yet been set up. Delaying access to abortion services in the north keeps pregnant people from the north travelling to Britain or the south of Ireland to have an unwanted pregnancy terminated. But

not everyone can afford to travel. Not everyone can be absent for several days. Not everyone has the mobility or the right to travel. It's a slap in the face of those who are already disadvantaged and underlines the discrepancy of middle-class and working-class realities. I'd like to quote Judge Horner's comments in the Belfast High Court in 2015

abort the same foetus in England. There can be no doubt that the law has made it much more difficult for those with limited means to travel to England. The protection of morals should not contemplate a restriction that bites on the impoverished but not the wealthy. That smacks of one law for the rich and one law for the poor." Judge Horner

The pro-life voices are fighting the new law with all their might. The DUP, the Presbyterian and the Catholic Church, all kinds of activists and a former ombudswoman are calling for the repeal of the hard won abortion legislation. They say that an already beleaguered health staff should not, on top of a pandemic, have to cope with the introduction of abortion and they encourage them to refuse to take part in terminations stating their religious believes.



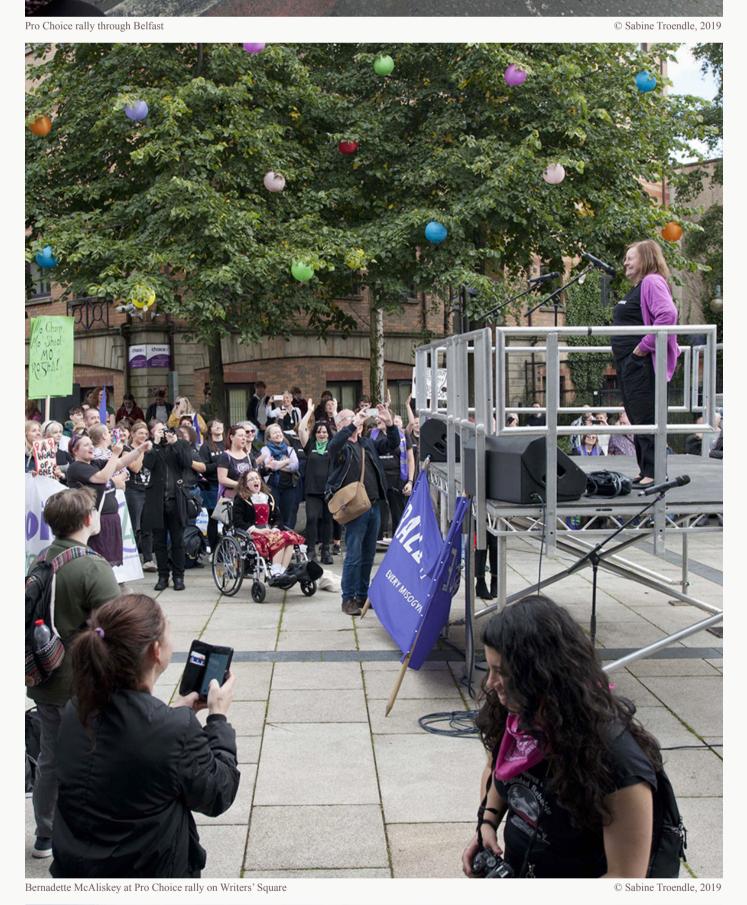
The pro-life group PRECIOUS LIFE lately took the fight against the new abortion legislation back to the streets, setting themselves up in front of City Hall, holding up placards with very graphic images of aborted foetuses. Some of these images can be pretty gruesome and certainly have the potential to retraumatise women who have had miscarriages or abortions. But of course, that's the point. I could not disagree with these groups more, but I guess they have the right to make their voices heard. The freedom of expression is one of the most important and fundamental human rights and people do not have the right to not being offended.

But it's reassuring and encouraging to see how many young, colourful, loud people counter them in joyful celebration and take to the streets every time there's a call. At the Rally for Choice in 2019, Bernadette McAliskey said something that resonates in Belfast more than anywhere else: "The faces I'm looking at are gloriously young and female. Young women in their twenties, straight people, gay people, bi people, trans people. The majority of the people waling into the other direction were older. And male. That's a new interface. The new interface isn't about which geographical location in Belfast or Northern Ireland you came from. What electoral district you might be in in terms of sectarian interfaces. Very clearly this new interface is between those who fundamentally believe in the right of individuals and human beings to exercise freedom of choice." Bernadette McAliskey











By the way, the Catholic Church did not always condemn abortion totally. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that in the case of a boy the soul entered the body at 40 days of pregnancy and 80 days in the case of a girl. And even if intentional abortion was always an offence against God in his view, until before the point of ensoulment it was less so. © Sabine Troendle, 2019

Eleanor Crossey Malone, The Socialist, 2018 Madeleine Johansson, YES for REPEAL, 2018 Bernadette McAliskey, Speech at Rally for Choice, 2019 Susan McKey, Pro-Union Non-Unionists, 4 March 2021 Peter Tatchell, Talkback BBC Radio Ulster, 25 Feb 2021 BBC, Belfast Telegraph, Guardian, Irish News, Jacobin Magazine, Rebel, Workers Hammer

Pro Choice rally through Belfast city centre