

REFLECTIONS ON VICTORY:

Interview with Bríd Smith TD

Bríd Smith has been fighting for a woman's right to choose since before the 8th Amendment was introduced in 1983. She played an important role in the recent referendum campaign, serving on the Oireachtas Committee that essentially framed the proposed legislation, advocating for repeal in the Dáil and on the media, speaking up and down the country, and organising on the streets. Irish Marxist Review was pleased to interview her about the campaign and the way ahead.

You have been campaigning for this for a long time. How personally do you feel about the victory on 25 May?

Obviously for someone like myself who has been campaigning on this issue all my adult life there is a great sense of achievement, of joy indeed. There is a feeling of having defeated the right wing fundamentalists who made this their line in the sand and who have been in the driving seat for so long. Those who assume 'the moral high ground', vilify and shame women, and ignore the suffering of women like Savita Halappannava, and Sheila Rodgers before her, and all those who were forced to travel and forced into exile. So now they have been pushed right back and women have the initiative, and I believe we can really go forward now. There is a huge sense of achievement in that.

Did the size of the victory surprise you?

Well it did and it didn't. We had bets on the outcome in the office and I put a tenner on 65% for Yes but that was before the campaign really got going. Then opinion polls started to



come out showing the gap narrowing and the 'don't knows' increasing and we started to worry. Also the anti-choicers seemed to come out on top in the big TV debate on the Claire Byrne Show. But that was possibly a turning point and certainly seems to have inspired more people to come out and canvass. By the last few days there was the sense on the streets that we had the wind in

our sails, with all the people honking their horns and smiling and giving you high fives. But when someone sitting not far from here rang me to tell me the exit polls I was surprised by the size and absolutely thrilled. I think the size of the victory was so important – it can't be overstated. It became clear that many of the 'don't knows' we feared might be silent Nos were actually silent Yesses. Choice had clinched it! It was also superb that the vote was so good in rural Ireland. This was not really expected – it must have utterly shocked and dismayed the anti-choicers and it showed how much the country really has changed.

What are the main reasons, in your opinion, for the resounding victory?

Well I think it became more and more clear that this was an issue that had touched almost every family personally. With over 117,000 people exiled over the years this had to be the case. Even if people didn't necessarily want to talk about it, they knew people – themselves, their daughters, their mothers, their cousins, their friends etc – who were affected. And as the campaign

progressed there was a gathering momentum with people telling their personal stories, this had a big affect.

I also think the Yes campaign had a huge impact through its canvassing. The canvass teams were magnificent – very feminine, very young (though of course a lot of men and older people as well), very enthusiastic and determined, and absolutely huge. This was true even in areas like Donegal and Leitrim, which were quite tough to canvass, and despite some of the ‘messaging’ from the top of the campaign, which was quite weak, they came over brilliantly.

One of the people who told their story was you, Bríd. Was that a deliberate decision or did it just happen?

Actually it just happened. I was doing a podcast at a feminist festival with the journalist Róisín Ingle who had herself told her story previously, and two of the women on the panel spoke of their experiences of travelling for abortion. So it just seemed natural to join in and do the same. I didn’t really think about it or the significance of me doing that as a TD. But I think it did have an impact, a positive impact, because I’m a TD and because so far I’m the only TD to have stated that they have had an abortion. I don’t think by the way, that I am the only one to have had an abortion, just the only one to say so. Quite a lot of people have thanked me for it and I hope it gave people encouragement and helped to break down taboos.

What do think of the NO campaign? Was it effective in its own terms?

Well clearly not! Actually I think it was quite clever at the beginning – very distasteful but clever. With all those images of foetuses floating in the ether, detached from any actual woman, and with lies about beating hearts and being able to yawn and stretch it was designed to tug at people’s heartstrings and play on their ignorance. In the campaign I think we were all worried for awhile that it might work but as the campaign went on and people more and more informed themselves, it backfired big time.

It was clear they had lots of money from right wing fundamentalists in America and the sort of people who stood with horrific and ugly big banners outside hospitals. I think that damaged them a lot. Also it became clear that all their concern for ‘the unborn’ vanished the moment there was a living born child. Not only was there the cruel history of Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby Homes in the past, but also the fact that none of these people had ever been seen on a protest about homelessness or benefit cuts or education cuts. In short, their campaign was ‘clever’ to start with, but it backfired.

A number of Government members and prominent Fine Gaelers – Leo Varadkar, Simon Harris and Kate O’Connell for example – campaigned for YES. What effect did this have?

Well at the victory celebrations in Dublin Castle there were people shouting ‘Good on you, Leo!’ and ‘I fancy Simon Harris’ and that sort of thing. But possibly less than a year ago Leo Varadkar and Simon Harris (not Kate O’Connell who had a

principled pro-choice position) would have called themselves Pro-Life.

They were pushed by the movement rather than leading it. They saw the increasing numbers on the streets, the mass marches for choice, the fantastic Strike4Repeal action on International Women’s Day in 2017, the mood among students and young people, and they saw which way the wind was blowing. They made a conscious decision to polish up their liberal image.

As neo-liberals and right wing free marketeers they had slashed spending on education, on health, on single parents and mental health. They had increased child poverty and made many women’s lives more miserable and more difficult for them to exercise real choice, but they sought to cover this reality up by their ‘liberal’ stand on this issue. But I think their shallow liberalism will be more and more exposed as the struggle for real choice and equality develops.

Their support for Yes probably did help win over some ‘undecideds’ but it also potentially damaged the campaign. I think the attempt by the top of the Together 4 Yes to soften and limit the message to ‘care’, ‘compassion’ and ‘some personal decisions need public support’ was done in order to accommodate these government people, along with some of the Labour right as well. This really weakened our arguments. But this was overcome on the ground in the mass movement, where talking about choice came naturally to people. And as the opinion polls always suggested and the exit poll confirmed, it was the argument that it was the woman’s choice that was

decisive for the mass of people.

How do you think the media, especially RTE, performed in covering the campaign?

At the beginning, say about a year ago, the left – people like myself, Ruth Coppinger and Clare Daly – were getting quite a lot of air-time on programmes like the Late Debate, The Week in Politics, even Prime Time, but as the referendum approached the left were more and more clearly carved out in favour of mainstream establishment politicians, including the Labour Party. On one Tonight Show programme, Labour TD Alan Kelly stated that Labour was the only party to be consistently pro-Repeal. This was completely untrue – People Before Profit and Solidarity were both 100% pro – Repeal from the start but it went unchallenged on the programme. There was clearly a decision to minimise the input of the left. The important Claire Byrne Show debate, which I've already referred to, was very badly handled. Whether deliberately or by mistake the No side were allowed to run away with the debate and get more contributions and much more time than the Yes. The debates that followed were more balanced, but the left were still cut out.

What was the experience of canvassing like?

The canvassing was brilliant and it was a really enjoyable experience. I have already talked about the size and enthusiasm of the canvassing teams but I also want to pay tribute here to the role played by People Before Profit activists in getting out

canvassing, and in organising the canvassing. In area after area it was PBP comrades who were the backbone of the campaign, who did the hard work of preparing the maps and the leaflets, giving the briefings and shepherding the huge canvass teams around the streets; so that those who came out in such numbers, many of them for the first ever political activity, found the experience a truly rewarding one. In my area, for example, Dublin South Central, these roles were played by my comrades Sean Carroll and Mary Smith, and others, and they did it brilliantly. And this was true in many places across the country, so I'm really proud of all the comrades and what they've achieved.

It has also put us at the heart of the movement, which I hope will continue.

So where do we go from here?

Well first of all I think a lot of right wing backwoods men and backwoods women will try to obstruct and limit the legislation. They will try to attack and undermine the provision of twelve weeks without restriction; they are already looking at conscientious objection clauses for doctors and even for referrals and whole institutions; and there may be attempts to filibuster the legislation. So we are going to have to maintain our networks from the campaign and be ready to mobilise. And there are a host of issues that need tackling like the Church control of schools, proper sex education, the separation of Church and State, the gender pay gap, and winning a woman's right to choose in the North.

We've already acted on this by taking busloads of campaigners to Belfast in solidarity with our sisters there. And for choice to be a reality for working class women we have to fight for the right to housing, health and education in a positive way. Equality must include the fight for economic equality.

How do you see the international impact of this result?

The international impact will be big. There was huge international media presence here during the campaign and they thought it was particularly interesting because it was a popular vote rather than just being decided by politicians, as is usually the case. It was the same with same sex marriage as well, of course. We actually had a popular vote. Also abortion is a major international issue with the right wing in so many countries – like Poland for example – trying to roll back the gains women have made. Internationally there is a political polarisation to the right and the left, and it is across the board on austerity, workers rights, racism, militarism, and of course women's rights and LGBT+ rights. The far right and the fascists have always been deeply misogynist and hostile to women's rights, especially abortion rights. On the other hand, in country after country we see women on the rise with #MeToo, Women's Strikes, and Women's Marches. So I hope that our victory will serve as an inspiration to the left and to women everywhere in the struggle for real equality, which is an essential component of the struggle for socialism.