The 1967 UK Abortion Act, 51 Years on

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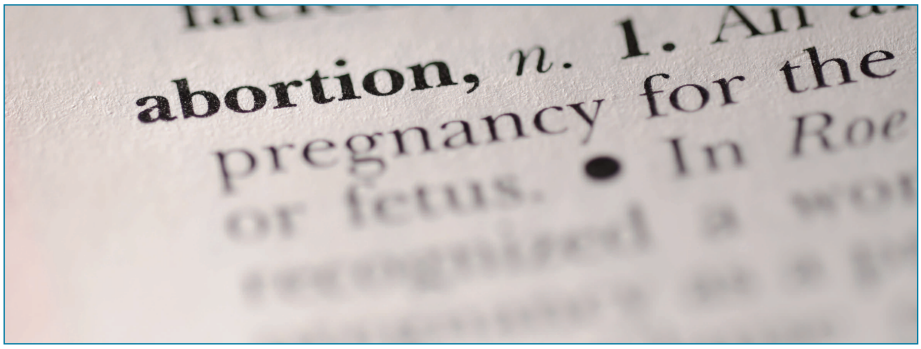

On 27 April it will be 51 years since the 1967 UK Abortion Act was introduced as the primary statute law governing the 'termination of pregnancies' in England and Wales. By any measure this is a sufficient period of time in which to allow for an assessment of its impact to take place.

It would also be fair to suggest that during that five-decade period any possible 'unintended consequences' will also have clearly emerged. These in turn may assist us in drawing some reasonable inferences or conclusions about what is likely to happen here should the same or a similar law become a reality in this state.

In other words; what is legacy for the United Kingdom may fairly be seen to foreshadow the future for our Republic.

Given the current discussions surrounding the Eighth Amendment, it is more important than ever that we look to see what is happening elsewhere. Not only do the recommendations of the Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment fundamentally mirror the provisions of the 1967 UK Act, but more importantly, at no point during the work of the Committee was any examination given to what might follow if the 1967 UK Act were replicated here.

When you consider the fact that leading politicians are talking openly of how they intend to put huge effort into campaigning for repeal, the fact that little or no consideration was given to the impact of abortion in other countries is even harder to understand. This should surely be the priority for any change to the law under consideration, and particularly one that concerns the most basic human right of all.

One way of initially assessing the legacy of the 1967 UK Act is to simply state some of the outcomes that the law itself has facilitated.

To that end we need to think about the following facts: since 1967 almost 9 million unborn children have been aborted in the United Kingdom. It has also become a society in which 1 in 5 pregnancies now ends in abortion and where 90% of unborn children diagnosed with Downs Syndrome have their lives ended in utero. This is to say nothing of the fact that the definition of what constitutes 'serious disability' has become increasingly and disturbingly elastic.

In many respects however, these 'tangible' and quantifiable outcomes are the consequences of a legislative legacy or impact that is less immediately available to analysis. But perhaps the more worrying aspect is the way in which the 1967 abortion law has acted to shape the culture of maternal healthcare and the concept of human rights itself within the UK. The most obvious impact is the way in which the best interests of women and the human rights of unborn babies are not given primary importance. Instead, the protection of unborn human life and the safeguarding of women's health must give way to the primacy of 'choice'.

This in turn was given effect by the introduction of a 'health care' policy that facilitated this choice while ostensibly providing 'safeguards' around the possible exploitation of access to abortion by requiring the involvement of at least two doctors acting in good faith.

This provision is also to be found in the Oireachtas Committee's Report. The reality of the legacy that has emerged in the UK, however, has not been one where exploitation has been prevented or where women's health has been safeguarded, but one where 'clinicians are found to be "bulk-signing" forms authorising abortions.' This practice has been annually identified for some time now by the UK's own statutory investigative body, the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

There is certainly an argument to be made, therefore, that one legacy of the 1967 UK Act has been to normalise a vision of abortion as 'just another medical procedure,' where genuine attentiveness to the needs of the individual woman has been ignored in the pursuit of meeting 'industry quotas.'

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As we listen to the discussions over the next few weeks and months, the question we must ask ourselves is: Do we want to retain a law, the Eighth Amendment, that honours, cherishes and respects all human life, or do we want to enact legislation the legacy of which will be to guarantee the inevitable and radical dehumanisation of both mother and child, as evidenced by the almost 9 million lives lost in the UK since 1967? If we believe in the life-affirming culture that the Eighth Amendment has helped to create, then now is the time for every pro-life person to commit to doing all they can to ensure that the campaign to retain the Eighth Amendment in our Constitution is successful.