

Ireland Delays Abortion Vote After All-Night Debate

Ireland's parliament adjourned debate early on Thursday on a bill that would legalize abortion for the first time, following an overnight session of emotional speeches on an issue that has long polarized the staunchly Roman Catholic country.

Premier Enda Kenny has provoked a strong backlash by pushing for access to abortion when a woman's life is in danger. Both sides of the debate have attacked Kenny's stance and the government has faced down more rebels on the issue than it did over its painful economic austerity plans.

Kenny told parliament he had been sent plastic fetuses and letters written in blood and his private house has been picketed by protesters wearing skeleton masks.

Debate on the bill continued until 5 am (12 midnight EDT), when it was adjourned until later on Thursday. A vote is possible late in the evening.

"It is a fudge and a sham, where the lives of women have become secondary to the need of this government to protect itself," said independent deputy Richard Boyd Barrett, who supports the bill but wants it to go further.

The two-decade debate over how Ireland should deal with a Supreme Court ruling that abortion be permitted when a woman's life is in danger was reopened last year after the death of a woman who was denied an abortion of her dying fetus.

The ruling was the result of a challenge, by a 14-year-old rape victim in the so-called "X-case" of 1992, to a constitutional amendment nine years earlier that intended to ban abortion in all instances.

Kenny has met resistance from some within his conservative Fine Gael party and has also faced a concerted campaign by Ireland's once powerful Catholic Church, which is putting pressure on lawmakers.

The Church, rocked by a series of child abuse scandals, has seen its public influence wane since the 1980s and a younger, secular generation wants to end the practice of Irish women travelling to nearby Britain to terminate their pregnancies.

Several lawmakers from Kenny's Fine Gael are expected to vote against the measure and face expulsion from the party.

In a sign of how contentious the abortion issue is, Kenny – midway through a five-year term – lost only one of the party's 76 members of parliament over economic austerity measures even as his coalition made deep cuts under an 85 billion euro (\$109 billion) EU/IMF bailout.

Protesters camped overnight outside parliament, mostly anti-abortion and a few in favor.

"Abortion is murder," said decorator Joe Duffy, 53, holding a poster asking "The death penalty?" over a picture of a pregnant woman's bare belly.

"And it's totally against my religion. So many innocent children are going to die." (\$1 = euros)

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