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Like the most righteous hen party with a law-breaking message



Pro-choice activists came with home-made signs Leah Farrell/Rolling News.ie

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The wheels on the abortion bus took a while before they went round and round yesterday. It left the Central Bank in Dublin early in the morning only to become stuck in traffic some 200 metres up the road.

The ironic similarities between the progress of the bus itself and how long the pro-choice campaign has been fighting its corner in Ireland wasn't lost on the self-styled abortion pill bandits.

"There will probably be a referendum by the time we get to Cork," one activist said.

I was on board with the Reproductive Rights Against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity, or the much easier ROSA for short. Ruth Coppinger, the Socialist party TD for Dublin West, had already spent the morning on the phone to various radio stations explaining what she and the other campaigners were up to. The plan was to be in Galway by lunchtime and Limerick in the late afternoon.

The trip began with the obligatory civil-disobedience selfies. Homemade signs with pro-choice slogans were taped to the windows and the friendly atmosphere gave the bus the feel of the world's most righteous hen party.

Ms Coppinger wasn't the only one handling PR. Rita Harrold, another spokeswoman, was furiously taking on Cora Sherlock from the Pro Life Campaign on a radio phone-in while someone else patiently explained to a London-based journalist the exact restrictive parameters of Ireland's reproductive healthcare system. There was also a scramble at one stage to find a gaeilgeoir who could facilitate an interview request in Gaeilge.

"What's the Irish for 'abortion'?" Rita asked.

"It's definitely something really Catholic and weird," another said.

For those interested, it's "ginmhilleadh", which roughly translates to "destruction of the foetus".

First stop: Galway. The city has become the reluctant capital of the abortion movement after the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar in October 2012. A group of students and activists cheerfully greeted the bus as it pulled up near the Spanish Arch.

Even though the women on board are technically breaking the law, ROSA was not expecting gardai attention, so there was a brief intake of breath when one of Galway's finest appeared at the driver's window. It turned out he was more interested in parking legislation, necessitating a move to a nearby church.

A handful of anti-abortion protesters arrived holding aloft signs reading "Stop using women as pawns" and "Stop endangering women's lives", which caused some confusion. One pro-choice activist was standing with them in support for ten minutes before she realised they were not quite singing from the same hymn sheet.

A makeshift rally was organised, to make sure women could slip on and off the bus unnoticed. Some of those who approached ROSA needed abortion pills urgently, while others wanted to know if they could keep some in Galway for those who might need them in future.

Diana O'Dwyer, a campaigner with ROSA, explained the change that the organisation had noticed in the way people talked about the issue.

“Ever since the marriage equality referendum, we’ve been selling out of pro-choice badges. It’s a bit trendy now to be political on things like this, and people are happier to share their stories,” she said.

Like the rest of the activists, she is “quietly confident” that a referendum on abortion would be won.

“Not easily, though. We know the other side will throw everything at it. But we will too.”

On the bus there were stocks of ten packs of mifepristone and misoprostol, the abortion drugs. While some might have just heard about these pills, ROSA said they had been floating around the country for yonks. Enterprising pro-choice activists have been stuffing them into the bottom of handbags and rucksacks, resiliently sourcing and generously sharing them out in a “needs-must” way. Abortion might be illegal, Ms Coppinger said, but you can’t ever stop it happening.

“People are having abortions in Ireland at home, in their bedrooms. These women are women you know: they’re your sisters, they’re your workmates.”

There was a sizeable crowd of pro-life campaigners when the bus arrived in Limerick shortly after 6pm. Locals ambling out of Supermacs were surprised to find themselves in the middle of an abortion war as both sides lined either side of O’Connell street, trying to drown each other out.

“What do you think?” a 56-year-old lady asked me.

I asked her to tell me what she thought first.

“I think I’ve been watching these things for years,” she said, laughing. “I don’t think it’ll change in my lifetime, but I hope it changes in yours.”

Behind the crowd, another woman quietly left the bus. She could have been the latest woman criminalised by Ireland’s most controversial law.

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