

OPINION&LETTERS

Compassionately pro-life

ALAN DEIDUN

You might excuse me for digressing from my customary focus on environmental issues, but to ignore the current raging debate concerning the introduction or otherwise of abortion merits some consideration.

Without sounding patronising, I wish to contribute my tuppence about the matter, and especially to break the mould once and for all of pro-choice (a misnomer in itself) environmentalists.

As I hope to elucidate through this column, I see no contradiction in being an environmentalist and concurrently a pro-life campaigner. I truly believe that being otherwise would raise the spectre of contradiction, and not the other way round.

I mulled long and hard over whether or not to pen this column, especially since those who fly their kite tend to get burned in this country. This explains why so many valid individuals, especially academics, take a backseat when it comes to contributing to public debate.

The main battering rams deployed by those campaigning for the introduction of abortion on our shores include the fact that, globally, Malta is one of just a few countries which completely denies the 'right' to an abortion, as if there is anything shameful in being one of the few countries to safeguard human life, and as if the non-existent 'right' to an abortion can ever trump the fundamental right to life.

Similarly, the 'restricted' authorisation of abortion, acceded to only in exceptional cases, including life-threatening complications for the mother, rape and in instances of severe foetal physical and mental impairment. My take on the first circumstance is that in cases of a Hobson's choice during delivery, there is no issue.

On the second, my gender risks giving me a paternalistic tone. I believe that aborting a foetus will only add to the tragedy of rape, adding a further victim to the one we already have, but I don't expect to be able to fully understand the rape victim's predicament and neither have I ever met such a victim. I can only make reference to the rape victims who have chosen to bring their pregnancy to a natural completion and whose offspring, whether they were given up for adoption or not, have been given a shot at life.

Concerning the viability of the foetus, this is a slippery slope indeed, bestowing the prerogative over who should live and should die simply on grounds of mental and physical fitness. This surely would be the epitome of discrimination which unravels all ongoing programmes to integrate individuals with different forms of disability and of different races.

Perhaps the most compelling of arguments made by the pro-abortion campaigners is that abortion is already happening on our watch, with a number of Maltese women purchasing online abortive pills and even heading abroad to have their abortion, raising the spectre of a discriminatory access to abortion, with those who can pay being able to circumvent the local ban.

While I still don't believe that this justifies the fully-fledged introduction of abortion on our shores, the support services provided to expectant mothers who are considering abortion should be thoroughly



It is indeed ironic that, while no stone is being left unturned by infertile couples wishing to become parents, with IVF techniques being broadened, some seek to dispose of human life. PHOTO: ANTON WATMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

widened. Although touted by many as a panacea, adoption is not an option for all women considering an abortion, for whom assistance in all its forms cannot wait a further nine months until delivery.

Consistency in views is certainly not our forte as a culture. Take capital punishment. Many are those who are against such a terminal act, normally on the ground that everyone deserves a second chance in life, however heinous his or her crime, and that no one should have the prerogative over another individual's life. This stance I fully support, but the mind then boggles as to why the same compassion and understanding is not extended to an innocent foetus

who certainly does not deserve to pay the ultimate price.

Indeed, the swelling ranks of those who consider the eating of meat as repugnant (a view I respect but don't share) similarly brand anti-abortionists as hypocritical in view of their support of the culling of farm animals. Respectfully, I fail to see the parallels between the two.

I wish to believe we are living in an age of compassion, especially since we are, and rightly so, granting more civil rights than ever before. We are considering the assisted termination of life (euthanasia), surrogacy and even extended parole rights, just to mention a few examples. We have just granted the right to make medicinal use of cannabis and we even have a Commissioner for Future Generations.

We split hairs, and rightly so, over the lack of open space that future generations will have to contend with, and over the unsavoury climate change scenarios which will await them. We seek the protection of all forms of non-human life, from the most endangered of plant forms to a poorly-known insect, up to the few non-human mammalian species roaming our islands. We regularly support calls to adopt endangered animals in foreign countries.

Hence – and this is where it starts getting murky – why are we not as compassionate when it comes to an unborn, defenceless and unrepresented foetus, who represents the immediate next generation?

Through this, I am not purporting to place humans on a rung above other species, as this view would be construed as being driven by some form of religious creed.

Scare-mongering (such as through the dissemination of butchered fetuses), judgemental hand-wringing (such as the demonisation of those considering an abortion), the drawing of parallels with the divorce issue and the bandying about of religious dogma should definitely not be deployed when countering pro-abortion arguments, since they have been proven to backfire in a spectacular fashion.

Such a debate should neither be reduced to a gender contest and should be

decoupled from the priority of addressing current gender inequalities, which should proceed unhindered given its importance. Anti-abortion women, pro-abortion men and anti-abortion atheists are not a figment of our imagination and dispel the stereotypes we would like to attribute to the two sides of the debate.

Despite no political party holding the mandate to initiate the relevant debate, and despite current polls placing the anti-abortion camp well ahead of the pro-abortion one, advocating a referendum on such an issue is simply equivalent to using sheer muscle rather than reason to carry the argument. Persuasion through level-headed and compassionate arguments should be resorted to rather than veiled threats to implement the will of the 'majority'.

Piero Angela, a mainstay of Italian TV since the early 1980s, was recently interviewed on national Italian TV, with the parting question being about 20th century attributes that he would have gladly brought over to the current century. His glib reply was that in his days, no one spoke of the 'rights' they purported to have, but rather spoke of the 'duties' they had.

This has completely metamorphosed into the flipside in this day and age, when talk of 'our body' is rife (despite overlooking the fact that the same 'body' is nurturing another human being, at least for the gestation period).

It is indeed ironic that, while no stone is being left unturned by infertile couples wishing to become parents, with IVF techniques being broadened, some seek to dispose of human life.

I feel a sense of resignation as I write this column, as the introduction of abortion to our shores is increasingly seeming inevitable, especially as the spiel about turning Malta into a 'modern' society picks up, as if there is anything progressive about having the unborn pay the ultimate price.

It's up to those who value human life to prove their case and to convince the uninterested hordes sitting on the fence that it's an issue worth campaigning for.

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