1) DEVOLUTION
1. I am surprised and disappointed that no-one on the Women and Equalities Committee represents a parliamentary seat in Northern Ireland ('NI').
2. For politicians at Westminster to intervene in a devolved matter such as abortion in NI would set a very concerning and worrying precedent for the devolved assemblies in these islands.
3. There is strong NI opposition to the intrusion of Westminster into NI devolved matters. Please note the recent ComRes polling of NI adults showing that 64% of people think that abortion should be decided by Northern Ireland’s elected representatives. This rises to 66% of women and 70% of 18 year olds to 34 year olds.
4. While the the Northern Ireland Assembly is very unfortunately temporarily suspended it is still constitutionally inappropriate and counter-productive to interfere in relation to such a sensitive subject at such a sensitive time for Northern Ireland.

2) DISTINCTIVE LAW AND CULTURE
1. The law on abortion in Northern Ireland protects individuals who are disabled from unjustified discrimination. In England, Scotland and Wales, unborn children can be aborted up to term if a disability is identified in utero. In Northern Ireland, this is not the case. This makes a major difference.
2. In 2016, around 90% of those identified in utero to have Down’s Syndrome in England, Scotland and Wales were aborted. In Northern Ireland on the other hand, 90% of children identified in utero with Down’s Syndrome were born.
3. As Lord Shinkwin put it recently in the House of Lords, “Northern Ireland is the safest place in our United Kingdom to be diagnosed with a disability before birth.” It is something to be celebrated that we in Northern Ireland do not discriminate against the disabled in the womb.
4. The law on abortion in Northern Ireland has been proven to save lives. Research conducted by ‘Both Lives Matter’ in 2017 found that an estimated 100,000 individuals are alive today who otherwise would not be had Northern Ireland followed England, Scotland and Wales in adopting the 1967 Abortion Act. Complaints were made to the Advertising Standards Authority about this claim but after a 5 month investigation, involving health statisticians, the ASA concluded that the 100,00 figure was indeed reasonable. Claims that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland do not stop abortion are, therefore, empirically baseless. The law does make a difference.

3) HUMAN RIGHTS & EQUALITY
1. An argument has been made that the UN claims that Northern Ireland’s abortion laws are not human rights compliant and that Northern Ireland should decriminalise abortion. On analysis with my experience as a lawyer of 35 years standing, I find that this does not refer to the view of the United Nations as a body, but to a report issued by one unelected committee, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
2. Some might consider that the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which defines the remit of the CEDAW Committee, sets out a right to abortion which Northern Ireland is failing to deliver. In truth, however, at no point does the Convention mention abortion. I understand that as a non-judicial body, Prof Mark Hill QC points out that CEDAW has no legal standing to read such a right into the Convention, much as some of its members may wish to do so. Members of the United Kingdom Supreme Court have also highlighted that the views of bodies such as the CEDAW Committee are only of marginal relevance. As Lord Wilson put it, “the authority of their recommendations is slight.”
3. Although a number of Supreme Court Justices recently indicated that they think that on two narrow points - life limiting conditions and sexual crime - the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is incompatible with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, these comments are non-
binding. Even if a future Supreme Court made a binding ruling, the cases in question only engage a tiny number of abortion cases in practice. I understand that less than 2% of recorded abortions in England and Wales were granted on these grounds.

4. There is a real danger that the Women’s and Equalities Committee accepts the untruth that women can only be equal when they have an absolute right to abortion in any circumstance for any reason. This pitches a woman against her unborn child and measures a woman’s freedom, equality and progress by her ability to end the life of their own child. This would appear to be a dangerous and destructive way to view women and humanity more widely. From my experience I know that many women, men and children see a better and more human way ahead which values the life, health and dignity of both a mother and her unborn child.

4) PERSONAL STORIES

I speak from experience of my daughter being personally involved in a wonderful special school that helps young people with a wide variety of disabilities to achieve their full potential. Each young person is a treasured individual deeply loved by family and friends. Their disability does not define who they are. It is something to be celebrated that we in Northern Ireland do not discriminate against the disabled in the womb. The law on abortion in Northern Ireland protects individuals who are disabled from unjustified discrimination. While in England, Scotland and Wales, unborn children can be aborted up to term if a disability is identified in utero, in Northern Ireland, this is not the case and this makes a major difference.

Let me illustrate this. Our local town and community includes people of a variety of ages who cope with disability. A number have Down’s Syndrome. While around 90% of those identified in utero to have Down’s Syndrome in England, Scotland and Wales in 2016 were aborted, in Northern Ireland in 2016, 90% of children identified in utero with Down’s Syndrome were born. As Lord Shinkwin put it recently in the House of Lords, “Northern Ireland is the safest place in our United Kingdom to be diagnosed with a disability before birth.”

I am privileged to spend time with individuals who live with disability including Down’s Syndrome. Each one is part of our local community and fully part of family life and celebration. Many are involved in meaningful work. Each one is valued and deeply loved. Their presence encourages our local community to be more caring and supportive of one another. The law on abortion in NI has been made by our local politicians as part of local legislation on behalf of local people. Please continue to allow us to decide locally on this very important matter for our community.

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