

Brendan Halligan Interview "Women Today", 1984

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**On the subject of The Debate On Women
held in the European Parliament, 1984**

INTERVIEW WITH BRENDAN HALLIGAN ON 'WOMEN TODAY' ABOUT EU DEBATE ON WOMEN

RTE Radio, 1984 (interview is transcribed from a recording
of the show, interviewer is Marian Finucane)

Marian Finucane: But first ... a political story of particular importance to women. This week, for the first time, an elected representative of one of the three main political parties went on record as supporting the introduction of abortion into this country. The politician is Labour Euro MP Brendan Halligan, and he took the step when he voted in the European Parliament's Debate on Women in Strasbourg on Tuesday. His action is likely to cause him problems within his own party and is something bound to come up at the Euro elections in June. But this was only one amendment in a debate on women that was far-ranging and in the main constructive. Brendan Halligan, you are hot off the plane from Strasbourg having been at the Debate on Women of the European Parliament. How would you describe what took place there?

Brendan Halligan: Well, I described it in a speech as a very historic day for the European Parliament, it was the first time that I think any parliament anywhere in Europe has given an entire day – it was a very special session – to a debate on the situation of women. What the Parliament was debating was in fact a 550-page report that I have here on the table in front of me, which literally examined the situation of women in every aspect of life, within every country. It is to the credit of the European Parliament that it has done something that all the other parliaments have lacked the courage to do. I would suggest that the 550-page report exceeds anything that has been done by any research institute, sociological university or whatever. The debate itself is really saying that women are discriminated against in a whole variety of ways in this society, and that this must be ended, and it called on the ten member states to act in unison to take corrective measures.

MF: You said in the speech you made there that men tend to look at women through the eyes of men. They can't do otherwise, and therefore they can't make laws that really suit the needs of women?

BH: There's no question about that – that's absolutely true. I described societies as male-dominated societies, run by men for men and structured by men, and I think that most women, whatever their social status, and whatever degree of progress has been made in recent years, still regard themselves as being discriminated against and as being incomplete. I think that most men lack the ability to see the world through the eyes of the woman. And in many ways don't even realise that discrimination is taking place. And very often they are the cause of the discrimination.

MF: Let's come to amendment No 124, which you supported – you were the only Irish Euro MP to support this particular motion, and it would seem, perhaps, to have got you into some trouble. Tell

us exactly what that amendment was.

BH: Well, let me just place this in context. First of all, I voted in the European Parliament, and the European Parliament does not itself have any power to make law. Although many people, at the time of the recent referendum, accused it of having such power. And sometimes people actually believe it has, just out of ignorance. It has no power to make domestic law, except in matters under the economic treaty of Rome and Paris, that's the first thing. Therefore, in the whole area, this report is really calling upon the governments to do something. It cannot force them to do anything.

MF: What are you calling on the Government to do with Amendment 124?

BH: There is a symbolic value in what the European Parliament does. In this connection, there was an amendment to the resolution that was carrying the report which called upon the governments to harmonise legislation so that women can end pregnancies in hygienic conditions. It's interesting that this phrase was used, because it was tabled by a Greek member in whose country abortion is illegal, but where abortions take place. In other words, society casts a blind eye to it – and it takes place in back alleys and so on, and many women are placed in danger of their health as a result.

MF: Effectively, Brendan Halligan, it's calling on governments to legalise abortion.

BH: It's calling on governments to harmonise the legislation and permitting abortion in certain cases, yes it is.

MF: Why did you take that step, given the fact that obviously the vast majority of Irish people are opposed to the whole idea of abortion as shown in the recent referendum?

BH: I knew that whatever was passed by the European Parliament – and this amendment was not passed – it would have had no effect here, because the Irish constitution cannot be upset or overthrown.

MF: But you said it would have a symbolic effect.

BH: A symbolic effect. When it was put to me, 'was I or was I not' going to express solidarity with women in this matter, I took the decision for myself that I was going to. Particularly in the case of women who are subject to sexual violence either outside the home, for example through rape, or within the home through incest, where I don't think it's the right of a man to say to women in such cases that they must not take a decision about that pregnancy. We know that very many Irish women *do* take that decision by taking the plane or the boat out of this country. We are behaving in a totally hypocritical way by denying that it exists, and it is that blindness that I talked about – that we have blinded our consciences to the fact that it takes place.

MF: So in some cases, you would support the introduction of abortion into this country. Is that Labour Party policy?

BH: No, it is not. There is no defined or expressed Labour Party policy in this area. But I certainly think that most women listening to this programme would recognise that in cases where sexual violence has taken place, either within or without the home, and if a pregnancy occurs, they will think twice about going through with the pregnancy.

MF: Well, we don't have a precise breakdown of voting patterns, but we do know that the vast majority of people in this country did vote in favour of the amendment ...

BH: I think most people, when put in the actual, real life situation of the possibility or the actuality of a pregnancy, will at least debate with themselves whether they want to go through with that. And for those who want to go through with that, I don't think we should stand in their way. And I don't think we should endanger the lives of those women who do decide to go ahead by forcing them into backstreet abortions where, in fact, they place their own lives at risk.

MF: Your party colleague Flor O'Mahoney didn't support the amendment, and his vote was, in fact, crucial. Had he voted with you it would have been a draw. Have you any feelings about that?

BH: No, it was a purely personal decision that I took in the parliament and I respect the right of other members of the parliament to take their own personal decision in this matter. I have absolutely no comment to make. I simply had to react to a real-life situation in the Parliament and I reacted in the way I did knowing, of course, that it would be misinterpreted at home. But it was a risk that I had to take because I think that it's about time that politicians did give a lead on matters like this. There is an evil in this country and the evil essentially is about the hypocrisy we have about male violence against women. We don't want to admit it exists – or rather, most men don't want to admit it exists – and therefore are not prepared to put into place the legal or medical institutions that are required to deal with it.

MF: Well, you are the first politician that has come out and publicly supported the introduction of abortion into this country. Does this mean that when the Euro elections come around in June, people will have the opportunity of choosing between the Labour Party wing that supports abortion and the Labour Party wing which doesn't? As witnessed by yourself and Flor O'Mahoney?

BH: I would ask you not to dramatise it like that, and I hope that the media will not dramatise it like that. There are no pro- or anti- abortion wings inside the Labour Party. I will stand on my personal record if I am chosen as a candidate, and I hope that if people decide to vote for me they will vote for me for many other reasons as well as this one. I have done many things, I hope, for both Dublin and Ireland in the Parliament that makes it worthwhile to vote for me.

MF: I expect this isn't the last you'll hear of it, though.

BH: I don't think so.

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