

# OPPOSITION NOTES

AN INVESTIGATIVE SERIES ON THOSE WHO OPPOSE  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

## Youth Defence: How US-style extremism failed in Ireland

### I INTRODUCTION

By embracing the aggressive tactics and ideological extremism more usually associated with US antichoice groups, Ireland's Youth Defence briefly grabbed the headlines, first as an object of curiosity and then as the subject of derision. As Youth Defence's extremism, rather than its beliefs and goals, became the news, the whole antichoice movement was tarred by the same brush and severely discredited.

Youth Defence's founders—the ultraconservative, Catholic Mac Mathúna family—were inspired by the example of Joe Scheidler, the American author of the book *Closed! 99 Ways to Stop Abortion* (1985), who was largely responsible for developing the tactic of personally harassing abortion providers. The group's aggressive approach may be explained by its links with members of the conservative, ultranationalist political party, Republican Sinn Féin, which formed in 1986 as a splinter from Sinn Féin and is widely believed to have links to the paramilitary Continuity Irish Republican Army.

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The discredit it has brought on the wider movement through its US-style approach—relatively rare and

generally frowned on in Europe—has prompted statements by other antichoice groups distancing themselves from Youth Defence.

In the early 1990s, Youth Defence attracted heavy media curiosity for aggressive and intimidating tactics that were unprecedented in both scale and the manner in which they were deployed on the streets and outside the homes of politicians. Escalating militancy saw its members arrested for invading health clinics and Dublin's Adelaide Hospital, and for a high-profile invasion of governing party

## Key Findings

- Among activities that have led to Youth Defence's unpopularity and isolation are invasions of health facilities and political meetings, attempts to intimidate the prime minister and protests at the home of a government minister's elderly mother; Youth Defence members have repeatedly been arrested for these practices.
- Right-wing and neofascist figures in America and Europe have been linked with Youth Defence leaders, as have a loyalist with an alleged paramilitary past and minders linked to the Provisional IRA; Youth Defence leaders have also been known to voice xenophobic and misogynistic views.
- Youth Defence sought unsuccessfully to soften its image by creating the Mother and Child Campaign, which quickly reverted to the parent group's extremism, summed up in a presentation that a government committee said was "tantamount to incitement to hatred."
- Youth Defence's attempts at international expansion have been almost entirely fruitless.
- Polls show support for legal abortion generally increasing in Ireland, especially among the young.

Fianna Fáil's annual conference during prime minister Bertie Ahern's address. These tactics led to the alienation of many sources of potential political support and Youth Defence became isolated from other antiabortion groups. Attempts by Youth Defence to become more mainstream, when for example it founded the Mother and Child Campaign, appear to have failed as the new campaign merely repeated the old tactics. Youth Defence's attempts to export its tactics and campaign style to other European countries have also met with no apparent success.

The group was further discredited during the "C" case in 1997, when it convinced a poor couple to change their minds about allowing their 13-year-old daughter, who was pregnant after being raped, to have an abortion in Britain. Youth Defence offered financial inducements for the girl to continue the pregnancy to term and the family appealed the court's decision to allow the girl to travel. (She had become a ward of the court system.) The parents ultimately dropped their appeal, and the girl went with a health board guardian to Britain and had the abortion on December 4, 1997.<sup>1</sup> The case attracted international attention, with Youth Defence's intervention receiving particular condemnation.

As the antiabortion issue has dropped from the headlines in Ireland, the group's support seems to have dwindled. However, it is still capable of turning out small groups of militant protesters with its remaining hard-core supporters. Youth Defence is perhaps a cautionary tale for those who think that extremist American-style antichoice activism is the way to go in Europe.

## II HISTORY

Youth Defence was established in February 1992. The impetus behind its launch was a decision by the Irish Supreme Court recognising that a woman whose life was at risk because of her pregnancy, including through a real and substantial risk that she would commit suicide, was entitled to terminate her pregnancy. (Despite this ruling, abortion remains almost completely unavailable in the Republic of Ireland.)

Youth Defence was founded by business student Niamh Nic Mhathúna (as per the particularities of the Irish language, the family name is Mac Mathúna for boys and men and Nic Mhathúna for girls and women), who became the organisation's first chairperson; her eldest sister Una, who became Youth Defence general secretary and is author of *The Life Book* (1999), developed for use at Youth Defence street sessions where the group tries to recruit new members; and Peter Scully, the public relations officer.

The organisation's first contact address was given as the Mac Mathúna family home in a middle-class Dublin suburb.<sup>2</sup> Youth Defence later leased offices in Dublin city centre and registered its name, but not any financial information, with Ireland's Companies Registration Office on March 7, 1992. The state office registers both "companies" and "business names"; Youth Defence opted for the latter designation, which requires comparatively little transparency. Youth Defence is not registered as a charity.

Friends of Youth Defence, a sister group for people who can no longer reasonably call themselves youthful, was established at the same time as Youth Defence. The parents of Una

and Niamh, Una Bean Mhic Mhathúna and Seamus Mac Mathúna, were founding members.<sup>3</sup> Friends of Youth Defence was also registered as a “business name” at the Companies Registration Office.

### III LEADERS

#### The Nic Mathúna Sisters

The Nic Mhathúna sisters come from a large, conservative Catholic family. The Mac Mathúna family belonged to a right-wing fringe of Irish nationalism and were supporters of the renegade Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre who was excommunicated by Pope John Paul II in 1988.<sup>4</sup> Their mother Una had a history of campaigning against a number of proposed changes in Irish society, including the introduction of contraception and providing any state support for single mothers.

Family friend Joe Scheidler, the aggressive US antiabortion activist, was an inspiration to the group. He first visited the Mac Mathúnas during the 1983 campaign to add a “right to life” clause to the Irish Constitution.<sup>5</sup> Then aged 14, Niamh was exposed to the graphic images popular among extreme US prolife activists such as Operation Rescue. She later dated her commitment to combative antiabortion activism to this experience.

In August 1995, Niamh attended a private mass with Pope John Paul II,<sup>6</sup> after which the pope purportedly stressed to her the importance of Youth Defence’s work. On the same occasion, she met with Padre Cristian-Mario Charlot, secretary of the Pontifical Academy for Life, who reportedly later wrote to her that “it is God’s will to give effective daily help to Youth Defence.”

#### Justin Barrett

Justin Barrett rose through the ranks to become both press officer and president of Youth Defence. He joined after failing to get elected in 1992 to the leadership of the prochoice Union of Students in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Originally Justin Slevin, he took on Bernadette Barrett’s surname after they were married. Together, the two took responsibility for Youth Defence’s successful attempts to place its propaganda in schools in 1999.<sup>8</sup>

Barrett has long-standing connections to extreme right-wing groups throughout Europe. According to the Italian neofascist Forza Nuova party’s Web site, he

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attended conferences and rallies in Bologna and Milan (2000).<sup>9</sup> As an “honour guest” of the German National Democratic Party, he addressed a rally in Passau in 2000, appearing with Roberto Fiore, leader of Forza Nuova.<sup>10</sup> There, a former Nazi SS officer received a standing ovation. When reported in the media, these connections proved a serious liability to his subsequent campaign for the European Parliament in June 2004.

Barrett’s views are to be found in his 200-page book, *The National Way Forward* (1998), where he expresses opinions on everything from Jewish influence in the US to his proposal for Irish reunification, which would include the expulsion of Northern Protestants. The book disappeared from bookshelves during the Irish referendum on the European Union’s Nice Treaty in October 2002 and is now available for order only on

right-wing websites. Barrett campaigned against the EU treaty, standing on an antichoice and anti-immigration platform. During the anti-Nice campaign, Barrett argued that the European Union had diluted morality in Ireland through European laws giving women the right to travel, a right established by an Irish abortion case (Grogan, 1992), and that enlarging the European Union would lead to Ireland's being "swamped" by Poles, Czechs and Hungarians.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV AFFILIATE: PRECIOUS LIFE

In 1997, Youth Defence helped establish Precious Life for the purpose of campaigning against the

leaflets, books and posters for distribution at an information centre. Joe Scheidler and other militant American antiabortionists visited Precious Life in September 1999 and returned three years later.

Despite Youth Defence's nationalist roots, the group also has close links with Precious Life Scotland, founded in 1999 by loyalist Jim Dowson, a paramilitary sympathiser with a criminal record.<sup>14</sup> Dowson, who has admitted a "very, very murky past," is well known for his media announcements of major abortion clinic demonstrations in the UK, but the reality is that he usually attracts only a handful of people if the protests take place at all. In 1999, Cardinal Thomas Winning, one of the more outspoken Catholic prelates on the abortion issue, called on Catholics to shy away from Dowson. He said in response to reports on Dowson's paramilitary past, "If the most recent revelations about Mr. Dowson prove to be true then they are deeply disturbing. I would think any Catholic who might have felt sympathy for his organisation will now be convinced to steer clear."

**"I do not consider the tactics and the threatened tactics of Precious Life to be helpful. Their rhetoric antagonises people, their threats frighten people...giving the impression that everyone who is against abortion is a dangerous extremist."<sup>12</sup>**

**-Cardinal Thomas Winning, 1999**

extension of the 1967 British Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Describing Precious Life as an affiliate organisation, Youth Defence confirmed that it gave the group, headed by Bernadette Smyth, 70,000 euros.<sup>13</sup> Copying the tactics of Youth Defence, Precious Life runs regular "street sessions" in which graphic material is distributed to members of the public. It has also mounted intimidating pickets on family planning and advisory services and on staff members' homes.

Precious Life organised a major antichoice billboard and bus advertising campaign in Northern Ireland in 1998-99, producing

#### V MEMBERSHIP AND FUNDING

Fringe groups such as Youth Defence generally have small budgets, lack professional staff and rely on sporadic volunteer activity. Typically, such groups live from event to event and have little in the way of sustained, regular programming; this model appears to hold true for Youth Defence. The Irish antichoice group is not without resources, however, receiving support notably from like-minded US groups.

## TIMELINE

- 1983** US antichoice activist Scheidler first visits Mac Mathúna family, which later founded Youth Defence.
- 1992** Youth Defence, Friends of Youth Defence founded in response to Supreme Court decision recognising that a woman whose life was at risk because of her pregnancy, including through a real and substantial risk that she would commit suicide, was entitled to terminate her pregnancy. Both groups registered as business names with Companies Registration Office.  
First Youth Defence-linked violent incidents take place in Dublin. Police report indicates Youth Defence hired security with links to Republican Sinn Féin.  
Fianna Fáil sources say Youth Defence pickets appeared outside politicians' homes.
- 1993** Youth Defence pickets home of health minister's elderly mother.
- 1994** Youth Defence conference in Dublin reportedly funded by Human Life International.
- 1995** Pope reportedly praises Youth Defence after private mass with Niamh Nic Mhathúna.  
Youth Defence members jailed, fined for health minister protest.  
Youth Defence announces legal challenge to in vitro fertilization clinic. Clinic remains in operation as of 2006.
- 1996** American Life League gives 45,000 euros to fund a Youth Defence ad campaign.
- 1997** Youth Defence gives 51,000 euros to the parents of a 13-year-old pregnant rape victim to induce the parents to reverse their initial acceptance of the girl's wish to have an abortion in Britain.  
Youth Defence gives 70,000 euros to new offshoot Precious Life.
- 1998** Youth Defence leader Justin Barrett publishes book proposing, among other things, expulsion of Protestants from Northern Ireland.  
Precious Life mounts Northern Ireland's first antichoice billboard and bus ad campaign.  
Youth Defence members arrested for alleged attack on police during Dublin hospital protest.
- 1999** US antichoice activists, Youth Defence mount invasion of Irish Family Planning Association.  
Youth Defence members begin travelling through Ireland making antichoice presentations in schools.  
Youth Defence founds Mother and Child Campaign in bid to soften its image.
- 2000** Justin Barrett attends neofascist meetings in Europe.  
Youth Defence disrupts prime minister's conference speech.  
Youth Defence International founded; Youth Defence claims new branches in Europe; little or no activity follows.  
Youth Defence members cautioned for inflammatory remarks at government hearing.
- 2001** Youth Defence spends 44,000 euros on unsuccessful poster campaign calling for antiabortion referendum in Ireland. Lansdowne Market Research poll indicates 62% of people think at least some women should have access to abortion in Ireland.
- 2002** Justin Barrett campaigns against EU Treaty on anti-immigration and antichoice grounds.
- 2004** Crisis Pregnancy Agency poll shows 51% of 18- to 45-year-olds in Ireland support right to choice regardless of circumstances.
- 2005** Youth Defence members violate restraining order by trying, unsuccessfully, to disrupt an Irish Family Planning Association press conference.  
Mother and Child Campaign makes presentation on gay marriage that one person on the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution calls "tantamount to incitement to hatred."
- 2006** *Irish Examiner* poll finds 49% of people under 35 support access to legal abortion in Ireland. Scheidler, Mahoney et al. address Youth Defence annual conference.

## The Numbers Game

In October 1992, Youth Defence claimed nationwide membership of 3,000 in 42 branches.<sup>24</sup> By March 1995, that figure was given as 4,200 people, “mostly under 20.”<sup>25</sup> In 2001, combined membership of the organisations was claimed to be 8,000, with membership of Youth Defence given as 5,000. Actual membership is estimated to number somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200,<sup>26</sup> but, judging from recent mobilisations, the vast majority of these are members in name only as Youth Defence rarely turns out more than a few dozen activists.

Since its inception in 1992, Youth Defence has been registered with the Companies Registration Office—not as a “company” but as a “business name,” a designation that requires a considerably lower standard of document provision and general transparency and is not a charitable designation. Youth Defence, in fact, appears not to reveal any financial information willingly. The organisation is secretive about its membership and any questions about funding are usually answered by referring vaguely to member dues, church-gate collections, donations from supporters in Ireland and fundraising activities.

Rare glimpses into Youth Defence funding indicate some influence by US groups. A 1994 Dublin conference was reported to have been funded by Human Life International,<sup>15</sup> and a 1996 advertising campaign costing IR36,000 (some 45,000 euros) was largely funded by the American Life League.<sup>16</sup>

In March 2001, the Mother and Child Campaign offshoot of Youth Defence spent IR35,000 (some 44,000 euros) on posters calling for another antiabortion constitutional referendum to be held by June of that year.<sup>17</sup> The campaign was unsuccessful, although the government did hold a referendum in 2002 calling for further restrictions on abortion. That regressive proposal was defeated.

Youth Defence said in 1997 that it had given about 70,000 euros to its offshoot Precious Life, established that year to campaign against extending the British Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.<sup>18</sup>

In a related matter also in 1997, Youth Defence made unflattering headlines when it used financial

resources to interfere in an underprivileged family’s decision involving a 13-year-old pregnant rape victim—an affair known as the “C” case. The girl sought to have an abortion, a decision her parents initially accepted, and a children’s court ruled she could go to Britain for the procedure. The parents appealed in November 1997, reportedly “with the help of Youth Defence.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Justin Barrett, Youth Defence gave the parents IR40,000 (about 51,000 euros), money Barrett said was raised as “private donations.”<sup>20</sup> “At first,” the Associated Press reported, “the parents supported the girl’s demand for an abortion. But they changed their minds after a militant anti-abortion group, Youth Defense, offered financial help if she carried the baby to full term.”<sup>21</sup> The *Sunday Times* reported, “Youth Defence ... is paying the parents’ legal expenses. ... Psychiatric reports are understood to advise a termination as being in her best interests. The parents publicly supported their daughter’s wishes until the intervention of Youth Defence last week. The traveller family was offered financial support.”<sup>22</sup>

The parents ultimately dropped their appeal, reverting to their initial acceptance of the girl’s wishes. The girl went with a health board guardian to Britain and had the abortion December 4, 1997.<sup>23</sup>

## VI FOREIGN INFLUENCES

### Joe Scheidler

As noted above, the most significant influence in Youth Defence’s early days was Joe Scheidler, described as “the Green

Beret of the pro-life movement...a father-figure among radical pro-lifers.”<sup>27</sup> Scheidler introduced the Mac Mathúna family to militant antiabortion tactics, including intimidation and the use of graphic materials, pioneered in the United States. He also has addressed many of its activist meetings, including conferences in March 1994; September 1999, when he was the keynote speaker; and March 2006.

Author of *Closed! 99 Ways to Stop Abortion*, a 1985 protest handbook that advises using “inflammatory rhetoric” and tracking down doctors’ home addresses so that they can be picketed where they live, Scheidler has ties to many of the most violent members of the antichoice movement. He has also said that he is “indifferent” to the means used to shut an abortion clinic, but claims that the most effective means of shutting clinics is by intimidating providers.

### **Patrick J. Mahoney**

A leading US antichoice leader who has a penchant for seeking the limelight, Mahoney has also been a frequent visitor to Youth Defence events. He led the invasion of the Irish Family Planning Association offices in March 1999, and spoke at meetings in 1998, September 1999 and March 2006, as well as the August 2000 event in Rome that Youth Defence organised.

At the March 1999 event, Mahoney introduced “his hero and inspiration” Joan Andrews Bell, viewed by many as the founder of the American “rescue” movement. Bell had been arrested repeatedly for aggressively disrupting the work of reproductive health clinics. On at least one occasion, she was jailed after tampering with a machine in a

clinic by unplugging its electrical cord.<sup>28</sup> (Asked in 2002 about an antichoice activist who murdered a doctor, Bell said the shooter was “a victim of what Gandhi said of a corrupt and evil society.... ‘Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.’”<sup>29</sup>)

Mahoney was spokesman for Randall Terry’s Operation Rescue in the early 1990s. In 1994, he launched a legal expenses fund for Paula Jones in her case against US president Bill Clinton. He left Operation Rescue in 1995 to found the Christian Defense Coalition. He was most recently involved, again with Terry, in the 2005 Terri Schiavo case, intervening on behalf of the parents.

Mahoney conducted training sessions in Ireland and led the 1999 Youth Defence invasion of the Irish Family Planning Association clinic in Dublin, avoiding a trial by accepting a caution—basically, a slap on the wrist—from the courts as to his future behaviour.<sup>30</sup> Troy Newman, director of Operation Rescue West, Jeff White of Operation Rescue California and Joan Andrews Bell also participated in the invasion, threatening and intimidating callers, clients and staff.<sup>31</sup>

### **International Ties and Conferences**

Youth Defence attempted to import militant tactics into the Irish antichoice movement by hosting

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conferences addressed by foreign militant activists, principally from the US. One such conference led to a three-hour invasion of a city centre

## Other International Contacts

Youth Defence has invited a wide range of antichoice activists from around the world to address its meetings and conferences. These include:

- Youth Defence Australia founder **Ben Smith** (September 1996, September 1999 and August 2000),
- **Noelia Garcia** from France (January 1997 and June 1998),
- **Irina Kone** from the Ukraine and **Bruno Quintavalle** of the UK Pro-Life Alliance (both in June 1998),
- **Emma Maan** from Ontario Students for Life (June 1998 and September 1999) and
- **Mark Bomchill** from Pro-Life Action Ministries of Minnesota (September 1999 and November 2005), as well as other speakers from Italy, Germany, Spain, Britain, France and the US. These visits do not appear to have led to other incidents similar to the 1999 clinic invasion.

clinic in March 1999 (see above).

Youth Defence held its fourth International Pro-Life and Family Conference March 24-26, 2006, in Dublin. A featured speaker was Bobby Schindler, who in 2004 drew US and Florida state politicians into an ultimately unsuccessful media and court campaign to have his sister Terri's feeding tube left in—against her wishes as stated in earlier years and even though she had been in an persistent vegetative state for more than a decade. Other speakers at the 2006 conference included Scheidler; Latvian Baptist minister Ainars Bastiks, who as government health minister condemned legal abortion; and various anti-embryonic research and -cloning activists.

Youth Defence's attempts to assert its presence outside of Ireland have been fruitless despite repeated claims to the contrary. Youth Defence International was launched in 2000 during an international antiabortion conference in Rome, at which Niamh Nic Mhathúna, Justin Barrett, Bernadette Smyth of Precious Life, Jim Dowson of Precious Life Scotland, Javier Silvestre of Spain's Pro-Vida, Rock for Life USA's Beth Cavanaugh-O'Keefe, Ben Smith of Youth Defence Australia and speakers from Pro-Life Italy and Austria's Youth for Life all spoke.<sup>32</sup> Again, there is no real evidence of any ongoing activities and the organisation appears to be an ambition rather than a program.

Youth Defence claims to have formed new branches in EU member states in 2000 and to have helped establish significant organisations in Austria and Spain.<sup>33</sup> There is no evidence of any Youth Defence-related activities in these countries.

## VII ACTIVITIES AND TACTICS

### Intimidation and Demonstrations

Youth Defence activities were characterised by militancy and violence from the start. In its first years, the organisation was visible at public demonstrations brandishing graphic posters and distributing leaflets described by members of the public as "offensive" and "indecent." Youth Defence also organised weekly street sessions to distribute this material. Later reports described Youth Defence as appearing on the streets "as a fully formed organisation with an office and glossy posters and leaflets."<sup>34</sup>

In the space of a few months, Youth Defence organised two demonstrations in Dublin city centre (June and October 1992), adopting a policy of being noisy, provocative and controversial for the purpose of getting media attention and intimidating people. Scuffles were reported, including two significant incidents of violence in October 1992 and July 1994. There are also reports that the group used "hired muscle" as stewards and attacked prochoice activists with knuckle-dusters in the early 1990s.

A 1992 police report on the background of the organisation allegedly shows that at least four hired security workers seen at Youth Defence marches were known members of the Provisional IRA, fuelling public concern. Security sources were reported as identifying two other minders and one of their principal organisers as being previously known to police.<sup>35</sup>

Through the early and mid-1990s, Youth Defence expanded its tactics to include intimidatory pickets outside politicians' homes. It also targeted



constituency clinics, public and private meetings, government offices and family planning clinics, where clients were waylaid in an effort to prevent them from availing of services. These pickets were loud and accusatory, and demonstrators continued to use graphic material. Demonstrations were also organised at major road junctions and across bridges, and an annual nationwide road show to distribute the group's graphic antichoice material was launched.

Already in October 1992, Fianna Fáil sources told the *Independent* that Youth Defence had been "picketing the family homes of politicians."<sup>36</sup> That same month, the group was reported to have "picketed the home of a woman MP known to be in favour of law reform."<sup>37</sup> In January 1993, the *Irish Times* reported, "Youth Defence ... picketed the home of [health minister] Mr. [Brendan] Howlin's elderly mother."<sup>38</sup> Wexford mayor Paddy Nolan in October 1993 "had to physically restrain passersby from attacking members of Youth Defence," the *Irish Times* reported, in what Nolan said was "not a peaceful protest" outside Howlin's weekly clinic in the town.<sup>39</sup> Youth Defence members entered Howlin's Wexford office in March 1994 with one being forcibly removed by police.<sup>40</sup>

Youth Defence's activities have attracted continued police attention and legal cases, regularly initiated as a result of arrests following complaints about its use of indecent posters. Demonstrators were often arrested or questioned about their activities by police concerned with breaches of the peace. In 1995, protests on the health minister's constituency clinic resulted in fines for several members, including John

Heaney, Peter Murphy and Niamh, Una and Seamus Mac Mathúna.<sup>41</sup> Also in 1995, Youth Defence activist Conor Maguire was jailed for intimidating behaviour outside another Dublin family planning clinic.<sup>42</sup> In 1996, six Youth Defence members were arrested in a protest that started outside health minister Michael Noonan's home.<sup>43</sup> The group again picketed the minister's home in 1997.<sup>44</sup>

The invasion of the Adelaide Hospital in Dublin city centre in May 1998 led to members of Youth Defence being arrested and accused of violently attacking police. They later appeared in court to answer charges about the melee during which they had screamed abuse through loudhailers, oblivious to the needs of many patients, including some who were dying. In the resulting conviction, eight members of Youth Defence, including Justin Barrett, were fined for assault and obstructing police.<sup>45</sup>

**"Youth Defence's agenda is not just about 'banning abortion.' They also want to close down women's health services and prevent sex education programmes for young people. Youth Defence want to drag Ireland back to the era of the contraception ban, women dying in childbirth after repeated pregnancies and young girls being locked up in Magdalen laundries to hide the 'shame' of being pregnant."<sup>46</sup>**

#### **-Dublin Abortion Rights Group, 1999**

In 1999, Youth Defence members, together with Patrick Mahoney, were restrained by the courts from picketing or invading the premises of the Irish Family Planning Association. They were further restrained from interfering with IFPA staff.<sup>47</sup> After members of Youth Defence and international

collaborators invaded the IFPA premises, legal injunctions were sought and issued against its leaders, and several of the antichoice visitors from the US.<sup>48</sup> National organiser Maurice Colgan was prevented by court order from continuing this tactic. The order was later overturned by the Irish Supreme Court, but the incident took a toll on Youth Defence in the form of diminished support from the general public and other antichoice groups.

These restrictions were ignored when a handful of Youth Defence activists tried unsuccessfully to invade a press conference organised by the IFPA in August 2005.<sup>49</sup>

Amid reports of growing public dissatisfaction with Youth Defence tactics, the group founded the Mother and Child Campaign in 1999. It is widely believed that this campaign was an attempt to present a softer, more acceptable public face for Youth

Defence, which was losing credibility as an organisation and alienating those who traditionally would have been sympathetic to its cause. The campaign's most recent spokesperson is Dr. Séan Ó Domhnaill, former medical officer of Youth Defence. The Mother and Child Campaign has filed one annual return with the Companies Registration Office, which shows only an outstanding debt to Youth Defence of some 30,000 euros. An undated solicitation from Niamh Nic Mhathúna describes the Mother and Child Campaign as "a natural progression for the founding members of Youth Defence...opening its membership to all ages."

While seeking to project a softer image than that of Youth Defence, the Mother and Child Campaign has opposed gay marriage and protested to the Vatican about Cura, an Irish

## Public Opinion Turns Against Youth Defence

As an example of how the ideas that drive Youth Defence have not met with public approval, it is worth noting some recent polling data on abortion that shows significant moves toward public support for access to abortion in Ireland. A poll published in the *Irish Examiner* in January 2006 showed a plurality of voters under the age of 35 were in favour of legalising abortion. The survey showed that while there was still an overall plurality opposed to abortion (47% to 36%), 49% of those under 35 wanted women to be able to access abortion in Ireland.

In 2004, a national survey of people aged 18 to 45 by the state's Crisis Pregnancy Agency found that 51% thought that a woman "should always have a choice to have an abortion, regardless of the circumstances, 8% felt that a woman should never have this choice, 2% had no opinion and the remaining proportion (39%) felt that there should be a choice in certain circumstances."<sup>56</sup> The study further found support for abortion in various circumstances had increased substantially in the past two decades, such that 86% of respondents thought a woman should have a choice to have an abortion if the pregnancy seriously endangered her health or was the result of rape or incest. Other major polls show similar support for access to legal abortion in Ireland. In 2001 a poll by Lansdowne Market Research of a nationally representative sample of 1,122 people over age 15 found that 62% of those polled believed that all or some of the many Irish women who travel to Britain for abortions should be allowed access to abortion in Ireland.<sup>57</sup>

government-funded Catholic “crisis pregnancy” agency.<sup>50</sup> Cura was established by the Catholic hierarchy in 1977 and runs 16 centres in Ireland.<sup>51</sup> Services offered include counselling and pregnancy testing, and the group says its volunteers “will not judge you, or tell you what you should do.”<sup>52</sup> In 2005, Ireland’s bishops asked Cura, which is headed by a bishop, to stop distributing a pamphlet that contained information on pregnancy counselling services; the matter had not been resolved as of this writing. Ireland’s Crisis Pregnancy Agency, a state-created body that is entirely funded by the Department of Health and Children, provides more funds to Cura—654,000 euros annually, according to the *Irish Times*—than to any other group.<sup>53</sup>

There is little if any evidence that the Mother and Child Campaign has actually done anything concrete for either mothers or children.

In the late 1990s the organisation developed a way to get graphic visual presentations on abortion into schools. According to Youth Defence’s Bernadette Barrett, representatives of the organisation produced instructional packages for use in science, home economics and other courses and travelled around Ireland presenting them personally in the classes of teachers sympathetic to their cause.<sup>54</sup>

In March 2000, Youth Defence attempted to intimidate Bertie Ahern, the Irish taoiseach (prime minister), picketing his home and office, invading the stage as he addressed Fianna Fáil’s ard fheis (his political party’s general assembly) and disrupting other public events.<sup>55</sup> There have been no apparent consequences as a result of the campaign against Ahern, apart from

the arrest and punishment of Youth Defence members and increasing criticism of the organisation by other antichoice groups and individuals and in the media.

### Testimony and Positions

Although originally describing itself as a single issue organisation, Youth Defence has sought to broaden its appeal by attacking other advances in reproductive technology. As early as 1995, Youth Defence planned a legal challenge to an IVF clinic at Clane Hospital in County Kildare, Ireland.<sup>58</sup> As of 2006, the hospital continues to provide IVF services.<sup>59</sup>

Members of Youth Defence who spoke at a governmental abortion committee hearing in 1999 were cautioned for intimidating behaviour. In particular, the committee chair repeatedly intervened to caution Justin Barrett. The chair took issue especially with Barrett’s claim that there were grounds for impeachment proceedings against the Irish

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Supreme Court because of past decisions on abortion.<sup>60</sup>

Somewhat ironically, considering the reason for the Mother and Child Campaign’s founding, one member of a 2005 all-party government committee investigating gay marriage accused the Youth Defence offshoot of having made a presentation to it that was “tantamount to incitement to hatred.”<sup>61</sup>

Congratulating the Italian electorate for accepting the pope’s directive to abstain in Italy’s June 2005 referendum on assisted human

reproduction and foetal stem cell research, Youth Defence called on the Irish prime minister to reject the recommendations of the government's Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction (May 2005), which call for the legalisation of foetal stem cell research and for single people and gay couples to be allowed to access IVF treatment.<sup>62</sup> Youth Defence positions on these issues and on abortion do not reflect mainstream Irish views.

## VIII CONCLUSION

Youth Defence's use of the aggressive antichoice tactics more often seen in the United States than in Europe has ultimately backfired, leaving the group widely rejected and marginalised, even by senior members of the Catholic hierarchy. The group's unusual approach, fuelled in part by contacts with US antichoice activists such as Joe Scheidler and also perhaps by its ties to some Irish nationalist groups, has led other Irish antichoice groups to distance themselves from the Mac Mathúnas' organisation.

Youth Defence has attracted negative media attention through invasions of health facilities and

pickets of public figures' homes—including that of a health minister's elderly mother—and was further discredited when in 1997 it tried to use financial resources to interfere in a poor family's decision about the pregnancy of a 13-year-old who had been raped. Partly because of its resulting marginal place in the antichoice movement, Youth Defence has had almost no success in carrying out plans for expansion, particularly to other countries.

The majority of young people in Ireland are supportive of reproductive choice, rebuking the efforts of Youth Defence and other groups. The group reveals little about its finances, but raising funds in the current context cannot be easy, and Youth Defence has at times relied on financially more robust US organisations to pay for its activities. Youth Defence has opened up no major new fronts in its work in nearly a decade—since it started Precious Life in 1997. Its membership may be estimated at barely more than 1,000, with active membership well below that number. This lack of support is surely reassuring to Irish supporters of choice, given Youth Defence's penchant for intimidation and ideological extremism.

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