News



This is an aerial view of The Houses of Parliament in London. (CNS/Reuters/Kieran Doherty)

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Abortion and same-sex marriage will be made legal in Northern Ireland unless self-government in the province is restored within three months.

The House of Lords in London voted 182-37 in favor of permitting abortions for Northern Irish women up to 28 weeks of pregnancy.

The July 17 vote came just two weeks after the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly in favor of an amendment to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill to permit both abortion and same-sex marriage in the province. The House passed the amendments July 18.

Both changes are subject to the restoration of legislative powers that were devolved — passed down from the British Parliament in London — to the Northern Ireland assembly at Stormont in Belfast by Oct. 21.

Power-sharing at Stormont between Irish Nationalist and Loyalist factions, which originated from the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, collapsed in 2017, and there are few signs that it will be restored in the near future.

The changes to abortion law are controversial because all of the U.K. Members of Parliament who hold seats in Northern Ireland are opposed to abortion.

The Stormont assembly also rejected abortion when it had the opportunity to vote for its introduction in 2016.

Northern Ireland is the only part of the U.K. — and one of the few places within Europe — where doctors can be prosecuted for providing abortions.

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Ahead of the passage of the bill through the Houses of Parliament, Auxiliary Bishop John Sherrington of Westminster, the lead bishop on pro-life issues of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, urged politicians to heed the wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland who, he said, "have not been consulted on

such a fundamental change to the law."

"Decision-making should take place as close to the people as possible," he said in a July 12 statement sent by email to Catholic News Service.

"In contrast, this proposal is an imposition enacted by a Parliament which is overwhelmingly not from Northern Ireland," the bishop added. "Parliament acting in this way threatens further to undermine devolution in Northern Ireland."

Clare McCarthy of Right to Life U.K., a lobby group, said: "The people of Northern Ireland have 13 weeks to stop the introduction of one of the world's most extreme abortion regimes to the province.

"Many thousands of people in Northern Ireland are deeply angered and distressed by this action by the Westminster Parliament," she said in a July 18 statement sent by email to CNS.

"The manner in which MPs from Westminster have attempted to impose abortion on a people that do not want it, and who they do not represent, is grossly disrespectful and unconstitutional," she said.

A letter with about 19,000 signatures from people of Northern Ireland was sent to outgoing U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May after her government indicated that it was dropping its policy of neutrality on abortion in the province in favor of actively pursuing a change in the law.

The letter, drafted by Baroness (Nuala) O'Loan, a Northern Irish member of the House of Lords, urged May not to permit legal abortion until the people of Northern Ireland had been consulted and their elected representative assented to a change in the law.

But Lord (Ian) Duncan, speaking for the U.K. government during the Lords debate, said abortion would be introduced irrespective of any consultation.

He said he wished to confirm that the "substantive point" of any future consultation would focus on "how women will obtain access to abortion, but not whether they should be able to do so."

"I want to be absolutely clear, consultation would not be on the question of whether this should be done but only how the recommendations can be implemented in Northern Ireland," he said.