

Standing up to Abortion Opponents: Healthcare and Secularism Part 6

Video available at: <https://youtu.be/zyTPrf1-x0E>

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(Dr Antony Lempert)

On its website one of the stated aims of the British Pregnancy Advisory

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Service (BPAS)

is to safeguard individual freedom and

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moral autonomy in making reproductive choices. Who could argue with that? Well

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I'm delighted to welcome Ann Furedi, leading pro-choice advocate and BPAS

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chief executive since 2003, who will no doubt tell us more about those who do

0:00:32.790,0:00:37.649

seek to limit individual freedom and moral autonomy in making reproductive

0:00:37.649,0:00:42.360

choices including abortion, and will now speak on standing up to abortion's opponents.

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(Ann Furedi)

I don't have any slides: I'm not presenting any data or important quotes

0:00:58.160,0:01:03.989

I've also got a bit old school about it it's kind of nice to see how bored

0:01:03.989,0:01:07.759

people are when you're talking to them.

0:01:08.209,0:01:16.470

Yes, thank you for the point that you just made about commitment to advocacy

0:01:16.470,0:01:23.250

and supporting autonomy. I do really feel that I'm so fortunate to have one of the

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best jobs really. BPAS is a charity that's existed since 1968 and is still a

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bit old-fashioned in the sense that we have a two-fold charitable remit. One is to

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provide services for women and we provide abortions for about 70,000 women

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a year. Almost all of those are delivered free to the women because the National

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Health Service pays for almost all of the abortions to British residents; women

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who who pay for their own treatment these days are generally travelling from

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from overseas. But we also have this advocacy remit as well - a public

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education remit -

and I think it's really important

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because I think that one of the things that we're able to do is to take the

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experience of what women need when they receive our services, and indeed the

0:02:30.260,0:02:35.959

experience of the doctors and nurses and midwives and everybody else who

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provides those services, and to use it to really try to explain to our politicians

0:02:44.780,0:02:51.310

and the general public what is really going on. And I say that because I think

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abortion is a really weird issue for people because it almost seems to exist

0:03:00.709,0:03:07.640

on two levels. On the one hand you've got abortion as a political and a moral

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issue, an issue of autonomy, of bodily integrity, an issue of women's rights and

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it can be discussed in that area. On the other hand what you have is you have

0:03:24.850,0:03:31.940

abortion as a health-care service. And it really comes home to you that that

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difference and that distinction really comes home to you when you're involved

0:03:36.470,0:03:43.100

in provision, because what you realise is that women never come to an abortion

0:03:43.100,0:03:49.190

service as a demonstration of their pro-choiceness. You know, they might

0:03:49.190,0:03:55.579

come to us but all manner of other reasons - you know I sometimes have this

0:03:55.579,0:04:00.680

real sort of sense that you know I now think I've heard absolutely everything

0:04:00.680,0:04:08.420

in terms of people's reasons. But no woman seeks to obtain an abortion to

0:04:08.420,0:04:13.609

exercise her right to abortion and I think that's very very important to keep

0:04:13.609,0:04:20.630

in mind when we think about the contested way that it then plays out in

0:04:20.630,0:04:26.349

the arena of public discussion. And in fact you

0:04:26.349,0:04:31.330

know many of the women who come to us for termination of pregnancy don't agree

0:04:31.330,0:04:36.610

with abortion. You know very often - and in fact our nurses and doctors can find it

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quite challenging when somebody comes and, you know, they're really doing the 'I

0:04:41.770,0:04:43.900

really don't know how you could do your job;

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oh I really don't agree with it, I'm not like all those other women sitting

0:04:48.189,0:04:54.370

out there in ... you know, I mean my
colleague from Malaysia, S P Chung - professor
- is

0:04:54.370,0:04:59.349

laughing because I guess it
happens exactly the same in Malaysia,

0:04:59.349,0:05:03.939

saying yes it does. Wherever you are it's
like I am NOT like them, and I think

0:05:03.939,0:05:08.349

that's because people have real
stereotypes of the kind of women who

0:05:08.349,0:05:14.319

have abortions and the reasons why
women have abortions. And it's, you know,

0:05:14.319,0:05:21.340

it's 'not like them'. So consequently when
we talk about abortion and when we deal

0:05:21.340,0:05:27.819

with abortion's opponents, it can become
quite hard because what you're doing is

0:05:27.819,0:05:32.199

you're having discussions on all kinds
of various different layers, different

0:05:32.199,0:05:39.129

levels of abstraction and it can be
quite difficult to engage and I

0:05:39.129,0:05:43.930

wanted to talk a little bit about that.
The first thing that I want to say

0:05:43.930,0:05:53.860

though that in terms of standing up to
abortion's opponents we're really doing it

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[aside: I'll just cover the bag up, so you don't
get the tweet noises]
in standing up to abortion's

0:06:00.639,0:06:06.370

opponents I really think we're doing
pretty well the moment. I look back - I've

0:06:06.370,0:06:15.680

been involved in campaigning for
abortion rights for 35 years

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or something that long - I've been doing
the job that I do at the moment for 13,

0:06:24.400,0:06:29.960

yeah about 13, years. And the way that
things have changed over the last couple

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of years has been phenomenal, it's
absolutely been phenomenal. When we first

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decided that we would launch a campaign
for decriminalisation of abortion, to

0:06:43.580,0:06:49.690

take abortion outside of - to take abortion
outside of the criminal law,

0:06:50.229,0:06:56.630

there was a sense among those of us that
we're discussing that this was really

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going for the highest peak. We had
this discussion that we kind of needed a

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campaign, we didn't like the idea of just
trying to extend the Abortion Act to

0:07:08.090,0:07:12.229

Northern Ireland, the abortion act that
we've got here. We thought the abortion

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act that we've got here was pretty
inadequate. We were looking that, well there

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were clearly legal changes that were going to happen in the Republic of

0:07:21.020,0:07:28.130

Ireland - there have been - there were changes that we thought that were likely to

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happen in the north of Ireland; so was this going to be a good time to push for

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change in Britain? And we were thinking about what kind of things we

0:07:39.470,0:07:45.220

should go for. In the past the pro-choice movement had really fixed itself on

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getting rid of the two doctors' signatures, maybe just getting one doctor, allowing

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early medical abortion to take place at home, little minor changes like that. And

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we kind of thought well damn it you know if you're gonna have

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a campaign you might as well campaign for what you really want and

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decriminalisation is what we really want. And then lo and behold what we actually

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found was that it was easier to explain to people about decriminalisation - why it

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was wrong for abortion to be in the criminal law, why it was wrong for a

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doctor to be accused of committing a criminal offence

and to stand trial for a criminal

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offence if a woman didn't meet the criteria in the '67 act; and indeed

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for a woman to be convicted of a criminal offence of causing her own

0:08:41.729,0:08:47.040

miscarriage. You know that seemed easier to explain than all of the little

0:08:47.040,0:08:52.680

bits and pieces around the 1967 act. And it really struck me how clear it was even

0:08:52.680,0:08:58.860

when I was talking to my own mum who, you know, at the age of 85 says - you know -

0:08:58.860,0:09:03.180

what is it that you're doing? And sort of thing, 'well I don't think that women or

0:09:03.180,0:09:07.890

doctors should be locked up for carrying out an abortion that the woman wants. Well

0:09:07.890,0:09:12.380

I think you're completely right about that, that would be insane!' You know. And

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there's a general kind of common sense element to it, so we're

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doing reasonably well. About 70 per cent of people in the latest opinion polls

0:09:27.000,0:09:33.449

are saying that they think that abortion

should be allowed simply because a

0:09:33.449,0:09:39.079
woman doesn't want to have a child; so that's pretty good going. Interestingly

0:09:39.079,0:09:48.029
about the same proportion of MPs are saying that they think that abortion

0:09:48.029,0:09:54.480
should not be a criminal offence when a woman doesn't want to have a child and

0:09:54.480,0:10:00.870
amazingly 58 per cent of Tory MPs are going along those lines as well. And I

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think that you know by focusing on the criminality act saying this isn't really

0:10:07.410,0:10:13.110
a question of whether you approve of abortion or not but do you think it

0:10:13.110,0:10:20.190
should be a criminal offence, I think it does make it pretty clear to people. So I

0:10:20.190,0:10:25.949
think that we're doing quite well on that particular front. Now talking

0:10:25.949,0:10:37.699
about our opponents, what I want to do is to talk about our opponents in really three

0:10:37.699,0:10:40.790
sort of areas.

0:10:41.010,0:10:48.390
There are clearly people who are absolutely, fundamentally opposed to

0:10:48.390,0:10:58.950
abortion on any grounds whatsoever. Organisations such as Abort 67 who are

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the ones who we sometimes get campaigning outside of our abortion

0:11:05.010,0:11:11.220
clinics. They're the very extreme ones, the ones will be distributing the pictures

0:11:11.220,0:11:17.970
of the aborted fetuses; they're the ones that are wearing the GoPro cameras on their

0:11:17.970,0:11:24.840
heads trying to film women who are coming into the abortion

0:11:24.840,0:11:33.300
clinics. They're the ones who write to me and compare abortion clinics with death

0:11:33.300,0:11:40.260
camps during the war and say that, you know, we

0:11:40.260,0:11:45.650
are committing the equivalent of a genocide. And that's really hard; there is no talking with these people right.

0:11:45.650,0:11:53.930
It's very difficult to have a discussion with people who seriously

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absolutely believe that we are the moral equivalent of the latter-day Mengele's.

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And what I think what it's crucial for us to do in terms of dealing with these people

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is to attempt to marginalise them as much as possible by trying to keep them

0:12:15.690,0:12:22.740
away from our clients. And I have

actually had a lot of problems with the

0:12:22.740,0:12:31.170

idea of the bubble zones around clinics and so on. I'm very uncomfortable with

0:12:31.170,0:12:38.370

the idea because I'm a great advocate of free speech and a very strong advocate

0:12:38.370,0:12:44.520

of the rights to politically protest. In my red hot days of youth I've been

0:12:44.520,0:12:48.600

arrested on demonstrations myself for all kinds of reasons

0:12:48.600,0:12:53.910

and I strongly believe that it's an important part of our freedoms to be

0:12:53.910,0:12:59.459

able to express our ideas. But the one thing about these people which in some

0:12:59.459,0:13:06.240

ways makes it different and why I think that there is a reason for

0:13:06.240,0:13:13.680

basically saying that they stand outside of the protections of free speech and

0:13:13.680,0:13:19.829

political protest, is because they say themselves they're not carrying out a

0:13:19.829,0:13:29.399

political protest and they are not in fact exercising their political right to

0:13:29.399,0:13:37.670

demonstrate. In fact what they argue is that abortion doesn't need a protest, it

0:13:37.670,0:13:44.670

protests itself. What they're trying to

do is to stop women from accessing the

0:13:44.670,0:13:50.069

services. And that to my mind takes it and puts it to one side. I'm

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still actually uncomfortable about it if I'm perfectly honest. I much preferred it

0:13:56.699,0:14:01.380

in the days when we weren't having this discussion. And we've had protesters at

0:14:01.380,0:14:06.839

our clinics as long as I've been around it's just that it used to be a couple of

0:14:06.839,0:14:13.709

nuns with a few prayer beads and prayer sheets and the clinic managers used to

0:14:13.709,0:14:18.870

take them out cups of tea because they felt sorry for them in the winter time and so

0:14:18.870,0:14:26.040

on. But that's manifestly different and my point is is that I am the person that

0:14:26.040,0:14:32.189

I will debate anybody at any time and anywhere on any platform,

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I will even debate these absolute fundamentalists, but you leave our

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clients alone, right? This is a matter of if you want to have a debate I will

0:14:42.000,0:14:46.110

debate with you when life begins, but when somebody is coming to one of our

0:14:46.110,0:14:51.569

clinics that is not what they are coming

to do. They're not coming to us for a

0:14:51.569,0:14:56.160

discussion they're coming to us to receive counselling or to us to receive

0:14:56.160,0:15:01.379

treatment. But I do think that away from the clinic

0:15:01.379,0:15:07.229

gates it is worth engaging with these people and the reason why I think it's

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worth engaging with them is because whilst there are some people who will be

0:15:12.499,0:15:20.789

really bought into the idea that the life of the three-day embryo is as

0:15:20.789,0:15:26.999

significant as the woman who's carrying the three-day embryo and they really do

0:15:26.999,0:15:32.609

put those things on a balance; really I don't think that there are very many of

0:15:32.609,0:15:42.289

them who will do that and I had a lovely debate in a very big church in London,

0:15:42.289,0:15:50.909

debating an American guy who was behind the whole operation rescue thing, really

0:15:50.909,0:15:56.159

trying to tease out his argument and really demonstrate that I actually

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didn't think even he totally believed what he was saying. Because if he really

0:16:03.959,0:16:10.679

thought that I was the equivalent of, you

know, a modern Hitler, if he really

0:16:10.679,0:16:17.999

thought that our clinics were doing the same as the death camps and if he

0:16:17.999,0:16:22.739

really thought I should be tried in Nuremberg for that, would he honestly be

0:16:22.739,0:16:26.629

calling a debate with me? I really didn't think that he would be doing that. And

0:16:26.629,0:16:32.639

you know I think that they kind of get it. John Harris who's a

0:16:32.639,0:16:40.589

lovely ethicist who works at - who works for Manchester University, he's a professor of

0:16:40.589,0:16:45.779

medical ethics there, has a lovely mind experiment in one of his books that I

0:16:45.779,0:16:52.979

use quite a lot when he basically you know is talking to people who are against

0:16:52.979,0:16:59.579

abortion and claiming that they regard the life of the embryo as being

0:16:59.579,0:17:04.319

equivalent for the life of children and the life of adults, when he says look

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imagine you're standing in front of a burning hospital and you can do one run

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into the hospital and save somebody's life. You know you might have an internal

0:17:16.010,0:17:21.410

debate about whether you run to the

children's ward or the maternity ward or,

0:17:21.410,0:17:29.300

you know, wherever. But you're not going to run to the fridge that's got the

0:17:29.300,0:17:35.420

frozen embryos and rescue the frozen embryos even though arguably you could

0:17:35.420,0:17:40.730

be bringing out dozens rather than just the one person that you can carry. And

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it's a great line, great story to lob in to a fundamental you know anti-choice

0:17:48.680,0:17:53.990

meeting because they genuinely find these things quite difficult to answer.

0:17:53.990,0:18:01.700

Because in their heart of hearts I think not among the really die-hard ones but

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among a lot of the younger people that they pull around them who are bought

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into these arguments because they basically are very naive and haven't

0:18:16.250,0:18:25.070

a sense of why abortion is necessary, to talk to them about these ideas does

0:18:25.070,0:18:31.700

bring people over to our side because it undermines some ideas that they

0:18:31.700,0:18:39.200

thought were very logical. I was having a - I was speaking at a debate with a woman

0:18:39.200,0:18:47.090

and she's also called Anne - Scanlon - who

runs Life, and the two of us were

0:18:47.090,0:18:53.810

debating at King's College, part of the University of London, earlier in the week.

0:18:53.810,0:19:01.370

And the point that I was going overboard with her on actually was the argument

0:19:01.370,0:19:05.750

about whether you're pro-life or you're pro-choice. I was making the point

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that, you know, I regard myself actually as being very pro-life; I do accord a

0:19:12.170,0:19:19.250

large amount of moral status to the fetus you know, I generally have a very

0:19:19.250,0:19:24.920

large presumption in favour of life. My family laugh at me actually it's a big

0:19:24.920,0:19:27.180

family joke that I'm the one that's trying to catch

0:19:27.180,0:19:31.860

the mouse that the cat's brought in to put it outside the front door

0:19:31.860,0:19:35.370

and yet I run abortion clinics. You know they've got this general sort of sense

0:19:35.370,0:19:39.900

of, you know: how do you tally that up? My point really is that I've got a very

0:19:39.900,0:19:45.240

strong presumption in favour of life when that life is doing no damage, and when a

0:19:45.240,0:19:51.540

woman is pregnant and she's carrying a

fetus yes of course I have a huge regard

0:19:51.540,0:19:55.530

for the status of the fetus for what it could become

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as a potential human being, but in terms of its equivalence or its superiority

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over her life and her choice and her autonomy no I do not really give it that

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particular status. It was very interesting I was mobbed by people after

0:20:14.790,0:20:21.960

the meeting who wanted to talk to me about why it is that I could sort of

0:20:21.960,0:20:29.490

reconcile the idea of according a moral value to the fetus in the womb but I

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didn't necessarily go down that pro-life trajectory. So I think all of these ideas

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are very important, it's why I wrote this book on the moral case for abortion. Now what

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I will say in winding up from this - because I'm being given a five-minute note -

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what I will say from this is that I genuinely believe that it is important

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for us to stand up to our opponents by trying to engage with them and their

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audiences and to take up their arguments

and to demonstrate to them why there is

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a need for abortion, and abortion is not dehumanising and it is not a bad thing. I

0:21:16.680,0:21:22.410

think it's very important to be speaking to as many audiences as possible, in fact

0:21:22.410,0:21:27.960

about the opposite - why it is a good thing for a woman to be making a

0:21:27.960,0:21:35.220

decision about her future and taking responsibility for it herself. That is a

0:21:35.220,0:21:39.450

good thing and that is a good thing that our clinics offer.

0:21:39.450,0:21:47.490

So this is a thing to throw out because this meeting that I was at on Wednesday

0:21:47.490,0:21:55.529

was the most bizarre meeting, most bizarre debate, I have ever spoken at in

0:21:55.529,0:22:01.710

terms of its composition. Even weirder than the one in the church that I was

0:22:01.710,0:22:09.929

debating the American anti-life - anti-choice - zealot from. And the reason

0:22:09.929,0:22:14.850

why was because it was about a hundred people in this meeting about 85 of whom

0:22:14.850,0:22:22.320

were men, or young male students, and only about 15 of them were women. And the

0:22:22.320,0:22:28.320

reason for that is because the women's

groups on campus shortly beforehand had

0:22:28.320,0:22:32.760

decided that Anne Scanlon my
opponent shouldn't be allowed to speak

0:22:32.760,0:22:38.460

and that the debate shouldn't take place
because she was anti-abortion and they

0:22:38.460,0:22:42.210

think that that's hateful
and so therefore they think that she

0:22:42.210,0:22:47.100

should be no platformed. So basically the
organisers were in fact worried that

0:22:47.100,0:22:51.539

there was going to be a protest outside -
there wasn't, they just boycotted the

0:22:51.539,0:22:58.740

meeting - which was a real shame because
we actually had a very good lively very

0:22:58.740,0:23:04.110

contested but conflictual meeting. I had
the same experience when I went to

0:23:04.110,0:23:09.120

Cambridge University where actually
there was a demonstration of women's

0:23:09.120,0:23:14.760

groups that were basically arguing the
point that in their view abortion is

0:23:14.760,0:23:19.620

beyond debate, we should no longer be
discussing it at all because it should

0:23:19.620,0:23:26.110

be so obvious that it's
a medical issue and that it's misogynist

0:23:26.110,0:23:33.280

to even be asking the question whether

or not it should be allowed. Now I do not

0:23:33.280,0:23:40.710

think this is a useful approach to be
having. And what I would really urge is, you
know

0:23:40.710,0:23:46.900

as humanists, as secularists, you
are in a position where you can be

0:23:46.900,0:23:52.210

talking with the feminist groups who are
taking - not all of them - but

0:23:52.210,0:23:57.940

particular groups that are taking this
view at the moment and trying to ban

0:23:57.940,0:24:03.610

these debates from our university
campuses because I really fear that it

0:24:03.610,0:24:07.960

is not doing us any favours; it's not
doing us any favours because it's

0:24:07.960,0:24:13.330

actually denying us the opportunity to
have the argument out and win people

0:24:13.330,0:24:17.320

over to our side. We don't need to be
worried about it you know we should have

0:24:17.320,0:24:22.180

confidence in our arguments. And the
other thing is it is allowing them to

0:24:22.180,0:24:27.130

play the victim card of 'oh we're so banned
at the moment no one gets a chance to

0:24:27.130,0:24:31.600

listen to us'. So the best way that we can
stand up to our opponents I believe is

0:24:31.600,0:24:37.320

to engage them and defeat their arguments. Thank you.

0:24:40.370,0:24:42.430

[Applause]

(Dr Antony Lempert)

On its website one of the stated aims of the British Pregnancy Advisory

0:00:12.000,0:00:15.840

Service (BPAS) is to safeguard individual freedom and

0:00:15.840,0:00:22.440

moral autonomy in making reproductive choices. Who could argue with that? Well

0:00:22.440,0:00:27.750

I'm delighted to welcome Ann Furedi, leading pro-choice advocate and BPAS

0:00:27.750,0:00:32.790

chief executive since 2003, who will no doubt tell us more about those who do

0:00:32.790,0:00:37.649

seek to limit individual freedom and moral autonomy in making reproductive

0:00:37.649,0:00:42.360

choices including abortion, and will now speak on standing up to abortion's opponents.

0:00:42.360,0:00:57.320

(Ann Furedi)

I don't have any slides: I'm not presenting any data or important quotes

0:00:58.160,0:01:03.989

I've also got a bit old school about it it's kind of nice to see how bored

0:01:03.989,0:01:07.759

people are when you're talking to them.

0:01:08.209,0:01:16.470

Yes, thank you for the point that you

just made about commitment to advocacy

0:01:16.470,0:01:23.250

and supporting autonomy. I do really feel that I'm so fortunate to have one of the

0:01:23.250,0:01:33.929

best jobs really. BPAS is a charity that's existed since 1968 and is still a

0:01:33.929,0:01:40.560

bit old-fashioned in the sense that we have a two-fold charitable remit. One is to

0:01:40.560,0:01:48.929

provide services for women and we provide abortions for about 70,000 women

0:01:48.929,0:01:56.670

a year. Almost all of those are delivered free to the women because the National

0:01:56.670,0:02:04.259

Health Service pays for almost all of the abortions to British residents; women

0:02:04.259,0:02:07.920

who who pay for their own treatment these days are generally travelling from

0:02:07.920,0:02:13.829

from overseas. But we also have this advocacy remit as well - a public

0:02:13.829,0:02:17.900

education remit - and I think it's really important

0:02:17.900,0:02:24.730

because I think that one of the things that we're able to do is to take the

0:02:24.730,0:02:30.260

experience of what women need when they receive our services, and indeed the

0:02:30.260,0:02:35.959

experience of the doctors and nurses

and midwives and everybody else who
0:02:35.959,0:02:44.780
provides those services, and to use it to
really try to explain to our politicians
0:02:44.780,0:02:51.310
and the general public what is really
going on. And I say that because I think
0:02:51.310,0:03:00.709
abortion is a really weird issue for
people because it almost seems to exist
0:03:00.709,0:03:07.640
on two levels. On the one hand you've got
abortion as a political and a moral
0:03:07.640,0:03:16.670
issue, an issue of autonomy, of bodily
integrity, an issue of women's rights and
0:03:16.670,0:03:24.850
it can be discussed in that area. On
the other hand what you have is you have
0:03:24.850,0:03:31.940
abortion as a health-care service. And it
really comes home to you that that
0:03:31.940,0:03:36.470
difference and that distinction really
comes home to you when you're involved
0:03:36.470,0:03:43.100
in provision, because what you realise is
that women never come to an abortion
0:03:43.100,0:03:49.190
service as a demonstration of their
pro-choiceness. You know, they might
0:03:49.190,0:03:55.579
come to us but all manner of other
reasons - you know I sometimes have this
0:03:55.579,0:04:00.680
real sort of sense that you know I now

think I've heard absolutely everything
0:04:00.680,0:04:08.420
in terms of people's reasons. But no
woman seeks to obtain an abortion to
0:04:08.420,0:04:13.609
exercise her right to abortion and I
think that's very very important to keep
0:04:13.609,0:04:20.630
in mind when we think about the
contested way that it then plays out in
0:04:20.630,0:04:26.349
the arena of public discussion. And in fact you
0:04:26.349,0:04:31.330
know many of the women who come to us
for termination of pregnancy don't agree
0:04:31.330,0:04:36.610
with abortion. You know very often - and in
fact our nurses and doctors can find it
0:04:36.610,0:04:41.770
quite challenging when somebody comes
and, you know, they're really doing the 'I
0:04:41.770,0:04:43.900
really don't know how you could do your
job;
0:04:43.900,0:04:48.189
oh I really don't agree with it, I'm
not like all those other women sitting
0:04:48.189,0:04:54.370
out there in ... you know, I mean my
colleague from Malaysia, S P Chung - professor
- is
0:04:54.370,0:04:59.349
laughing because I guess it
happens exactly the same in Malaysia,
0:04:59.349,0:05:03.939
saying yes it does. Wherever you are it's

like I am NOT like them, and I think

0:05:03.939,0:05:08.349

that's because people have real stereotypes of the kind of women who

0:05:08.349,0:05:14.319

have abortions and the reasons why women have abortions. And it's, you know,

0:05:14.319,0:05:21.340

it's 'not like them'. So consequently when we talk about abortion and when we deal

0:05:21.340,0:05:27.819

with abortion's opponents, it can become quite hard because what you're doing is

0:05:27.819,0:05:32.199

you're having discussions on all kinds of various different layers, different

0:05:32.199,0:05:39.129

levels of abstraction and it can be quite difficult to engage and I

0:05:39.129,0:05:43.930

wanted to talk a little bit about that. The first thing that I want to say

0:05:43.930,0:05:53.860

though that in terms of standing up to abortion's opponents we're really doing it

0:05:53.860,0:06:00.639

[aside: I'll just cover the bag up, so you don't get the tweet noises] in standing up to abortion's

0:06:00.639,0:06:06.370

opponents I really think we're doing pretty well the moment. I look back - I've

0:06:06.370,0:06:15.680

been involved in campaigning for abortion rights for 35 years

0:06:15.680,0:06:24.400

or something that long - I've been doing the job that I do at the moment for 13,

0:06:24.400,0:06:29.960

yeah about 13, years. And the way that things have changed over the last couple

0:06:29.960,0:06:38.060

of years has been phenomenal, it's absolutely been phenomenal. When we first

0:06:38.060,0:06:43.580

decided that we would launch a campaign for decriminalisation of abortion, to

0:06:43.580,0:06:49.690

take abortion outside of - to take abortion outside of the criminal law,

0:06:50.229,0:06:56.630

there was a sense among those of us that we're discussing that this was really

0:06:56.630,0:07:02.599

going for the highest peak. We had this discussion that we kind of needed a

0:07:02.599,0:07:08.090

campaign, we didn't like the idea of just trying to extend the Abortion Act to

0:07:08.090,0:07:12.229

Northern Ireland, the abortion act that we've got here. We thought the abortion

0:07:12.229,0:07:17.000

act that we've got here was pretty inadequate. We were looking that, well there

0:07:17.000,0:07:21.020

were clearly legal changes that were going to happen in the Republic of

0:07:21.020,0:07:28.130

Ireland - there have been - there were changes that we thought that were likely to

0:07:28.130,0:07:33.889

happen in the north of Ireland; so was this going to be a good time to push for

0:07:33.889,0:07:39.470
change in Britain? And we were thinking about what kind of things we

0:07:39.470,0:07:45.220
should go for. In the past the pro-choice movement had really fixed itself on

0:07:45.220,0:07:52.400
getting rid of the two doctors' signatures, maybe just getting one doctor, allowing

0:07:52.400,0:07:57.710
early medical abortion to take place at home, little minor changes like that. And

0:07:57.710,0:08:00.770
we kind of thought well damn it you know if you're gonna have

0:08:00.770,0:08:04.389
a campaign you might as well campaign for what you really want and

0:08:04.389,0:08:09.440
decriminalisation is what we really want. And then lo and behold what we actually

0:08:09.440,0:08:17.960
found was that it was easier to explain to people about decriminalisation - why it

0:08:17.960,0:08:24.020
was wrong for abortion to be in the criminal law, why it was wrong for a

0:08:24.020,0:08:30.509
doctor to be accused of committing a criminal offence and to stand trial for a criminal

0:08:30.509,0:08:37.709
offence if a woman didn't meet the criteria in the '67 act; and indeed

0:08:37.709,0:08:41.729
for a woman to be convicted of a criminal offence of causing her own

0:08:41.729,0:08:47.040
miscarriage. You know that seemed easier to explain than all of the little

0:08:47.040,0:08:52.680
bits and pieces around the 1967 act. And it really struck me how clear it was even

0:08:52.680,0:08:58.860
when I was talking to my own mum who, you know, at the age of 85 says - you know -

0:08:58.860,0:09:03.180
what is it that you're doing? And sort of thing, 'well I don't think that women or

0:09:03.180,0:09:07.890
doctors should be locked up for carrying out an abortion that the woman wants. Well

0:09:07.890,0:09:12.380
I think you're completely right about that, that would be insane!' You know. And

0:09:12.380,0:09:18.540
there's a general kind of common sense element to it, so we're

0:09:18.540,0:09:27.000
doing reasonably well. About 70 per cent of people in the latest opinion polls

0:09:27.000,0:09:33.449
are saying that they think that abortion should be allowed simply because a

0:09:33.449,0:09:39.079
woman doesn't want to have a child; so that's pretty good going. Interestingly

0:09:39.079,0:09:48.029
about the same proportion of MPs are saying that they think that abortion

0:09:48.029,0:09:54.480
should not be a criminal offence when a woman doesn't want to have a child and

0:09:54.480,0:10:00.870
amazingly 58 per cent of Tory MPs are going along those lines as well. And I

0:10:00.870,0:10:07.410
think that you know by focusing on the criminality act saying this isn't really

0:10:07.410,0:10:13.110
a question of whether you approve of abortion or not but do you think it

0:10:13.110,0:10:20.190
should be a criminal offence, I think it does make it pretty clear to people. So I

0:10:20.190,0:10:25.949
think that we're doing quite well on that particular front. Now talking

0:10:25.949,0:10:37.699
about our opponents, what I want to do is to talk about our opponents in really three

0:10:37.699,0:10:40.790
sort of areas.

0:10:41.010,0:10:48.390
There are clearly people who are absolutely, fundamentally opposed to

0:10:48.390,0:10:58.950
abortion on any grounds whatsoever. Organisations such as Abort 67 who are

0:10:58.950,0:11:05.010
the ones who we sometimes get campaigning outside of our abortion

0:11:05.010,0:11:11.220
clinics. They're the very extreme ones, the ones will be distributing the pictures

0:11:11.220,0:11:17.970

of the aborted fetuses; they're the ones that are wearing the GoPro cameras on their

0:11:17.970,0:11:24.840
heads trying to film women who are coming into the abortion

0:11:24.840,0:11:33.300
clinics. They're the ones who write to me and compare abortion clinics with death

0:11:33.300,0:11:40.260
camps during the war and say that, you know, we are committing the equivalent of a

0:11:40.260,0:11:45.650
genocide. And that's really hard; there is no talking with these people right.

0:11:45.650,0:11:53.930
It's very difficult to have a discussion with people who seriously

0:11:53.930,0:12:01.770
absolutely believe that we are the moral equivalent of the latter-day Mengele's.

0:12:01.770,0:12:07.800
And what I think what it's crucial for us to do in terms of dealing with these people

0:12:07.800,0:12:15.690
is to attempt to marginalise them as much as possible by trying to keep them

0:12:15.690,0:12:22.740
away from our clients. And I have actually had a lot of problems with the

0:12:22.740,0:12:31.170
idea of the bubble zones around clinics and so on. I'm very uncomfortable with

0:12:31.170,0:12:38.370
the idea because I'm a great advocate of free speech and a very strong advocate

0:12:38.370,0:12:44.520

of the rights to politically protest. In my red hot days of youth I've been

0:12:44.520,0:12:48.600

arrested on demonstrations myself for all kinds of reasons

0:12:48.600,0:12:53.910

and I strongly believe that it's an important part of our freedoms to be

0:12:53.910,0:12:59.459

able to express our ideas. But the one thing about these people which in some

0:12:59.459,0:13:06.240

ways makes it different and why I think that there is a reason for

0:13:06.240,0:13:13.680

basically saying that they stand outside of the protections of free speech and

0:13:13.680,0:13:19.829

political protest, is because they say themselves they're not carrying out a

0:13:19.829,0:13:29.399

political protest and they are not in fact exercising their political right to

0:13:29.399,0:13:37.670

demonstrate. In fact what they argue is that abortion doesn't need a protest, it

0:13:37.670,0:13:44.670

protests itself. What they're trying to do is to stop women from accessing the

0:13:44.670,0:13:50.069

services. And that to my mind takes it and puts it to one side. I'm

0:13:50.069,0:13:56.699

still actually uncomfortable about it if I'm perfectly honest. I much preferred it

0:13:56.699,0:14:01.380

in the days when we weren't having this discussion. And we've had protesters at

0:14:01.380,0:14:06.839

our clinics as long as I've been around it's just that it used to be a couple of

0:14:06.839,0:14:13.709

nuns with a few prayer beads and prayer sheets and the clinic managers used to

0:14:13.709,0:14:18.870

take them out cups of tea because they felt sorry for them in the winter time and so

0:14:18.870,0:14:26.040

on. But that's manifestly different and my point is is that I am the person that

0:14:26.040,0:14:32.189

I will debate anybody at any time and anywhere on any platform,

0:14:32.189,0:14:37.199

I will even debate these absolute fundamentalists, but you leave our

0:14:37.199,0:14:42.000

clients alone, right? This is a matter of if you want to have a debate I will

0:14:42.000,0:14:46.110

debate with you when life begins, but when somebody is coming to one of our

0:14:46.110,0:14:51.569

clinics that is not what they are coming to do. They're not coming to us for a

0:14:51.569,0:14:56.160

discussion they're coming to us to receive counselling or to us to receive

0:14:56.160,0:15:01.379

treatment. But I do think that away from the clinic

0:15:01.379,0:15:07.229
gates it is worth engaging with these people and the reason why I think it's

0:15:07.229,0:15:12.499
worth engaging with them is because whilst there are some people who will be

0:15:12.499,0:15:20.789
really bought into the idea that the life of the three-day embryo is as

0:15:20.789,0:15:26.999
significant as the woman who's carrying the three-day embryo and they really do

0:15:26.999,0:15:32.609
put those things on a balance; really I don't think that there are very many of

0:15:32.609,0:15:42.289
them who will do that and I had a lovely debate in a very big church in London,

0:15:42.289,0:15:50.909
debating an American guy who was behind the whole operation rescue thing, really

0:15:50.909,0:15:56.159
trying to tease out his argument and really demonstrate that I actually

0:15:56.159,0:16:03.959
didn't think even he totally believed what he was saying. Because if he really

0:16:03.959,0:16:10.679
thought that I was the equivalent of, you know, a modern Hitler, if he really

0:16:10.679,0:16:17.999
thought that our clinics were doing the same as the death camps and if he

0:16:17.999,0:16:22.739
really thought I should be tried in Nuremberg for that, would he honestly be

0:16:22.739,0:16:26.629
calling a debate with me? I really didn't think that he would be doing that. And

0:16:26.629,0:16:32.639
you know I think that they kind of get it. John Harris who's a

0:16:32.639,0:16:40.589
lovely ethicist who works at - who works for Manchester University, he's a professor of

0:16:40.589,0:16:45.779
medical ethics there, has a lovely mind experiment in one of his books that I

0:16:45.779,0:16:52.979
use quite a lot when he basically you know is talking to people who are against

0:16:52.979,0:16:59.579
abortion and claiming that they regard the life of the embryo as being

0:16:59.579,0:17:04.319
equivalent for the life of children and the life of adults, when he says look

0:17:04.319,0:17:10.319
imagine you're standing in front of a burning hospital and you can do one run

0:17:10.319,0:17:16.010
into the hospital and save somebody's life. You know you might have an internal

0:17:16.010,0:17:21.410
debate about whether you run to the children's ward or the maternity ward or,

0:17:21.410,0:17:29.300
you know, wherever. But you're not going to run to the fridge that's got the

0:17:29.300,0:17:35.420
frozen embryos and rescue the frozen embryos even though arguably you could

0:17:35.420,0:17:40.730
be bringing out dozens rather than just the one person that you can carry. And

0:17:40.730,0:17:48.680
it's a great line, great story to lob in to a fundamental you know anti-choice

0:17:48.680,0:17:53.990
meeting because they genuinely find these things quite difficult to answer.

0:17:53.990,0:18:01.700
Because in their heart of hearts I think not among the really die-hard ones but

0:18:01.700,0:18:07.400
among a lot of the younger people that they pull around them who are bought

0:18:07.400,0:18:16.250
into these arguments because they basically are very naive and haven't

0:18:16.250,0:18:25.070
a sense of why abortion is necessary, to talk to them about these ideas does

0:18:25.070,0:18:31.700
bring people over to our side because it undermines some ideas that they

0:18:31.700,0:18:39.200
thought were very logical. I was having a - I was speaking at a debate with a woman

0:18:39.200,0:18:47.090
and she's also called Anne - Scanlon - who runs Life, and the two of us were

0:18:47.090,0:18:53.810
debating at King's College, part of the University of London, earlier in the week.

0:18:53.810,0:19:01.370
And the point that I was going overboard with her on actually was the argument

0:19:01.370,0:19:05.750
about whether you're pro-life or you're pro-choice. I was making the point

0:19:05.750,0:19:12.170
that, you know, I regard myself actually as being very pro-life; I do accord a

0:19:12.170,0:19:19.250
large amount of moral status to the fetus you know, I generally have a very

0:19:19.250,0:19:24.920
large presumption in favour of life. My family laugh at me actually it's a big

0:19:24.920,0:19:27.180
family joke that I'm the one that's trying to catch

0:19:27.180,0:19:31.860
the mouse that the cat's brought in to put it outside the front door

0:19:31.860,0:19:35.370
and yet I run abortion clinics. You know they've got this general sort of sense

0:19:35.370,0:19:39.900
of, you know: how do you tally that up? My point really is that I've got a very

0:19:39.900,0:19:45.240
strong presumption in favour of life when that life is doing no damage, and when a

0:19:45.240,0:19:51.540
woman is pregnant and she's carrying a fetus yes of course I have a huge regard

0:19:51.540,0:19:55.530
for the status of the fetus for what it could become

0:19:55.530,0:20:02.480
as a potential human being, but in terms of its equivalence or its superiority

0:20:02.480,0:20:09.030
over her life and her choice and her
autonomy no I do not really give it that

0:20:09.030,0:20:14.790
particular status. It was very
interesting I was mobbed by people after

0:20:14.790,0:20:21.960
the meeting who wanted to talk to me
about why it is that I could sort of

0:20:21.960,0:20:29.490
reconcile the idea of according a moral
value to the fetus in the womb but I

0:20:29.490,0:20:34.980
didn't necessarily go down that pro-life
trajectory. So I think all of these ideas

0:20:34.980,0:20:39.480
are very important, it's why I wrote this book
on the moral case for abortion. Now what

0:20:39.480,0:20:44.490
I will say in winding up from this -
because I'm being given a five-minute note -

0:20:44.490,0:20:51.750
what I will say from this is that I
genuinely believe that it is important

0:20:51.750,0:21:00.660
for us to stand up to our opponents by
trying to engage with them and their

0:21:00.660,0:21:08.700
audiences and to take up their arguments
and to demonstrate to them why there is

0:21:08.700,0:21:16.680
a need for abortion, and abortion is not
dehumanising and it is not a bad thing. I

0:21:16.680,0:21:22.410
think it's very important to be speaking
to as many audiences as possible, in fact

0:21:22.410,0:21:27.960
about the opposite - why it is a good
thing for a woman to be making a

0:21:27.960,0:21:35.220
decision about her future and taking
responsibility for it herself. That is a

0:21:35.220,0:21:39.450
good thing and that is a good thing that
our clinics offer.

0:21:39.450,0:21:47.490
So this is a thing to throw out because
this meeting that I was at on Wednesday

0:21:47.490,0:21:55.529
was the most bizarre meeting, most
bizarre debate, I have ever spoken at in

0:21:55.529,0:22:01.710
terms of its composition. Even weirder
than the one in the church that I was

0:22:01.710,0:22:09.929
debating the American anti-life -
anti-choice - zealot from. And the reason

0:22:09.929,0:22:14.850
why was because it was about a hundred
people in this meeting about 85 of whom

0:22:14.850,0:22:22.320
were men, or young male students, and only
about 15 of them were women. And the

0:22:22.320,0:22:28.320
reason for that is because the women's
groups on campus shortly beforehand had

0:22:28.320,0:22:32.760
decided that Anne Scanlon my
opponent shouldn't be allowed to speak

0:22:32.760,0:22:38.460
and that the debate shouldn't take place
because she was anti-abortion and they

0:22:38.460,0:22:42.210

think that that's hateful
and so therefore they think that she

0:22:42.210,0:22:47.100

should be no platformed. So basically the
organisers were in fact worried that

0:22:47.100,0:22:51.539

there was going to be a protest outside -
there wasn't, they just boycotted the

0:22:51.539,0:22:58.740

meeting - which was a real shame because
we actually had a very good lively very

0:22:58.740,0:23:04.110

contested but conflictual meeting. I had
the same experience when I went to

0:23:04.110,0:23:09.120

Cambridge University where actually
there was a demonstration of women's

0:23:09.120,0:23:14.760

groups that were basically arguing the
point that in their view abortion is

0:23:14.760,0:23:19.620

beyond debate, we should no longer be
discussing it at all because it should

0:23:19.620,0:23:26.110

be so obvious that it's
a medical issue and that it's misogynist

0:23:26.110,0:23:33.280

to even be asking the question whether
or not it should be allowed. Now I do not

0:23:33.280,0:23:40.710

think this is a useful approach to be
having. And what I would really urge is, you
know

0:23:40.710,0:23:46.900

as humanists, as secularists, you
are in a position where you can be

0:23:46.900,0:23:52.210

talking with the feminist groups who are
taking - not all of them - but

0:23:52.210,0:23:57.940

particular groups that are taking this
view at the moment and trying to ban

0:23:57.940,0:24:03.610

these debates from our university
campuses because I really fear that it

0:24:03.610,0:24:07.960

is not doing us any favours; it's not
doing us any favours because it's

0:24:07.960,0:24:13.330

actually denying us the opportunity to
have the argument out and win people

0:24:13.330,0:24:17.320

over to our side. We don't need to be
worried about it you know we should have

0:24:17.320,0:24:22.180

confidence in our arguments. And the
other thing is it is allowing them to

0:24:22.180,0:24:27.130

play the victim card of 'oh we're so banned
at the moment no one gets a chance to

0:24:27.130,0:24:31.600

listen to us'. So the best way that we can
stand up to our opponents I believe is

0:24:31.600,0:24:37.320

to engage them and defeat their
arguments. Thank you.

0:24:40.370,0:24:42.430

[Applause]