

# Britain: A government that includes the DUP is profoundly bad news for women

The Tories' new coalition partners are deeply socially conservative

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This extraordinary election has seen one horrible irony for women traded for another. At the start of the campaign, when Theresa May looked to turn her high personal ratings (lol) into an even higher Conservative majority (lololol), it seemed that the UK's second female prime minister was going to bring about a depressing decline in female MPs: because only Labour has a substantial record of getting women into parliament (thank you, all-women shortlists), anything that hurts Labour hurts sexual equality on the benches.

Back when a 1930s style collapse seemed plausible (lololololol), names on the line included Jess Phillips and Thangam Debbonaire, among other redoubtable feminists who have brought their feminist politics into parliament. Well that didn't happen. Instead, Labour's surge saw Phillips add 10,000 votes to her majority; Debbonaire's vote share went from 33.7 per cent to a dizzying 65.9 per cent.

Instead of losing women, Westminster gained a record intake of them. And the Tories lost, lost, lost (one final lol here). But this is where the next irony comes in, because the only way for the now-diminished Tories to form a government is for them to join a coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland. And a ruling coalition that includes the DUP is profoundly bad news for women.

The reason for that comes down to one issue in particular: abortion. The DUP is a deeply socially conservative party, and has consistently blocked both the extension of equal marriage to Northern Ireland and the roll-out of the 1967 Abortion Act. While abortion is still criminalised throughout the UK under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, the 1967 Act allows for terminations to be legal, under certain conditions. It does not apply in Northern Ireland.

Instead, Northern Irish women must travel to England – at their own expense. They must pay for the procedure – in 2014, the High Court ruled that Northern Irish women were not entitled to NHS-funded abortions.

Getting the money together takes time, and longer gestation makes abortions more complex and more expensive. (The charity Abortion Support Network [\[1\]](#) helps provide funding to thousands of Northern Irish women dealing with crisis pregnancies each year.) You could order abortion pills, but then you could be prosecuted under the 1861 Act – as happened to a woman in 2016 [\[2\]](#).

This cruel law applies to women in Northern Ireland whether they are victims of rape, whether they are victims of incest, and whether the foetus they are carrying is even capable of life outside the womb. And the DUP is fine with that. However urgently women in Northern Ireland have made the moral case for reform, the DUP – along with all Northern Ireland's parties – has ignored it.

After a high court judgement held that Northern Ireland's abortion case was breaching women's

rights, DUP leader Arlene Foster (because yes, women have the equal opportunity to be depressing misogynists too) said that she would not want abortion to be as “freely available” to women in Northern Ireland as it is elsewhere in the UK, which surely provoked some bitter laughter from any woman who’s had to negotiate patchy provision and the two-doctors requirement in England, Scotland or Wales.

Now, as the minority party without which the Tories cannot govern, the DUP gets to impose its anti-freedom agenda on women nationwide. Never mind extending the ‘67 Act to Northern Ireland: a DUP-beholden Conservative party will be careful to respect the principle of denying women choice wherever they are in the UK.

And all this because of an election which showed – among other things – that the electorate really does not want a return to old-style illiberal Toryism. 2017’s female MPs have strength in numbers, but the ten MPs of the DUP have an outside influence that could have a chilling effect on women’s rights at Westminster.

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<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2017/06/government-includes-dup-profoundly-bad-news-women>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.asn.org.uk>

[2] ESSF (article 41257), [Abortion and Northern Ireland: the human rights abuse that we all ignore](#).