

Bodies United

[red clydesider](#) reports on the ongoing struggle for bodily autonomy and specifically the fight for safe zones around abortion services and health clinics in Scotland.

The latest attack on reproductive rights in the United States of America has stirred a fury that has leapt beyond the borders of the troubled republic. This is no surprise. Whatever happens, over there have repercussions that are felt all across the globe, and these latest events show how easily cherished democratic and civil liberties can be rolled back by determined reactionaries and fundamentalists. As such, they stand as a stark warning to the rest of the world. Whatever has been gained by struggle, can only be protected and sheltered by struggle. This fact cannot be ignored.

Here in Scotland, anger at the assault on Roe vs Wade has mingled with a home-grown cause, the fight for buffer zones around healthcare sites offering abortion services that would insulate them from anti-abortion protests. Since 2017, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and Back Off Scotland have recorded a series of repeated protests at seven different hospitals and clinics across Scotland. Just this year, there was a candlelight vigil of around one hundred people outside the Maternity Wing of Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, and in recent months smaller pickets by preachers have been plaguing clinics like Sandyford, with those using the clinic being harassed and condemned as they approach the building.

To address this, the Green MSP Gillian Mackay has proposed a bill for the Scottish Parliament to establish legally protected safe access zones of a perimeter of 150m for abortion clinics and healthcare settings, in order to protect the persons and the privacy of those going to these clinics for abortions. Within the buffer zones, the bill aims to

prohibit behaviour such as impeding or blocking somebody's path or an entrance to abortion services, intimidating or harassing people, and photographing or filming a person within the zone. There is currently [a consultation](#) for the bill taking place online.

As the consultation progresses and the bill moves through parliament, however, there is still a continuing menace being faced by clients of clinics all across Scotland, as at Sandyford, where the previously mentioned religious protesters have tended to make so much noise that the staff within cannot actually give consultations, check-ups and treatment to patients, healthcare that also includes rape counselling and sexual health services for the LGBTQ+ community. Action must therefore be taken in the meantime to give clinics support, protection and solidarity against harassment. As the feminist movement agitates for political change at the level of rights and legislation, there must also be a spirited defence of treatment at the ground level.

Beth Douglas is a woman that has been involved with great energy in exactly these struggles, and it's for that reason that I sat down to talk with her about the fight for buffer zones.

To begin with, I asked Beth about who she is, and what she does. In the broadest terms, she describes herself as an activist, with a particular focus on equality campaigning and bodily autonomy. In addition to her work on the abortion rights issue, she fights for trans health care and for the destigmatisation and decriminalisation of sex work. In more narrow party terms, or, as Beth put it, "If you want to push me into a box", she is a member of the Scottish Green Party and a co-convener of its LGBTQ+ wing, the Rainbow Greens.

Not just this, but she has long been active in protest against how Pride marches are often co-opted by corporate money and used as an image-laundering opportunity for big business and

the state, particularly arms traders and the military. Indeed, those of you who followed or participated in Glasgow's radical scene in the 2010s may remember her as one of the "Pride Five", who were unjustly arrested at Glasgow Pride 2017 for protesting against capitalist influence on the event and the participation of a Police Scotland bloc in the march. Perhaps a few of you may even have been there at the courtroom solidarity demonstrations.

And, as you may have gathered from her advocacy for trans health care, Beth is a transgender woman. How does this facet of her identity shape her conception of feminism? What perspectives does she, a trans woman, bring to this movement? And in what ways do the struggle for trans rights link up with the struggle for abortion rights? I was particularly interested to find out, so I got right into the questions about her work and her views.

As for many of us, American events have been a painful sight for Beth to witness. But it isn't simply a well-meaning sympathy that spurs her into action around abortion rights. What primarily drives her is her own experience of the ways in which society constricts bodies to fit rigid gender and sexual norms.

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Additionally, she recognises that these political issues are not neatly separated from each other: "We are about to see millions of people lose their right to reproductive healthcare

across America, and it is horrific to see people being robbed of their bodily autonomy. And even though I will never need to have an abortion, it still has a knock-on effect and matters to me.”

The strengthening of patriarchal state control over bodies, the denial of free choice for people to make decisions about themselves, only gives the state a stronger position from which to police other aspects of gender and sexuality, to keep anyone who dissents from a strict patriarchal idea of “proper” gender and sexual roles in line by force. Therefore, Beth concludes that “if you weaken bodily autonomy on abortion you weaken it for trans people too and vice versa”.

It is a stance that calls to mind that slogan of the workers’ movement, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” or the admirable sentiment of old Bakunin, that the freedom of others, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation. These are fine socialist principles from which to go forward, and they animate Beth’s political practice.

To return to actions of solidarity: It is with a grimace that Beth concedes that “unfortunately, American politics are global politics.” Indeed, one can scarcely avoid being shaken by even the slightest stumbles of an imperial giant.

Feeling those tremors, Beth really wanted to do something to show solidarity with her American sisters. So, she and another trans woman, Heather, got together a demonstration at the United States Consulate after the Edinburgh May Day march on May 7th. With a couple of days’ notice, the demo brought together about eighty people, and the speakers included activists from Backoff Scotland, the Green MSP Gillian MacKay and a member of the Scottish Trans Alliance.

People from the crowd also took the mic, and some of them were Americans who spoke about how they felt sad and desperate for

their loved ones over there, and how they felt scared to go back to their home country because of the way things are going.

Not only this, but speakers from the crowd also talked about how they themselves had been confronted by bigoted protesters on their way into healthcare settings when going in for not just abortions, but for STI checks, menopause checks, and HIV check-ups and rape counselling.

Testimony like this served to underline the contributions of Gillian MacKay and Backoff Scotland, who raised the demand for Buffer Zones in their speeches. It wouldn't even be a week before yet more service users were being harassed outside clinics, as would happen to someone close to Beth just days after the consulate demonstration.

Beth's friend was on their way to the Sandyford clinic to receive rape counselling, and right outside the building were two religious preachers, who yelled at them to "stop killing babies!" as they entered. The two preachers had their own sound system, and they were so loud that Sandyford couldn't offer care on one whole side of their building for that day.

Hearing of this from her friend, Beth was furious and immediately went over to Sandyford to film the preachers and expose what they were doing on social media. This footage would quickly find its way to the national press, and with the word getting out on Twitter, more counter-protesters came down to join Beth and help drown out the preachers. She remembered hearing "a whole cocktail of bigotry coming out of these men's mouths", including rants about Islam, and at one point when some gay men came out of Sandyford and were told by the preachers that "they had chosen a life of sin."

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told by the preachers that "they had chosen a life of sin."

Eventually, faced with opposition from the crowd, the preachers packed up and left. "In the end," says Beth, "it wasn't the police who moved these bigots, but the people who showed up and argued with them. The whole time the police didn't take action". That kind of inaction, Beth argued, shows why buffer zones are hugely important: "The patients who use Sandyford, whatever they are using the clinic for, are just trying to get healthcare, and if we allow people to stand outside and harass them then we are denying their right to healthcare."

It wasn't long before Beth was back at the United States Consulate agitating on this theme again. After the first consulate demo, there was an American woman named Lindsay Jaacks who wanted to organise another protest at the consulate in a week's time. She asked Beth and Heather for help, so Beth got the Scottish Activist Legal Project (SCALP) involved to do legal observing. Thinking of how the Irish police have consistently hassled and targeted abortion protesters over there, Beth was keen to involve SCALP going forward.

Demo two had a similar number of people, but a different crowd. Following on from Edinburgh May Day, demo one was mostly younger people, but at the second demo, there were some new faces. Now, while the first protest was taking place, gender-critical activists were not present, instead holding a lunch meetup over on Glasgow Green, a tradition inaugurated by the ultra-rich Blairite J. K. Rowling and aped by her middle-class adherents.

When Beth expressed surprise and disappointment on Twitter that, in a situation when women's rights are being rolled back, gender-criticalists are more focused on hobnobbing and complaining about the Gender Recognition Act than showing up to demonstrations, she was met with odd accusations her

criticisms amounted to “daring to tell women they couldn’t have lunch.”

In any case, it seems the consciences of some gender-criticalists were stung into action by this, and they turned up to the second demo at the consulate. This is something Beth welcomed: “It doesn’t matter if they hate me or not, the important thing is we work together to protect the very concept of bodily autonomy- You can’t attack the bodily autonomy of one group and expect it to remain for yourself.”

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Unfortunately though, when Beth spoke on the microphone, to talk about how the American religious right has been using its money and resources to stoke division in the feminist movement, and about how when bodily autonomy is weakened for one group it is for all groups, she was heckled by the gender-criticalists in the crowd.

The heckles were predictable, simplistic and parochial. To Beth’s linking of struggles, she heard shouts that the issue “was just women’s’ bodies” and women’s’ bodies alone. When Beth spoke about showing solidarity with our trans brothers and non-binary siblings, who also need the right to abortion, the gender criticalists shouted “they’re women!”

The first set of heckles can easily be dispensed with by pointing out that, given, as we have seen, that the range of treatments impacted by anti-abortion protests goes beyond abortion to HIV check-ups, rape counselling, LGBTQ+ health services and so on, it is clear that the Buffer Zone struggle is overall a fight against a generalised assault on reproductive/sexual healthcare which expresses itself primarily as an abortion rights issue.

The gender-criticalists who shout about the issue just being women's' bodies have not paid close enough attention to what is happening at Sandyford and elsewhere. Additionally, they wilfully ignore that the abortion struggle is an issue closely tied to all other struggles against rigid patriarchal gender and sexual norms and that it represents one front in the fight to resist a largescale reaction by the patriarchy against any challenge to its power.

Is it a coincidence that the same Republican Party zealots leading the charge against abortion in the United States are also the same bigots stoking a panic about LGBTQ+ people? That these are the same Jim Crow capitalists that ruthlessly oppose the Black Lives Matter movement, striking workers and tenants unions? Of course not!

As for the second set of heckles, Beth is frustrated about how the gender criticalists are obsessing over whether trans men are actually women, and so making the struggle about identity rather than rights- In doing so, she argues, "you are changing the argument from 'Everyone deserves abortion' to 'Are trans men actually women'". She considers it a distraction from the real core of the issue, one that is utterly pointless given the high stakes and the urgency of the situation.

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Thankfully, a better example of political unity was close at

hand. Another important event Beth wanted to highlight was the Trans Pride march in Paisley on the 20th of May. Members of the Scottish Greens, along with members of other parties, brought along a banner reading "Trans and Queer People Support Buffer Zones" and took it on the march.

"It was very heart-warming to see how many people marched behind that banner," Beth recalled, speaking of the warm response they got from attendees of Trans Pride. For her, the march served as a clear marker that the trans community is ready to support abortion rights and back the demands of the feminist movement for the protection and the advancement of those rights.

"This is how solidarity is supposed to work." Beth feels that for some lefties, "Solidarity has become the new 'thoughts and prayers,' a slogan you can say as a token gesture of support without actually doing anything. "True solidarity," Beth argues, "is waving your flag for one group but campaigning for another, whether that's trans people fighting for the bodily autonomy of all people, or lesbians and gays supporting the miners' strike", a clear nod to the legendary Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) group of the 1980's.

So, where next for the struggle from here?

Since my interview with Beth, she certainly has been busy, organising further demonstrations against the continued targeting of the Sandyford Clinic by fundamentalist preachers. While buffer zones are being sought through parliament, it is essential that the movement is able to organise for the protection of abortion clinics wherever and whenever.

Along with concrete defence of clinics goes the agitation for political change. Beth called on everyone reading this article to fill out the consultation as soon as possible: "We need as many people filling it in as we can!" The link can be found below, and I emphatically urge all of you reading this to

complete it, and help show the Scottish Parliament how crucial Buffer Zones are.

With the Summer Pride season coming up, Beth was keen to spread the call for buffer zones all over Scotland. "We're going to keep using that buffer zone banner. It's important it goes to as many prides as possible." She aims to bring the buffer zone struggle wherever it can be brought, to demos, marches and events of all sorts. "We really need to get around and defend the idea of bodily autonomy wherever it is threatened regardless of who or where. If you can deny that to someone you can deny anything to them."

I ended by asking Beth how people can show support for the cause and how they can keep up to date with her. Her first port of call was the Safe Access (Abortion Services) Scotland Bill Consultation, which can be found [here](#) The Consultation runs until the 6th August 2022. Once again, Beth was eager to point people in its direction. "It is important that as many people fill in the buffer zone consultation as possible," Beth said, and she implores all of you to take part in it as soon as you can. As well as that, she directs everyone reading this to follow and support the work of [Back Off Scotland](#).

If you want to keep up with Beth's own work, check out Beth's [Twitter](#), her recent article for [Ungagged](#) and the [Twitter](#) of the Rainbow Greens.

The Overturn of Roe vs Wade: The Struggle for Reproductive Justice in the US

Thursday 30 June 2022 on Zoom, 19:30 BST

Speakers:

Zora Monico *Michigan Coalition for Reproductive Liberation*

Kerry Abel *Chair, Abortion Rights (UK)*

Beth Douglas *Trans campaigner focusing on bodily autonomy*

please register in advance at: <https://bit.ly/usabortionrights>



ANTI★CAPITALIST RESISTANCE

And finally, if you want to hear from the woman herself, make sure to come along to Anticapitalist Resistance's Zoom meeting, "The Overturn of Roe vs Wade: The Struggle for Reproductive Justice in the US" which takes place on June 30th at 7.30 pm. The speakers include Zora Monico, an activist with the Michigan Coalition for Reproductive Liberation and co-founder of WVN, Whenever We're Needed, Kerry Abel, Chair of Abortion Rights UK, and Beth Douglas whose work you are quite acquainted with by now. Signup [here](https://bit.ly/usabortionrights) and share on [Facebook](#).