



Discussie over leven en dood in Groot-Brittanië

England Considers Proposal for Assisted Suicide

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By Father John Flynn, LC



A bill to legalize assisted suicide has been introduced into Britain's House of Lords by Lord Falconer, previously Lord Chancellor under Labour prime minister Tony Blair, and it is causing widespread debate.

The House of Lords has already debated this matter in 2006 and 2009 and both times has strongly rejected the attempts to allow assisted suicide. The opinion pages and letters columns of the English media have been filled with contrasting views. In the Telegraph newspaper on July 4 Charles Moore deplored the manipulative use of the phrase of "dying with dignity."

"Wielding 'dignity' so skilfully, Lord Falconer and his allies then hold before us the distressing individual examples who say they long to die, but cannot," he commented. The Vatican has intervened in the debate, with the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Mennini, saying that allowing assisted suicide would open a "Pandora's box," with "horrible consequences," for the frail, elderly and sick, the Telegraph reported May 8. Religious leaders in England have generally condemned the proposal, but there have been divisions in the Anglican Church. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, came out in support of the bill saying that "The old philosophical certainties have collapsed in the face of the reality of needless suffering," the Telegraph reported July 11. Another Anglican prelate, Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, also supported the proposal, saying that: "Yes, I think a lot of people would be upset if I said I wanted assisted dying. I would say I wouldn't mind actually," the Observer newspaper reported July 13.

Nevertheless, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has come out decisively against the bill put forward by Lord Falconer. Elderly people and others would be put under pressure to end their lives if the bill is passed, he warned in an opinion column published by the London Times, July 12.

Mistaken and dangerous

Far from being a compassionate option assisted suicide is "both mistaken and dangerous," he said. "True compassion can be shown through care, through expending time and resources on those suffering and through offering hope even in the darkest of circumstances," he added. Following this 23 religious leaders wrote a letter to parliament expressing their opposition to the bill. The signatories included Archbishop Welby, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, and the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, the Telegraph reported July 15. Other signatories included representatives from the Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals. The letter, according to the Telegraph, criticized the bill as providing inadequate safeguards and instead of bringing comfort to the dying assisted suicide would only bring further distress and pressure at a time when they are already vulnerable.

Proponents of the bill have continued their pressure. Twenty-seven senior medical figures, including 11 present or former presidents of royal medical colleges, have written to all the members of the House of Lords in support of the bill, the Guardian newspaper reported July 15. Nevertheless, overall medical opinion is opposed to assisted suicide. A poll carried out by the the Royal College of General Practitioners found that a majority were against any changes in the law, the Telegraph reported February 21. "The Falconer bill would turn doctors into executioners, brutalising society in the process," wrote Melanie Philips in a column for the Times on July 7.



Slippery slope

She warned of the dangers of a slippery slope, citing examples in Belgium and the Netherlands where voluntary euthanasia gradually changed into killing the vulnerable, including children. Her position was backed up by Dutch ethicist professor Theo Boer. In a July 10 article published by the Daily Mail newspaper he explained that while initially in favor of euthanasia he had changed his mind on seeing what has happened in recent years. 'I used to be a supporter of the Dutch law. But now, with 12 years of experience, I take a very different view,' he said. Doctors are sometimes pressured by relatives to end lives and the practice of euthanasia has been extended to patients with dementia or psychiatric illnesses. Kevin Yuill, a university lecturer and author of "Assisted Suicide: The Liberal, Humanist Case Against Legalisation," likened assisted suicide to the death penalty in an opinion piece published July 14 on the Web site Spiked. If liberals, he said, "liberals believe that the premeditated killing of a human being by the state, even for the best possible reasons, is wrong, then, by definition, assisted suicide, which, after all, amounts to state-approved suicide, must also be judged wrong."

The Catholic Church has published a number of statements opposing the bill. Assisted suicide is a "counsel of despair" and instead we need to ensure everyone receives good palliative care, the bishops of England and Wales declared in a statement published earlier this year. "There's a world of difference, in medical ethics and in law, between accepting that death can't be prevented and seeking assistance to end your own life," they said.