

Why I'm voting 'no' on the assisted suicide bill: Seselja

By Zed Seselja
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This week the Senate is considering Senator David Leyonhjelm's assisted suicide bill.



This debate and subsequent vote will be a matter of conscience, just as the 1997 Andrews Bill was. On other occasions when the question has been territory rights, as some claim this bill

is exclusively about, political parties have had no problem enforcing party rule, so to allow a conscience vote here points to the real issue at stake.



ACT Senator Zed Seselja is voting against assisted suicide.
Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

It is about life and death.

And indeed in the past, Labor and the Greens, including Territory Senators, have had no problem voting to overturn Territory laws they don't like, such as the Northern Territory laws on mandatory sentencing.

And while people in Canberra have mixed views on the Bill, their ultimate opinion usually reflects their view on the issue of assisted suicide as Canberrans also have very mixed views on just how much power their local Assembly should have. When considering the Andrews legislation, Labor MP Lindsay Tanner put the tension well when he asked whether people would have a different view of territory rights if it was a different issue, such as capital punishment.

Which brings us onto the issue at the heart of the bill, assisted suicide. I oppose assisted suicide. And if this Bill passes, I have no doubt assisted suicide will become law in the ACT.

It's impossible not to be moved by the plight of terminally ill Australians who are enduring real suffering. But the question we have to ask as legislators is – will crossing this ethical threshold lead to better or worse outcomes for Australians, particularly our most vulnerable – the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the depressed, the lonely?

Experience overseas suggests that it will not.

Only recently we saw shocking reports that a nine year old and an eleven year old became the youngest ever to be euthanised under Belgian law.

In Oregon in 2016 nearly half of people killed under the scheme cited concerns about being a burden on family, friends, and caregivers as a reason for seeking assisted suicide.

The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg allow assisted suicide for dementia, alcohol and drug addiction, mental illness, and disability.

The fact is safeguards have time and again been eroded in other jurisdictions.

As former prime minister Paul Keating wrote; “once termination of life is authorised the threshold is crossed. From that point it is much easier to liberalise the conditions governing the law ... The experience of overseas jurisdictions suggests the pressures for further liberalisation are irresistible.”

And what of our efforts to counter the scourge of suicide in this country? Will legislation which endorses suicide in some cases not undermine these worthy efforts?

I also believe that we cannot truly debate assisted suicide without confronting the shortcomings of our end-of-life care system.

The reality is palliative care, properly resourced and administered, has the capacity to nurture people towards a dignified death. According to an open letter to the Victorian Parliament published by a number of palliative care professionals: “Current Australian data indicates that no more than two in every 100 palliative care patients would be in moderate or severe pain at the end of life.” In those rare cases palliative sedation is available.

They further note that “it would be unethical for any state jurisdiction in Australia to move to legalise for assisted suicide or euthanasia whilst many ill, aged and disabled Australians cannot yet access the support that they need. Such a move would not enhance choice, but instead reduce choice around the care and support for those in need.”

How can it be any other way? How can people really, truly be exercising personal autonomy and choice when they are not being offered the best choices available?

And in the ACT, where this bill will have its effect, there is no question palliative care resourcing from the ACT Labor Government has not been up to scratch. Dr Michael Chapman, Canberra Hospital's Director of Palliative Medicine says that in Canberra "people often receive too little or too late or no [palliative care] services at all."

Likewise, one of the strongest and most consistent arguments for legalising assisted suicide is about personal autonomy. However, overseas experience shows that personal autonomy can actually be undermined by assisted suicide.

One of the more horrible examples of this was reported in the *Washington Times* in October 2016. Stephanie Packer, a mother of four children with a terminal illness, was denied coverage from her insurance company for chemotherapy treatment but was offered coverage for assisted suicide soon after California law changed.

How's that for personal autonomy? How much easier will it be for governments to pay for euthanasia rather than treatment if these type of laws are passed?

Make no mistake, this is not about Territory rights, it's about human rights. I fear the passage of Senator Leyonhjelm's Bill will lead to assisted suicide becoming legal in the ACT under a regime that will have minimal safeguards. That is, after all, what Senator Leyonhjelm himself has suggested is his intent when arguing that the recent Victorian laws are too restrictive, as they only apply to the terminally ill.

I will be standing up for the rights of Canberrans to not be pressured to end their lives. I will stand up for proper palliative care. I will stand up for the old, the disabled, the sick, the lonely, and all those for whom the passage of assisted suicide would see their lives considered less worthy. I will therefore vote against the Leyonhjelm Bill.

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