News



Protestors holds a placard outside Parliament as British lawmakers debate the assisted dying law in London Nov. 29, 2024. Britain's lawmakers voted Nov. 29 to legalize assisted suicide for the terminally ill in England and Wales, despite opposition from Britain's Catholic bishops and other faith groups. (OSV News/Mina Kim, Reuters)

Simon Caldwell

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

London — December 2, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic bishops in England have decried a vote for assisted suicide, with one saying it represented a "dark day" in the history of the country.

Members of Parliament voted by 330 to 275 for the "Terminally Ill (End of Life) Bill," which will permit doctor-assisted deaths for adult patients deemed to have less than six months to live.

Although the bill must pass through several stages in both Houses of Parliament in London, the Nov. 29 vote in the House of Commons means that it is extremely likely that the bill will pass into law.

Following the vote, Bishop Philip Egan of Portsmouth told OSV News that he expected the outcome.

"It leaves me sad as it will put an intolerable pressure on the elderly and the terminally ill and undermine the trust normally placed in doctors and carers," he said.

"I fear too the ever-growing expansion of eligibility to other categories of people. Britain has now crossed a line: things will not be the same again. May God help us," Egan lamented.

Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury, who in September issued a pastoral letter urging Catholics to campaign against the bill, also expressed disappointment in a message to OSV News. He said: "It is a dark day for our country when the Christian witness to genuine compassion and the value of human life is more needed than ever."

Auxiliary Bishop John Sherrington of Westminster, the lead bishop for life issues of the bishops' conference of England and Wales, issued a press statement on behalf of all of the bishops in which he described the bill as "flawed in principle."

The bishops said: "We ask the Catholic community to pray that members of parliament will have the wisdom to reject this bill at a later stage in its progress.

"We are particularly concerned with clauses in the Bill that prevent doctors from properly exercising conscientious objection, provide inadequate protection to hospices and care homes that do not wish to participate in assisted suicide and allow doctors to initiate conversations about assisted suicide," they said.

"We ask that these voices be heard in the next stages of the Bill to strengthen the deep concerns about this proposed legislation."

The bill allows medical practitioners to assist in the suicides with the approval of two doctors and a High Court judge. It will be sent to Committee Stage for scrutiny and amendments before it goes to a vote in the House of Lords, Britain's second political chamber.

It was introduced by Labour Member of Parliament Kim Leadbeater and was supported by Prime Minister Keir Starmer and the majority of government ministers.

Opening a five-hour debate, Leadbeater said her bill would bring "choice, autonomy and dignity" at the end of life.

She said: "We should all have the right to make the choices and decisions we want about our own bodies," adding that "we are talking about giving dying people a choice of how to die."

Advertisement

Conservative MP Danny Kruger warned politicians, however, that the bill could lead to the assisted suicides of people with a range of illnesses or disabilities.

"All that someone needs to do to qualify for an assisted death — for the definition of terminal illness — is refuse treatment, such as insulin if the person is diabetic," he said.

"In the case of eating disorders ... a person just needs to refuse food. The evidence from jurisdictions around the world, and our own jurisprudence, shows that that would be enough to qualify someone for an assisted death," Kruger lamented.

A previous bill on assisted suicide was defeated by 330 votes to 118 in Britain's lower House of Commons in September 2015, while an August survey highlighted public fear the practice could be encouraged to ease pressures in the National Health Service.

Seven European countries — Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland — currently permit assisted suicide. Austria, Finland, and Norway allow passive euthanasia under strict circumstances.

Responding to the Nov. 29 vote, Andrea Williams, chief executive of Christian Concern, a British advocacy group, said the vote represented "a very Black Friday for the vulnerable in this country."

"But this is not over," she said in a press statement. "The proposals in this dangerous Bill have been completely exposed … it must be stopped."

Catherine Robinson of Right to Life, a pro-life group, said in a statement that activists would "redouble our efforts to ensure we fight this Bill at every stage and ensure that it is defeated to protect the most vulnerable."

She said: "This Bill can and must be defeated in Parliament. It still has a long way to go and presents an acute threat to vulnerable people, especially in the context of an overstretched healthcare system."