News

A protester holds a sign that reads "Assisted suicide is not the answer" card outside the Parlia

A protester holds a sign outside the Parliament in London Nov. 29, 2024, as British lawmakers debate a physician-assisted suicide bill. The House of Commons passed the bill 314 to 291 on June 20. The measure now proceeds to a debate and vote in the House of Lords. (OSV News/Reuters/Mina Kim)

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English bishops expressed sadness after an assisted suicide bill was passed in the House of Commons by a narrow majority June 20.

Members of Parliament approved the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill at a third reading by 314 votes to 291, a majority of just 23.

The vote share indicated a decline in support for the bill. When it received a second reading in November it passed with a majority of 55, by 330 votes to 275.

The bill has now completed all of its stages in the lower chamber of the Houses of Parliament in London and will proceed to a debate and vote in the House of Lords, the second chamber, before it becomes law.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, the president of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, called the vote "a watershed moment in the history of our country" that "fundamentally changes society's long held values and relationships on matters of life and death."

> 'The provision of a choice to die cannot exclude the provision of properly resourced care for those who choose to live until a natural death.'
> —Cardinal Vincent Nichols
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"The task is now clear: every effort must be made to limit the damage that will be done by this decision. This duty lies both on the House of Lords and on His Majesty's Government. The list of challenges is long," the cardinal said in a June 20 statement. "It has been well rehearsed in recent weeks by responsible bodies and distinguished individuals, including the Public Commission on Palliative and End-of-Life Care whose recommendations have yet to be discussed.

"The appeal to personal autonomy, so much at the center of the Parliamentary debate, cuts both ways: the provision of a choice to die cannot exclude the provision of properly resourced care for those who choose to live until a natural death."

Archbishop John Sherrington of Liverpool, the lead bishop on life issues at the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, said he was "shocked and disappointed" by the outcome.

"Allowing the medical profession to help patients end their lives will change the culture of healthcare and cause legitimate fears amongst those with disabilities or who are especially vulnerable in other ways," he said in a June 20 statement.

"We are also concerned about the future of palliative care, not least because experience suggests that, unless there are explicit protections, hospices may be required to co-operate with assisted suicide," he said. "If this were to happen, the future of many Catholic institutions could be under threat."

He added: "This is not the end of the parliamentary process, and we should not lose hope."

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Introduced by Labour Party MP Kim Leadbeater, the bill will allow adults who are deemed to have fewer than six months to live the right to be assisted in committing suicide by a doctor.

Such applications must be signed off by two doctors and approved by a panel consisting of a social worker, a lawyer and a psychiatrist.

In a June 20 debate ahead of the vote, Leadbeater pleaded with MPs to vote for "a choice for terminally ill people about how they die."

"If we do not vote for a change in the law today," she said, "we will have many more years of heart-breaking stories from terminally ill people and their families, of pain and trauma. ... There will be stories of suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder, lonely trips to (Dignitas assisted suicide clinic in) Switzerland, police investigations, and everything else we have all heard of in recent months."

In Switzerland, medical assistance in dying has been decriminalized. According to a July 2024 BBC story, 40 people from the U.K. ended their lives at Dignitas in 2023, "the highest level since 2019."

In Britain, MPs of all parties were permitted to vote their conscience on the bill, rather than as instructed by their party as is sometimes the case on measures before them. Prime Minister Keir Starmer voted in favor of the bill, and Kemi Badenoch, the leader of the opposing Conservative Party, voted against it.

In a June 20 statement given to OSV News, Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury said the vote was a "sad moment for us all" because it has "opened the door to euthanasia."

"We may be incredulous that such a seismic change to society was effected by what is widely acknowledged to be a deeply-flawed Bill passed after a few hours of debate, albeit with a small majority," he said.

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Bishop Philip Egan of Portsmouth said in a statement by telephone to OSV News that the vote for the bill was "an appalling development with massive consequences especially for the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable."

"British society has taken yet another step away from its Christian patrimony," Egan said.

Earlier, in a joint statement issued June 18, Nichols and Sherrington warned Catholics that the bill could force the closures of church-run hospices and care homes for the elderly.

Parliament's decision "does not change our firm belief in the sanctity of life, never simply a burden but always a gift of God, given and received," Nichols said. "Our duties are clear: to live by the teaching given to us by God; generously to accompany with care and compassion those facing disability, isolation and suffering; to continue to put forward, with respect and clarity, the objective norms that inform our firm beliefs on how to live, and to die, well."