

Marie Goldman



MP for Chelmsford

POINTS OF VIEW

Why I haven't made my mind up how to vote on assisted dying Bill

I'm sure many of you will be aware that a Private Members' Bill is being brought to the House of Commons on the issue of Assisted Dying. I've already received lots of correspondence on this subject asking me which way I'm going to vote. I wanted to let you know that I genuinely haven't yet made up my mind – and for very good reason: the Bill itself hasn't yet been published.

Please let me explain how this works.

Let's start at the beginning. What is a Private Members' Bill?

A Private Members' Bill (PMB), like any other Bill, is an attempt to change the law on a particular subject.

What makes it different is that it can only be introduced by a Member of Parliament who is not a minister.

PMBs are an opportunity to debate potential legislation that is not already being brought by the Government of the time. Anyone who isn't a minister can propose a PMB, including members of the opposition parties as well as backbenchers from the governing party.

Let's pause for a second while I try to clear up something that has come up in conversation a few times with members of the public lately. (If you're completely clued up on how Parliament works, feel free to skip ahead a bit.) Being a Member of Parliament (an MP) doesn't in itself make you a member of the Government. I was speaking to a lady recently and she was telling me about a change in the law that she would like to see. She told me that as I was now in government, she would like me to take it forward. I had to explain that I'm not in government – I'm in opposition.

Only MPs who are in the party that has a majority in Parliament have the chance of being in government, and then only ministers and those appointed by the Prime Minister to the Cabinet are officially 'in government'. Everyone else is referred to as a 'backbencher' and they have considerably less influence over Bills that are brought for-



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BEN WHITLEY

ward to potentially become law. The vast majority of the time, it's the Government that sets the timetable for parliamentary business, which includes saying which Bills (pieces of legislation) will be given time to be debated on the floor of the House of Commons and then potentially progressed through to the House of Lords.

(By the way, upcoming parliamentary business is officially announced every Thursday morning by the Leader of the House of Commons, currently Lucy Powell MP. It's my role, as Liberal Democrat Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, to respond to that statement every week and point out issues that the Lib Dems believe should be given more attention. You can watch these exchanges on Parliament TV here: www.parliamentlive.tv/Comments.)

So, anyone who isn't a minister can bring forward a Private Members' Bill, BUT – there isn't enough

time for several hundred MPs to do that and for there to be time to debate them all. To manage that issue, the Government sets aside 13 Fridays throughout the year for PMBs to be debated.

At the beginning of each Parliamentary session (usually once a year, after the King's Speech), there is a ballot to decide which MPs are allocated time to bring forward a PMB.

Most eligible MPs usually enter, but only 20 are drawn in the ballot. Even then, not all 20 are guaranteed to be given time to propose a Bill. Those nearest the top of the ballot are the most likely to be successful. You can see the result of this year's ballot here: <https://bit.ly/2024PMBResults>.

This year, Labour's Kim Leadbeater MP came top of the ballot. She has chosen to bring forward a Bill on assisted dying, with the aim of making it legal under certain circumstances to help another person end their life. It was formally 'presented' to the House of Commons on October 16, but at this stage there are no details, just the topic and title of the Bill. That's why I haven't yet made up my mind which way I'm

going to vote – I haven't yet seen the Bill. Nobody has. In fact, it hasn't even been written yet. And while that's the case and I haven't been able to scrutinise it, understand what it's proposing, think properly about the very important and significant implications contained within its text, and do further research, I simply can't say which way I'm going to vote.

And make no mistake: this Bill, whether it becomes law or not, is likely to have profound implications for our society.

For those who have long been campaigning for it, it offers the chance to alleviate suffering that no amount of palliative care can truly take away. It offers dignity, autonomy and – perhaps most interestingly of all – hope.

Hope that a degenerative illness does not have to end in pain and trauma. Hope that one's life can end with compassion and something that so many people with a terminal illness cannot bear the thought of losing: control over their own life and, indeed, their own death.

But for many who are campaigning against the introduction of such a Bill, it's an incredibly worrying and

frightening step in a direction that they see as a slippery slope. Many worry about the precedent it sets for future changes to the law.

They worry about poor safeguards leading to people ending their lives because they were coerced into it, and perhaps even choosing to end their lives unnecessarily.

They have legitimate concerns about the treatment of and attitude towards those living with disabilities. Some simply see it as a fundamental wrong.

We already know that the vote on this will be a 'free' vote as it is a matter of conscience for all MPs to decide on themselves. This means that votes will not be 'whipped' as they normally are, where the parties tell their MPs how they want them to vote.

It is truly a privilege to be given the opportunity to help decide on a matter so crucial to our existence as humans, and I'm already spending some of my time researching the opposing arguments to help me make up my mind when I eventually get to see the details of the Bill. Until then, I'm keeping an open mind.

Keep well.

Marie

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