

Marie Goldman

POINTS OF VIEW

MP for Chelmsford

Why I decided to cast my vote in favour of the Assisted Dying Bill

LAST Friday, I voted to allow the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (also known colloquially as the Assisted Dying Bill) to progress further through Parliament. In total 330 MPs voted this way, while 275 voted against. I want to explain to you why I voted the way I did.

First of all, I'm extremely grateful to the very large number of people who got in touch to share their thoughts and sometimes heart-breaking personal experiences with me.

The sheer volume of emails that I have received on this subject alone makes it very difficult to reply individually and in detail to each and every one, but I wanted to thank everyone who engaged constructively in this very difficult, but necessary debate.

I also want to thank the doctors working in palliative care, acute care and general practice who got in touch and with whom I met to understand their views. I know this is such a complex topic for them so I thank them for taking the time to express their opinions and help me understand how the system currently works – warts and all.

The vote was on what's known as the Second Reading of the Bill. If the majority of MPs had voted against the Bill, that would have stopped it in its tracks and the debate on this issue may also have stopped.

It is worth noting that the last time a similar debate was held in Parliament was in 2015 when it was decided not to change the law. There has been very little debate on this subject during the intervening decade.

Also during that time, many people have experienced agonising, tragic deaths in unbearable pain and suffering. Some have chosen to take their own lives, leaving their loved ones to find them unexpectedly, without any chance of saying goodbye.

Others who had the financial, physical and emotional resources to do so have chosen to travel to places where assisted dying is legal, such as Dignitas in Switzerland. Sometimes in doing so, they ended their lives



Marie Goldman MP in the House of Commons chamber during the debate on the Assisted Dying Bill
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earlier than their symptoms necessitated, but knowing that they had to be fit enough to travel independently so as not to risk prosecution for their loved ones if they provided any assistance. A vote against the Bill would not have prevented any of these scenarios happening repeatedly going forward.

Some correspondents have raised concerns about the standard of palliative care in this country. It has been suggested that we should be focusing our efforts on that instead of assisting people to die. I have some sympathy with that argument. In my opinion, palliative care has

been woefully underfunded by successive governments and it urgently needs proper funding to reverse the decline in availability of services and to alleviate the pressure on the amazing doctors and nurses who work in our hospices and palliative care system. But I don't consider that the need to invest in palliative care and the argument

for this Bill are mutually exclusive. I believe we should be doing both at the same time and it really shouldn't be beyond governments to do so – after all, there are many, many other Bills and changes being proposed at

the moment, and we're constantly having shake-ups and reorganisations of the NHS. Government should be able to pat its head and rub its tummy at the same time, if you'll pardon the expression.

And then, of course, palliative care can't alleviate all symptoms. Medicine is good, but it can't fix everything, and I've listened to many awful accounts of patients dying in excruciating pain and suffering that palliative care and medicine simply hasn't been able to prevent.

As part of my research, I have listened to families sharing their devastating personal stories about loved ones that they saw suffer an agonising death, or choose a lonely path to take their own life. I have also heard from those currently living with a terminal diagnosis and listened intently as they described the fear they have of a slow, painful death with no autonomy in how they leave this world. Many spoke passionately about the hope this Bill gives them that they will have choice in death as they do in life.

I am also aware of the concerns of disabled people that this Bill may make it easier for others to effectively end their lives without their consent. I watched Liz Carr's excellent and thought-provoking documentary 'Better Off Dead?' and have heard the horrific stories of disabled people being treated by others as if they are not able to lead rich and ful-

filling lives. They give accounts of being made to feel that they shouldn't demand the same excellent medical care as an able-bodied person.

However, I do not think there is anything in this Bill that would make that outrageous practice any more acceptable. Fighting for strengthened protections for disabled people is not contrary to the Bill and it is very clear in the Bill that it would only apply to an adult with a diagnosed terminal illness, with less than six months to live and who has clearly demonstrated a settled will to end their own life.

But the Bill isn't perfect. And while I have voted for it to progress to the next stage in Parliament – Committee Stage, a line-by-line examination of the Bill with the possibility of evidence being submitted and amendments being proposed – my vote for the Bill is by no means a guarantee of my vote for it at Third Reading, which is really when MPs get to decide if this will become law.

That won't happen for a number of months. In the meantime, I was pleased to hear the Government say they will now put resources into this to ensure the Bill is workable and implementable.

I also want to say something about the Private Member's Bill (PMB) process that has brought this Bill to the House. The nature of PMBs means that there is very little pre-

legislative scrutiny. That means it's far too easy to end up with Bills that are very far from perfect. The competitive races and ballots that MPs necessarily take part in to have the opportunity to bring forward a Bill of their choosing is, in my humble opinion, deeply flawed.

I'd like to change that, ideally replacing the whole PMB system with something rather more fit for purpose.

If you are also not happy with the way they work, may I gently suggest you submit your views to the Modernisation Committee as part of its Call for Views, which closes on December 16 (<https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/3442>).

Finally, debate in the House of Commons isn't always the bastion of democracy that it's supposed to be. MPs often come to debates with prepared speeches (which is sometimes entirely appropriate), make their speech, wait to listen to the required two speeches afterwards, as demanded by the parliamentary etiquette rules, and then leave.

Interventions (interrupting another MP in their speech) are often used as a way of getting a clip-pable soundbite to put out on social media, rather than because you've been listening to the debate and want to clarify a point or contribute your own expertise to a specific point. This time was different.

On Friday, the House of Commons was at its absolute best. It was a true honour and privilege sitting on the green benches listening to the outstanding, thoughtful contributions of colleagues across the chamber and from all parties.

Some I agreed with, some I didn't, but the tone of the debate was by far the most respectful and considered of all the debates I have yet seen in my short time as an MP. Speaking to a few colleagues afterwards, they felt the same. It was truly something to be proud of.

Whether the vote went the way you hoped or not, I hope this has helped you to understand why I voted for the Bill.

Thank you again for continuing to take an interest. I truly believe that it is only through constructive debate, discussion and understanding that we can bring about the changes we need to create a better, fairer and happier society.

With my sincerest best wishes.

Marie

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