

Bishops pan federal government's survey on expanding assisted suicide

The federal government is coming under increasing fire from critics of legal medically-assisted suicide in Canada for how quickly it is moving to change the regulations around assisted suicide and for how short a time period Canadians were given to express their views in an online survey overseen by the Ministry of Justice.

In a strongly worded letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau dated Jan. 31 – four days after the federal government's two-week online survey of Canadians regarding changes to the so-called medical assistance in dying (MAiD) law ended – Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC) president Richard Gagnon reiterated the Catholic Church's opposition to government-sanctioned suicide while slamming the idea that a survey is the way to address "grave moral questions."

"It is inappropriate and superficial to use a survey to address grave moral questions concerning life and death," said Gagnon, who is Archbishop of Winnipeg. "Two weeks is entirely insufficient to study the question as well as to learn from the sobering lessons in other jurisdictions where euthanasia/assisted suicide has been practised with fewer restrictions."

In contrast, when the federal government was considering legalizing marijuana, the public was given two months – from Nov. 21, 2017 to Jan. 20, 2018 – to comment. The federal two-week online consultation period is troubling to more than the Catholic Church.

"The government gave Canadians just 14 days to fill out a bare-bones online questionnaire on expanding MAiD. Graduating high school students have more time to consider a university acceptance letter than Canadians were given to consider monumental social change fraught with moral complexity," said Ray Pennings, executive vice-president of the Ottawa faith-based think tank Cardus.

"The government needs to take its time," he said.

The short time period Canadians were given to comment on possible expansion to the MAiD system is tied to the Quebec court decision in September that struck down the "reasonably foreseeable" and imminent death requirement to qualify for an assisted death as being unconstitutional.

Both the federal and Quebec governments could have appealed that decision but decided not to, which means the federal government will make changes to Canada's assisted-dying regulations to comply with a court deadline of March 11. Federal Justice Minister David Lametti has said he wants to table

legislation in the House of Commons by the middle of February.

There were close to 300,000 responses to the online survey. "There does seem to be a clear tendency that Canadians are largely in agreement that we ought to expand the possibility for medical assistance in dying beyond the end-of-life scenario," Lametti told the CBC on Jan. 30.

Medical-assisted suicide in Canada has been legal in Canada since 2016. The law includes numerous restrictions in addition to the requirement that a person already be nearing the end of life which the Quebec court decision struck down. Canadians seeking an assisted death must be an adult, not be mentally ill, and people suffering from progressive mentally-disabling illnesses such as dementia can not give advance permission for euthanasia after their condition deteriorates to the point in which they are mentally impaired from making a decision.

The federal decision not to appeal that Quebec ruling has been a hot-button issue for opponents of MAiD.

Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, said the federal government had a "duty" to appeal the decision even if it agreed with the court decision.

"They abdicated their responsibility as the federal government," he said, calling the government's online survey a "dog and pony show."

"The online consultation questionnaire was a sham," Schadenberg said. "Many of the questions implied an outcome. It is a sham to ask people to complete a questionnaire when some of the questions are designed to provide a predetermined outcome."

In the CCCB's letter, Gagnon also took issue with the survey questions.

"The way the survey was constructed requires Canadians to agree tacitly in the expansion of euthanasia before even being able to express opposition and any concerns they may have," Gagnon's letter said.

"We, as bishops of the Catholic faithful in Canada, call on the government to engage in a more rigorous, impartial and prolonged study of the problems inherent in euthanasia/assisted suicide by involving those whose experiences offer a different perspective and even present inconvenient truths," the CCCB letter said.

In response to the CCCB's letter, Rachel Rappaport, press secretary to Lametti, said the government is currently responding to the Quebec court decision, but there will be a further review of Canada's MAiD system starting in the summer as promised when the legislation was first enacted.