

Critics say proposed assisted suicide legislation goes too far

Ottawa has reintroduced a bill that will make it easier for more Canadians to access assisted suicide, a move the government says it must do to fall in line with a 2019 court ruling.

The government claims it has the backing of most Canadians to expand the qualifications for Medical Assistance in Dying, but long-standing opponents say what the government proposes goes far beyond what that Quebec court decision actually said.

In a statement, the federal government says the changes to Canada's MAiD system, which eliminates the requirement that a person's death must be "reasonably foreseeable" before they qualify, is in keeping with the "emerging societal consensus" of Canadians on the issue.

"The bill reflects emerging societal consensus and was informed by views and concerns raised by Canadians, experts, practitioners, stakeholders, Indigenous groups, as well as provinces and territories during the public consultations undertaken in January and February 2020," according to the government.

"It is also informed by the past four years of experience with MAiD in Canada."

The bill, reintroduced on Oct. 5 also introduces a two-track approach to procedural safeguards based on whether a person's natural death is reasonably foreseeable, excludes eligibility for individuals suffering solely from mental illness, allows a waiver of final consent for eligible persons whose natural death is reasonably foreseeable and who may lose capacity to consent before MAiD can be provided, and expands data collection about MAiD in Canada,

The government points to an online consultation process as proof that Canadians are in favour of the MAiD system and making it easier to access.

Public opinion polls have consistently shown Canadians support MAiD, including an Angus Reid Institute survey in early 2020 that indicated "four-in-five (80 per cent) of Canadians now say it should be easier to make their own end-of-life decisions, compared to nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) in 2016."

However, the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition disputes the government's position that the changes it proposes are a result of the September 2019 Truchon decision when Quebec's Superior Court found the "reasonable foreseeability of natural death" requirement to be unconstitutional because it was too restrictive.

Instead of just dropping that requirement as the court decision demanded, the

proposed changes to the system would now also allow some Canadians to “a waiver of final consent for eligible persons whose natural death is reasonably foreseeable and who may lose capacity to consent before MAID can be provided.”

The Euthanasia Prevention Coalition says allowing for the waiver of final consent means that some Canadians will be put to death even if they change their minds but are unable to communicate that decision. The EPC also says that other safeguards that were originally built into the system are being stripped away.

“They are making changes that are not in that court decision,” said Alex Schadenberg, director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition. In a message to his members, he said, “I challenge each of you to ask for a meeting with your Member of Parliament. We must stand strong against the expansion of euthanasia.”

The Catholic Church has continually spoken out against euthanasia and any expansion of Canada’s MAiD system.

“We unequivocally affirm and maintain the fundamental belief in the sacredness of all human life, a value that we share with many others in our country, including persons of different faiths and no faith at all,” Archbishop Richard Gagnon, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

“Despite the misleading euphemism, ‘Medical Assistance in Dying’ (MAiD) remains simply euthanasia and assisted suicide – that is, the direct taking of human life or the participation in his/her suicide, which can never be justified,” said Gagnon, who is the archbishop of Winnipeg.

Canada’s bishops, like the EPC, are calling on Canadians to continue to contact their MPs to express opposition to MAiD and any changes to the system that makes assisted suicide easier.

Gagnon said the Catholic Church calls “upon all Canadians to make their voices heard” and urges members of Parliament to acknowledge the giftedness of life as an inalienable right not to be taken away by others, the importance of compassion for the ill and the dying, as well as our responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us.”

The federal government has until Dec. 18 to bring Canada’s laws in compliance with the Quebec court decision, a deadline that has already been pushed back twice because of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic.