

Odds stacked against bill to enshrine conscience rights for health-care providers

The odds weigh heavily against Bill C-418, Conservative MP David Anderson's private member's bill to enshrine conscience rights for health-care providers on assisted suicide, as the first hour of debate is set for Parliament May 29.

First, it's a private member's bill, which have a long history of failing to pass in the House of Commons. It is also up against a Liberal majority government that believes its 2016 MAiD (medical assistance in dying) legislation enshrined conscience rights in Bill C-14 to allow health care practitioners to opt out of the practice, though the evidence has proven to the contrary.

Justice Minister and Attorney General David Lametti has shown his displeasure with his government's legislation, arguing that Bill C-14 didn't go far enough.

With this session of Parliament soon to end – when unfinished House of Commons business dies – and an upcoming federal election in October, there's no guarantee Anderson's bill will make it to a final vote.

Still, Anderson is pushing forward on C-418, which he sees as a “good addition” to the current law that will erase any doubt as to the MAiD legislation's intention.

“Bill C-418, the point of the bill is to actually establish the penalty for coercion or intimidation and the threat to someone's employment status,” said Anderson. “It establishes a consequence for conducting yourself that way.”

Anderson's bill would make it a punishable offence to compel, through “violence or threats of violence, coercion or any other form of intimidation,” a health-care professional to take part in assisted suicide.

It would also punish employers who refuse to employ or dismiss from employment a worker who refuses to take part in assisted suicide.

As it stands now, there are different interpretations of the law across Canada. The Coalition for HealthCARE and Conscience – which includes a number of Catholic entities including the Archdioceses of Toronto and Vancouver – notes there is limited protection under C-14 for freedom of conscience enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Manitoba has allowed for opting out of the practice with its passing of Bill 34, but there is no such protection in provinces like Ontario, Saskatchewan and

Nova Scotia, where at the very least regulators have insisted a physician must make an “effective referral” for assisted dying even if it would violate their conscience.

Lametti, in an e-mail to Canadian Catholic News, acknowledges it’s a “difficult and deeply personal issue,” but said the matter has been addressed in C-14 after extensive all-party debate. He added the government will consider any improvements moving forward.

Meanwhile, the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition has been seeking 20,000 signatures on a petition to be presented to Lametti in support of C-418. By May 21 it had garnered almost 18,000 signatures.