

RIGHT TO LIFE

Catholic Church leads the charge against pro-euthanasia bill in UK

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

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All Catholics in the UK should oppose this “deeply flawed Bill with untold unintended consequences” - “by urging your MP to vote against the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill”. This appeal by Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster together with

all the bishops of England and Wales, features in a **pastoral letter** he wrote on 1 April and which was read out loud in every Catholic parish in the UK last weekend, 5-6 April.

It's not the first time the Cardinal has urged Catholics to lobby their MPs on issues with ethical implications. But the particular gravity he places on the prospect of assisted suicide being introduced in the UK is clearly demonstrated by his call to all 22 diocese in England and Wales to take a common stand to block the proposed legislation which he has said, "risks bringing about for all medical professionals a slow change from a duty to care to a duty to kill".

Primarily, it is "the deeply flawed process undergone in Parliament thus far" which is the driving force of the Cardinal's second pastoral letter. "The Bill itself is long and complex and was published just days before MPs voted on it, giving them inadequate time to consult or reflect upon it. The time for debate was minimal. The Committee examining the Bill took only three days of evidence: not all voices were heard, and it comprises an undue number of supporters of the Bill. In short, this is no way to legislate on such an important and morally complex issue", wrote the Cardinal.

Considering the Bill has had less than five months scrutiny and still has unresolved fundamental issues, the Cardinal's concerns appear well founded. When the Bill was introduced in October 2024, MP Kim Leadbeater urged MPs to back her plan to roll out the service by 2027. But since then, she has been forced to climb down and delay its implementation until 2029 after civil servants drafting amendments told her the Bill was unworkable in several key areas. Primarily, it contains no detail on how assisted dying services will operate, costs to the taxpayer, its impact on the rest of the NHS and how the Bill can be safely implemented without causing harm to vulnerable people.

This is the reason the timing of Cardinal Nichols' second letter coincides with this particularly crucial moment of the passage of Kim Leadbeater's Private Member's Bill through Parliament. On 25 April, its **third reading** will take place. This is the final chance for MPs in the House of Commons to debate the contents of the Bill. But the final debate is usually short, and is limited to what is actually in the Bill, (questions and amendments were treated in the Bill's second reading) after which MPs cast their vote. If approved by the legislative body, the Bill will progress to the House of Lords for its first reading. Although the Bill will be scrutinised by the Lords and further amendments probably proposed, it is the elected legislators of the House of Commons who make the final decision.

Above all, the Cardinal is not alone in his criticisms. Amid the growing climate of concern, the UK Catholic Medical Association (CMA) issued a **statement** on 7 April warning that legalising assisted suicide will cause patients to “fear for their safety” in the medical system. Former Paralympian and independent peer (a non-party political member of the House of Lords) Tanni Grey-Thompson said: “I’m disappointed with the process. This is the biggest legislative change to our society potentially ever, and it feels like it’s been pushed through at a pace”. “We’ve continually been told it’s the safest bill in the world, but that’s quite a low bar as every jurisdiction has changed since inception and the safeguards have become weaker,” she added. Catherine Robinson, spokesperson for Right To Life UK said, “this bill is being rushed through parliament without any impact assessment and partly behind closed doors”.

But, rumblings of dissatisfaction are now also emerging from previous supporters of the Bill and members of the Labour Party the Bill’s principal supporters. Labour MPs opposed to assisted dying have called the bill “irredeemably flawed and not fit to become law” in a **letter** to their parliamentary colleagues, saying “significant new risks” for vulnerable persons emerged during the scrutiny process. Among the other concerns raised by MPs was the prospect that doctors would still be allowed to proactively suggest assisted dying to patients who had not raised it themselves and the potential for the private sector to make a profit from the legislation. The Labour MP James Frith called the bill “a mess, with significant issues of concern where there had been promises of scrutiny and improvement”.

Kim Leadbeater, however, continues to canvass heavily for support even telling MPs it’s their duty to vote for her Bill. “What worries me is, if the bill doesn’t pass, the conversation ends, and that would be really dreadful for so many people, for so many reasons,” she said.

The third reading vote on 25 April, therefore, carries some uncertainty. Although the second reading vote last November passed with a majority of 55, opponents of the bill are claiming some MPs have since changed their minds. Political pressure on MPs to vote against the Bill from Catholics could tip the scale in April.

But the question is how many Catholics will actually mobilise, given the situation in which they live in a Britain where religious freedom is increasingly restricted. That is why Cardinal Nichols, who is well aware of the situation, ended his appeal by quoting St Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul wrote this letter while in prison, “reflecting on the difficulties and responsibilities of life”, to inspire and encourage believers to have faith in

their struggles, knowing that "Christ Jesus has made us his own". So we too," concluded Nichols, "press on with this struggle, which is so important in our time".