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The United Kingdom: assisted suicide campaign an example of steered democracy

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According to statements by its proponents and the expectations generated by the media, the British assisted suicide bill was expected to pass without difficulty. However, more than a year later, the process for approving the bill is still in limbo, and it is now

possible that it will not be approved before the end of the parliamentary session in spring 2026.
On 18 December, the British Parliament adjourned for the Christmas recess, leaving the issue of the 'Adult Terminally Ill (End of Life) Bill' – also known as the assisted suicide bill – pending until 5 January, when Parliament resumes.

In reality, the parliamentary debate has been characterised by deep divisions among MPs and heated debates in both Houses, despite widespread media support for assisted suicide, which has sided with the activism of Labour MP Kim Leadbeater, who proposed the bill as a private member's bill. Public opinion was selectively reported, societal debate was limited and timeframes exploited to create a sense of urgency.

This is how the promoters of assisted suicide created the illusion of overwhelming support for the bill, putting pressure on MPs to pass it. This is a classic example of steered democracy, which can be very effective if managed well. Indeed, there are suspicions that the entire affair was manipulated behind the scenes. Evidence of this comes from a confidential document published by The Guardian on 3 December, revealing that the Labour Party planned to introduce a law on assisted suicide while still in opposition in 2023. The document details a discussion between the current leader, Sir Keir Starmer, and shadow cabinet ministers about introducing a private member's bill on assisted suicide. This would avoid presenting it in the party's election manifesto (so as not to lose support) and subsequently not as a government initiative which would still enable it to exert significant influence over the process.

The note makes eleven references to the campaign group *Dignity in Dying*, which warns that there would be "strong, impactful campaigns in favour of assisted dying during the general election campaign". The proposal in the note suggested limiting the law to people who are 'mentally competent, terminally ill, and have less than six months to live' matches to the criteria set out in the bill. Despite their claims of neutrality, the leak raises questions about the extent of government involvement in Labour MP Kim Leadbeater's bill.

Unsurprisingly, a spokesperson for Leadbeater categorically denied that the MP had held any contact with the Prime Minister or the party leadership before raising the issue of assisted dying. However, Helen-Ann Hartley, the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle and a member of the House of Lords who opposes the bill, told the BBC: 'An internal briefing before the election raises serious questions about their neutrality.' A source from the Guardian said: 'At a time when the Lords are being told that democracy requires them to nod this bill through, it is now clear that the process in the House of

Commons bypassed the usual processes for developing laws of this magnitude, and that everyone has been misled about the nature and origin of the bill'.

When Kim Leadbeater presented her bill to the House of Commons in November 2024, the media reported that it has overwhelming public support, with at least two-thirds of British citizens in favour of passing the law. Parliamentarians were therefore expected to give their full support to the bill. The Labour Party had just come to power after a landslide victory, securing 411 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons and thus ensuring a comfortable majority to pass the law. However, when the final vote was held in June 2025, the bill was narrowly passed at its third reading by a majority of only 23 votes (315–291).
Although this was a clear blow to the Labour Party, the media hailed the result as a 'historic victory'.

Then, in September, a more detailed survey conducted by the UK alliance Care Not Killing found that assisted suicide was not at all a public priority. People wanted the government to reduce waiting lists, improve care for cancer patients, fund mental health services, provide care for disabled people and children with special educational needs, and improve funding for palliative and hospital care. When asked to prioritise a list of options, legalising assisted suicide was the least popular of the 11 choices, with only 12% of respondents supporting it. By contrast, 70% of respondents wanted the government to reduce National Health Service waiting lists, 54% wanted adequate ambulance services, and 44% wanted improved cancer care.

The message to the government was clear: with estimated costs totalling £425 million over ten years for assisted suicide, the public would prefer the money to be spent on under-resourced services.

This makes the role of the Upper House, which is responsible for scrutinising legislation, even more vital. The bill is currently at the committee stage in the House of Lords, which is the third of five stages that new laws must go through in each House. Itis at this stage that the bill undergoes thorough and detailed examination. The clashes between MPs have been particularly bitter. When critics proposed a record number of over 1,000 amendments, forcing an additional 10 days of debate, MPs in favour of the bill responded angrily. They accused their colleagues of deliberately trying to “obstruct” the legislation. Lord Falconer, co-sponsor of the assisted suicide bill, made misleading public statements about the House of Lords' obligation to align with the will of theHouse of Commons, stating that 'they cannot say no'. While MPs who tabled the most amendments have received threatening letters and accusations of obstructionism.

In any case, if the bill is not passed by the end of the parliamentary session, this will not be considered a definitive victory by supporters of the movement against euthanasia and assisted suicide. Lord Farmer, a former Conservative Party treasurer, described the legislation as 'an atheist bill that assumes there is nothing after death'. Until Britain acknowledges that 'forgetting God diminishes our humanity', as Cardinal Vincent Nichols warned in his open letter on assisted suicide in October 2024, nothing will prevent a new bill from being reintroduced by a future government.