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# Politicians

and the Question of *Voluntary Euthanasia*

Voluntary euthanasia is a subject that has concerned people all over the world for a long time. The Greek philosophers talked of it and Sir Thomas More dreamt of and longed for it. Societies and organisations have been formed under differing names to popularise the concept for decades. Yet, with few exceptions, politicians in every country have resisted the move to legalise voluntary euthanasia.

This is strange when one considers that poll after poll has shown overwhelming support for the move. It is believed that a simple omission in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – ‘Every one has the right to live and the right to die’ has caused untold misery to suffering people when all they wanted was a peaceful death and the wherewithal to achieve that.

For some time now suicide has been removed from the Criminal Code, but while deleting that, the politicians, for some reason decided to keep the sections that dealt with assistance to suicide. Whether that was deliberate or unintentional we do not know. So we have a lacuna in the law – anyone found guilty of helping a person to commit a lawful act (suicide) is committing a felony. How can this be? Surely it should be corrected? Everyone admits that but we find a strange reluctance among our politicians to rectify it. Is it conscience, self-preservation or sheer cussedness?

We are supposed to live in a democracy – a form of government, in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively, and which is administered by officers appointed by them. Our politicians are officers appointed by the people to act as the people decide. Legalisation of voluntary euthanasia is consistently being shown to have overwhelming public support.

It can be said that the people have expressed their wishes rather emphatically and yet the Parliament has chosen to ignore this. The politicians have turned and twisted, doubted and dithered, hummed and hawed, equivocated and prevaricated and done everything possible to avoid taking a decision. One wonders if Richard Harris, a US journalist, was right when he said ‘Probably the most distinctive characteristic of the successful politician is selective cowardice’ (Annals of Legislation- *The New Yorker*, Dec 14 1968).

The usual answer one gets from politicians is that it is a complex issue. Perhaps it is, but that should only mean that we should have an honest, open, frank and meaningful debate and try to solve the problem. Shelving the issue or putting it in the too hard basket is not going to resolve it. It has been said that it may erode more rights than it

will confer. It is baffling to understand what right it will take away; the case is for voluntary euthanasia, not compulsory euthanasia. It is a meaningless excuse.

Let us be brutally honest and say that perhaps the politician is frightened of upsetting certain sections of the community. Sections of the church, the AMA and the Right to Life lobby are against any move to change the law to minimise suffering. Do they really want to see people suffer? Or is it just a blinkered outlook? Whatever their arguments, these institutions appear to be more of a threat to politicians than the Voluntary Euthanasia lobby will ever be.

Politicians must be aware of the anger and frustration felt by the terminally ill and the sick, who are suffering more than they care to bear, but they obviously feel that those people are not a threat - they will soon die and ... the dead can not vote.

Please, do not waste your anger and frustration trying to convince politicians. Rather pass it on to your friends and relations; get them involved in your effort to confront those indifferent, unfeeling politicians, who do not seem to care how much you want to be released from your suffering.

Politics, like any other profession, has a well defined career path. Depending on how far they want to get ahead, politicians have to map out their strategy and act accordingly and to their

own advantage. So it is not surprising that a certain amount of self-interest is always critical in a politician's actions and opinions. This has to be understood and accepted.

Thus politicians do not have to be convinced of the ethics and morals of voluntary euthanasia, but rather that it will be in their self-interest to support it. It is not so much the merit of the argument that will sway them, as the sheer number of supporters in the community.

Once the politician is convinced that more people are for it than against it, legalisation of voluntary euthanasia will be a breeze. It may be a cynical view but nevertheless the only one that makes any sense.

People like Dr Philip Nitschke believe that politicians will never have the will or the conviction to pass a humane and practical law, and the only way out is to find ways to help oneself. Maybe they are right, but I would like an honest answer from a politician in power and authority to my question : "Do you have the will to help all those who are suffering, and if yes, then what are you going to do about it?"

*Ranjan Ray*