**The assisted dying bill has passed. At last: a decent life can end in a decent death**

* Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, Fri 29 Nov 2024

Here it is at last, a landmark that will be an enduring symbol and the humane legacy of this Labour government. Parliament has finally caught up with the public, who have long been firmly and unwaveringly in support of assisted dying since the [first polls on the issue](https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/116429/pdf#:~:text=The%20proportion%20of%20respondents%20saying,(see%20Table%201%20below).) more than 40 years ago. What took MPs so long?

In the debate today the reasons for that support were graphically and sometimes horrifically laid out by MPs, including Kim Leadbeater, in whose name this law will pass into history. The status quo is “cruel and dangerous” said Andrew Mitchell from the Tory benches. There is no “safe” avoidance of suffering, there is no certainty that palliative care will always prevent a horrible death. Morphine is no saviour, as I have witnessed in my own family. […]

That oft-quoted risk of death by relatives over-eager to grasp an inheritance always looked utterly implausible: they couldn’t wait another month or two instead risking prosecution and a [14-year sentence for coercion](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/nov/11/assisted-dying-bills-strict-safeguards-to-include-long-jail-terms-for-coercion)? As for being a burden, yes, many don’t want a humiliating dependency on others in their very last days – and for them, assisted dying is a reasonable choice.

The one lobby against the bill I have some sympathy with comes from disability groups. I think they are quite wrong to claim this is a slippery slope towards euthanising the inconvenient, but they are right to publicise how appalling their lives can be as things stand – in benefits, in transport and much else. However, many disability groups were on the other side; as for everyone else, it’s for them alone in extremis to decide whether they want to live out their final terrible months.

Around the world, scores of countries have long had dignity in dying legislation – in Spain, Australia, New Zealand and a host of countries more religious than Britain. However, in this [supremely irreligious land](https://humanists.uk/2021/04/01/latest-british-social-attitudes-survey-shows-huge-generational-surge-in-the-non-religious/), there was much opposition from religious groups. For reasons not obvious, the Commons always has a far higher number of MPs professing a faith than the general public, the Lords many more (aided by those 26 bishops Labour should be abolishing along with hereditary peers). However, little was said by MPs about their religious reasons for opposing the bill, knowing the word of God carries little weight among voters these days. Christianity – with the cross as its emblem **–** has a peculiar relationship with suffering as a value in itself.

How long this has taken. Seven times since 2010, a Tory-dominated parliament voted down bill after bill on the right to die, regardless of public opinion. Almost all progressive social reforms have trailed behind the public in this way: parliament is very rarely the standard bearer. In fact, it is usually the foot-dragger, timid unless absolutely certain what its constituents think. Abortion had long been strongly supported before parliament finally caught up. Divorce law had become an absurd farce for decades […]

Banning capital punishment was the standout exception, when a new Labour government in 1965 dared to defy a public that was [still in favour](https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/resources/sixty-years-public-opinion-about-crime-and-punishment). Afterwards, the Commons held a vote in every parliament until 1997 calling to restore the death penalty, always defeated. Public opinion on this is now [against restoration](https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/death-penalty-research-unit-blog/blog-post/2023/08/crude-opinion-polls-death-penalty-distort-public). Gay rights and civil partnerships broke through the barriers only with very strong public support. Here again, citizens were way out ahead.

This bill allows for a vital personal freedom over our bodies and our lives. It’s a far too restrictive law for many, especially those suffering beyond endurance with degenerative diseases, but it’s extremely unlikely to be extended in any way during the political lifetimes of this generation of MPs. Although, at 330 to 275, the vote was closer than it should have been, those who passed this law can be proud of what they did today.