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## The Marris sponsored Assisted Suicide Bill

Mark Jones (2015)

In an interview on the BBC Stephen Hawking, was asked about his support for assisted suicide. His view was that 'To keep someone alive against their wishes is the ultimate indignity'. When asked what would make him take his own life, his response encapsulated two main arguments used to propose change to the law: he would consider assisted suicide 'if I were in great pain... or felt I had nothing more to contribute but was just a burden to those around me.'

Hawking's second reason is also why many of those opposed to assisted suicide believe that the current law should not be changed; that being irredeemably affirmed as being worthless or a burden to others and having no innate value must surely be a greater indignity than receiving reassurance to the contrary and compassion.

If Hawking believes in dignity and ascribes this to humans then there must be value attributed to everyone above the 'matter' of which we are made or perceptions of our usefulness. If that is the case then shouldn't this be conveyed to those who might feel that they are such a burden that they are better off 'out of the way' and need assistance to end their own life? If we truly value human life then society should do its best to make sure that all human life remains valued – especially when someone is at their most vulnerable.

If Hawking's second reason is flawed, his first echoes a commonly heard cry for change. Even a number of prominent clergy including former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, and Archbishop Tutu, have expressed their view that the rightful and compassionate response is that no-one should have to die in pain, and for this reason the law should be changed.

Is this really a right view of compassion? Compassion literally means 'to suffer with' the sufferer. How do we, in the name of compassion, solve the problem of suffering by eradicating the sufferer? Those opposed to assisted suicide would state that in all but the rarest of situations, modern palliative care offers effective symptom control.

It is crucial that the responsibility of the law - those making it, applying it and upholding it - is to provide strong and firm foundations upon which society can flourish, to protect those who are vulnerable, and to protect life. It is equally important when difficult issues arise that everyone, and especially our elected Parliament, should seek to understand the facts, recognise the cultural impact of change and engage in a reasoned, informed debate about what is truly best for society. Given the wider issues and values at stake, greater consideration must be given to what real and long term effects a change to the law would lead to.

On 11th September, there will be an attempt in the commons to pass a bill legalising euthanasia. One of the best ways to prevent the law from being passed is for people like us, lawyers, writing to our local MP by 21st July, before the House rises for the summer recess and immediately after they return in the first week of September. I will be doing this and asking my MP to oppose the bill.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- \* That support for the principle may not be motivated by genuine "compassion" but by desire to reduce the cost of care and pension provision.
- \* Creating a culture of a "duty to die".
- \* The innate devaluing of the life of the infirm, vulnerable and weak.
- \* To support the medical profession who overwhelmingly oppose it.
- \* The Bill is poorly drafted; for example it lacks full protection for the vulnerable.
- \* My desire to support those who are suffering – and challenge any feeling that they are better off dead (as they feel they are a burden for others) or selfishly using resources by living.
- \* The Bill is not addressing an obvious need. There has been a marked absence of prosecutions under the current law.
- \* The inability to predict or reverse any culture change emanating from this. The experience of other countries has been an increase in the culture of death. For example in Belgium the rate of euthanasia increased 8-fold between 2003 and 2013, whilst in the Netherlands 4,829 people received euthanasia in 2013, over three times more than when the law was introduced.
- \* The weakness of the reassurances about preventing proliferation, echoing those given at the time of the abortion laws.

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