WE HAVE TO BE ZEALOTS AND SHOUT NO!

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Catholic Herald 25th July 2014

The Falconer Bill's opponents are acting as if they've already lost the argument

Sometimes being reasonable is not the answer. Sometimes, to try to understand and accommodate an opponent is not the behaviour of the mature adult but, rather, the behaviour of the loser who merely wishes to retrieve some minor concession from their defeat. That's the sad and sorry conclusion I came to while following the House of Lords debate on Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill. As honourable man after honourable woman stood to declare their opposition it became clear to me that we are acting, and arguing, as though we have lost this vital argument.

It is not that great, courageous and eloquent arguments weren't presented against legalising the ending of other people's lives. It is that, too often, secondary justifications were used when what was needed – is needed – is a straightforward and utterly unreasonable (in the eyes of our opponents at least) cry of "No". Lords and Ladies rose to explain to the House that the Bill had too few, or too flexible, safeguards. It did not sufficiently protect the vulnerable, they said. It was too open to interpretation and misuse, they argued. All true enough. Except also all too dishonest.

I don't think I'm alone when I say that as an opponent of assisted dying I am guilty, when pressing the case for "safeguards" to people like Charlie Falconer, of leading the poor man up the garden path. No legislative clause, no second opinion, the involvement of no profession, be they judge, doctor or both, will make me believe that this country should abandon the principle of the sanctity of human life. It is disingenuous to suggest to supporters of this legislation that there is a compromise to be achieved. Our obligation to refuse the sanctioning of murder does not and can not evaporate in the face of contextual reassurances. It is and must be unyielding.

I oppose the death penalty. It revolts me. The idea that the state may – after the fact and in no way to prevent physical harm to others – end a human being's life is abhorrent to all I hold dear. You know what? That opposition does not cease to be so strongly held if you could guarantee to me that all executed men and women are guilty. It's better, naturally, than if hundreds of innocent people were being wrongly put to their deaths. But it doesn't make me feel any less strongly that even the most outrageously depraved criminal must be spared - must, among other things, be given the chance for atonement and redemption.

That's what disturbs me about our contemporary debate on assisted suicide (which is what, in truth, this Bill would be more honestly named). The principle that we do not endorse the killing of others – for any purpose other than in defence against immediate threat – is being fundamentally undermined here. Yet we are allowing ourselves to become caught up in downstream arguments about how we can make sure that when euthanasia comes it is 100 per
The principle has become submerged beneath the presumption that this breach with our Christian heritage and our basic humanity is as inevitable as the tide sweeping in. It is not.

We know that we could, should we choose, decide not to follow this path because we have - ever since abolition – refused to do so when it comes to the death penalty. Even in the face of similar levels of public support as those which are claimed for this legislation, the political class has absolutely resisted attempts to reintroduce hanging here in Britain. They have done so on principle. They could, and should, do so now, when it is the blameless whose lives are being held in the balance.

This is a conviction that I share with the historian Kevin Yuill, author of the book Assisted Suicide: The Liberal, Humanist Case against Legalisation. I haven't met Dr Yuill, but I think it safe to say that there are likely to be relatively few areas where we agree, but on this we are in complete concord. "The danger of Falconer's Bill is less slippery slope than moral rubicon," he writes. "If we are to place value on even the most wretched of human lives - an important marker of civilisation – neither the death penalty nor assisted dying can be justified. If we go down either road, we sacrifice something of our humanity."

I couldn't have put it better myself (believe me, I've tried). To legalise this act of interference by one person in another's survival is to march straight across the line of decency and into a land of macabre possibility: human life no longer is sacred.

I know many people who support this Bill. And I know them to be decent and well-intentioned people. But, in the words of Lord Tebbit during the debate, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". It is a mistake, I believe, to characterise people like Charlie Falconer as would-be enablers of Nazism (as some appeared to do last Friday). Better to see them for what they are: good people making a terrible error. They are, on the whole, Utopians of the Left who believe – as a matter of course - that Government can by action abolish suffering, pain and unfairness. They are almost always wrong and, in this case, dangerously so. But that is not to say that they are by intent "evil". Just as we should be honest about what we believe, so we should be honest about what they do. It is not that they hate the elderly, the infirm and the destitute. It is that they have mistaken what love looks like.

Every time we as opponents of this law pick away at the details and avoid the principle, we lose. Whenever we talk of the "safeguards" at the expense of the sanctity of life, we lose. Each moment we waste explaining why people are not as protected as proponents believe them to be, we lose. It is all wasted time and wasted words. It ignores the real, visceral power of our true argument: that life is not there for the taking. It allows our opponents to mistake us for compromisers rather than the zealots we must be. And it contributes to the pervading; untrue and entirely resistible sense that this will come no matter what. Let's remember how to say "No!" rather than "Maybe next time". Because there should never be a next time – and we know that.

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