

## The Right To Die: It's Sad, Sick and Deadly Dangerous

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By Mick Hume

The notion of flying off to the Alps to "get away from it all" could be about to take on a whole new meaning, with news that a terminally ill man from Liverpool plans to travel to Switzerland to join a group that helps foreign nationals to kill themselves.

What's more, the 74-year-old sufferer from motor neurone disease reportedly wants to publicise his wish to die "in the hope of promoting euthanasia in Britain". Promoting euthanasia? That made even more depressing reading than the Prime Minister's "We're Doomed!" new year message.

The international campaign for the "right to die" gained a fresh lease of life in 2002. The Netherlands became the first country to legalise assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia, closely followed by Belgium, while the legalisation debate intensified from France to Australia. In the UK, Dianne Pretty lost the legal battle for her husband's right to help her to die, but won widespread support for a change in the law.

We all feel sympathy for the desperate individuals and families demanding voluntary euthanasia. But there are wider issues of life and death at stake.

Of course, doctors have long taken humane measures to hasten death at the very end. And, in a sense, everybody already has the right to die, since no law can punish a suicide. But that is no reason to give the State's formal approval to it.

The rise of campaigns to legalise voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide reflects society's declining faith in life before death. It is a symptom of the morbid, defeatist mood of the times that one of the more dynamic reform movements should be inspired by those demanding an early demise.

That movement's language of personal choice can make its cause seem attractive. But nobody who truly values liberty should want to reduce life itself to just another "lifestyle choice". It is telling that public support for legalisation is out of all proportion to any actual demand for voluntary euthanasia. In practice, few terminally ill people go through with it. Even such a prominent campaigner for voluntary euthanasia as the drugs guru Timothy Leary chose to "drop out" of the suicide squad when his time came.

Perhaps more telling still, American surveys suggest that support for legalisation is highest

among people aged 18 to 44, and lowest among the over-70s. What, exactly, is motivating all these young campaigners?

Among those asking to die, the most common factor is not physical pain, but depression. This is the new battleground in the euthanasia debate. On Christmas Eve, the Dutch Supreme Court ruled against a doctor who had helped a physically well man to commit suicide simply because he claimed he was "tired of life". But the push to widen the grounds for voluntary euthanasia continues. Belgian law recognises psychological suffering as legitimate grounds, and the Swiss group Dignitas, which the MND sufferer from Liverpool hopes will organise his death, told the BBC that it would accept a diagnosed schizophrenic for assisted suicide.

There must be something deeply disturbed about contemporary culture when treatable psychological disorders can be deemed to be a death sentence. Are we at such a low point that the law sees an unhappy existence as a good enough reason for a premature death? As disabled campaigners point out, making "quality of life" a measure of whether euthanasia is justified is a dangerous business. No law should be allowed to declare that a life lived in pain is worth less, never mind worthless.

Nor should any court be empowered to exercise Solomon-like powers over matters of life and death. My beloved wife and I may have our differences from time to time. But I really don't want a judge to give me the legal right to kill her (or indeed her me), whatever the doctor says.