

Assisted suicide is a devious subject in Britain, with some calling for the “right to die” to be enshrined in law and others saying that the action of helping to take someone’s life is wrong. Debbie Purdy, 46, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, won a landmark case last week asking for legal clarification so that people like herself could, if their lives became intolerable, ask a loved one to help them commit suicide.

The campaigner tells us why the ruling will help her live her life, while media commentator Brendan O’Neill says the right-to-life lobby is now a cause celebre and that assisted suicide is admitting defeat and killing hope...

YES

Debbie Purdy

Campaigning MS sufferer



LAST WEEK THE Law Lords made a historic decision that has the potential to improve the lives and deaths of thousands of people. They ruled that the Director of Public Prosecutions (the DPP) should publish a policy to clarify the law so that people will know under what circumstances they would be likely to be prosecuted if they assisted someone to die.

Some people may ask – if the law hasn’t been changed, why all the fuss? For me, the reasons to rejoice in the verdict are clear. I have primary progressive multiple sclerosis and at the moment I live a full and happy life with my husband Omar Puente. But I know that there may come a point where my life becomes unbearable and if this happens I want to have the choice of ending my life.

Currently, the main option available to me is to go to a country where it is legal to be assisted to die. If I make that choice, I don’t want to have to go alone and until last week that is the only way I would have gone. Assisting a suicide is a crime punishable by up to 14 years in prison – that is not a risk I am willing for Omar, or anyone else, to take on my behalf.

But travelling alone would have meant choosing to die perhaps years before I wanted to – because only then I could make the journey without help from others.

That is why, for me, the case was more about my right to live than my right to die.

The DPP has said he will issue guidance to clarify the law in the next two months. This policy should allow me to make an informed choice, with Omar, about what he could and could not do to help me, if I did get to the point where I wanted to end my life abroad.

A clear policy is absolutely vital because at present there is a contradiction between what the law says (assisted suicide is a crime) and the way

‘THE CASE WAS MORE ABOUT MY RIGHT TO LIVE THAN DIE’



SHOULD WE ALL HAVE THE RIGHT TO DIE?

the law is applied (none of the friends and relatives of the British people who have been assisted to die in Switzerland have been prosecuted).

The law presents a genuine risk to those assisting a loved one to die overseas, but no one really knows how it is applied and there do seem to be differences across the country.

Some people who have accompanied loved ones to die overseas are interviewed and investigated by the police upon their return, some are referred onto the Crown Prosecution Service and others are not. The DPP has made decisions on just eight cases

of the more than 115 British people who have been assisted to die in Switzerland.

The victory in my case is therefore shared with all the other people who face the same dilemmas as Omar and I. Since the case began two years ago we have received hundreds of messages of support from people who are facing these issues, and thousands from others who simply support the need for clarity in the law.

From September, people who are considering going abroad to die will no longer be in the dark. They will know whether or not their loved ones



NO

Brendan O'Neill

Editor of Spiked,
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IF I WERE TO MAKE A LIST of all the rights I would be willing to fight for, it would not include the “right to die”. I expect the right to free speech, the right to protest, the right to freedom of movement, the right to vote.

Those key rights make us free and autonomous beings, allowing us to determine the course of our lives and to carry out our daily activities without having the state peering over our shoulders. But the right to die? The right to end it all? The right to stop existing entirely? I don't want that right.

And yet that's the right that is talked about and fought over most passionately these days. Elbowing aside even the ongoing battle for full freedom of speech, or the right of migrants to travel freely to the UK, the “right to die” has become the number one cause celebre in contemporary Britain.

The increasingly-vocal pro-euthanasia and assisted suicide lobbies call for a recognition of terminally-ill people's “right to die”, and for the right of all of us to know that, if and when things get really tough towards the end of our lives, we will be able to travel to a suicide clinic in Switzerland and put an end to it all.

This is not a “right” that society should be sanctioning. And the fact that the “right to die” is now championed so widely tells us a lot about our downbeat, defeatist, misanthropic times.

Some will say that it is easy for me to brush aside the “right to die”. I am not currently ill, and I cannot possibly understand the physical or mental anguish of the estimated 120 British people who have travelled to Dignitas, the right-to-die clinic in Switzerland, to end their lives.

For example, last month the renowned conductor Sir Edward Thomas Downes, aged 85, travelled to Dignitas with his terminally-ill wife, Joan, 74, where they ended their lives together. Sir Edward had decided that he did not want to go on living without his beloved wife; he was also blind and increasingly deaf, a terrible burden for a man who devoted his life to music. We can all sympathise with his and his wife's tough decision.

More recently, Debbie Purdy, who is in a wheelchair as a result of multiple sclerosis, won her case at the House of Lords, where she and her lawyers insisted that the law on assisted suicide be clarified.

Specifically, Mrs Purdy wants assurance that, should she choose to exercise her “right to die” in the future, her husband will not be prosecuted for helping her travel overseas for a suicidal procedure (it is currently against the law, under the 1961 Suicide Act, to “aid, abet, counsel or procure” another person's suicide). Again, we can sympathise with Mrs Purdy.

But my worry is not with individual cases. Throughout history, desperate people have found a way to end their lives and sympathetic doctors have oftentimes found a way to help them, by administering too much morphine or quietly refusing to resuscitate.

No, my worry is with the recent elevation of the “right to die” into something that should be sanctioned at a society-wide level, and transformed from a discreet practice that has for a long time taken place behind closed doors into a publicly-recognised right for all people who find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances.

This is tantamount to sanctioning suicide itself, to sanctioning defeatism in the face of disease and hardship, and society should never sanction such things; it should always assert life, and hope for the future, rather than giving the green light to ending it all.

At a practical level, we already have the “right to die”. As a result of the 1961 Suicide Act it is no longer an offence to kill oneself; no one who tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide would be arrested.

Also, it is widely known, but quite rightly rarely spoken about, that kind doctors often “help” seriously ill patients to die in their final days at their request – and no doctor has ever been successfully prosecuted for doing so.

Yet the pro-euthanasia lobby wants our already existing ability to kill ourselves to be turned into a right to kill ourselves.

For them, it is not enough that society informally says: “If you kill yourself, we will not criminalise you.” They want it to say, far more pro-actively: “It is okay to kill yourself, go ahead.” They want

‘THE PRO-EUTHANASIA LOBBY WANT SUICIDE TO BE EFFECTIVELY CELEBRATED’

suicide not only to be looked upon sympathetically, but to be effectively celebrated.

But that would be to give in to defeatism and to elevate death as a solution to life's trials. Indeed, some of those who have travelled to Dignitas to be euthanised were suffering from non-fatal illnesses, such as Crohn's disease, inflammatory bowel disease and rheumatoid arthritis. Do we really want a society where we cannot say to sick or depressed people that life is still worth living? That even with your hardships, there is hope and wonder and joy to be discovered in human existence?

Thankfully, ordinary, everyday people don't seem too keen on the “right to die”. Only a tiny minority of Britons plan to go to Dignitas, and in Oregon, the only US state where euthanasia is legal, physician-assisted suicide accounts for between 0.06 and 0.14 per cent of all annual deaths – around 40 a year.

Most of us still recognise that, however rocky the road gets, it is still worth walking on it rather than giving up. If only the well-to-do commentators, campaigners and politicians who want to give us all the “right to die” would recognise that. ●

Appealing to the law Debbie Purdy and her husband Omar Puente after the Law Lords made their ruling

could face prosecution for assisting them. Another crucial point is that a clear policy will also help protect vulnerable people.

With a policy in place prosecutions will be brought against people who maliciously encourage someone to take their own life, whilst protecting those acting out of compassion. For these reasons, I truly believe that clarity in the application of the law is best result for everyone. ●