

First IPSCCommons Debate – The “Nays” Have It

The inaugural IPSCCommons debate on “Is it time for Singapore to consider a right-to-die bill?” closed on 9 October 2014. Law professor and diplomat Tommy Koh and Bishop Emeritus Dr Robert Solomon helmed the three-week long online debate, with 29 respondents commenting and voting on the issue. There were 5,823 page views of the debate (4,294 unique page views) with site visitors mostly from Singapore, and a handful from the United States, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Professor Koh was for the motion, while Dr Solomon opposed his views. Their exchanges are available [here](#).

Around 65% of debate respondents supported Dr Solomon. Reader Colin Ong said that “introducing assisted suicide in any society will inevitably lead to its moral decline” and suggested that palliative care was a viable option for a “harmonious departure from one’s life”. Readers Oneida and Cyril Chiam tackled the “utilitarian” arguments that Professor Koh made and said that dying with dignity must not be equated to dying painlessly or without suffering. “Dignity is the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect. There are countless stories of cancer patients [and] people who have put up a brave fight against their illness,” Oneida noted, adding that Professor Koh had “mistakenly assumed that all who are against assisted dying are religious.” There was also concern about whether a right-to-die bill would inadvertently disadvantage the ill and elderly and make them feel that death was the only option so that they would not burden their loved ones. Said reader Bernice: “With the right to die bill, patients and their family may be pressured to make the ‘right’ decision be it for self or their loved ones.” Former Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo, who shared the link to the debate on his public Facebook page, also disagreed with the motion. He said he remembered the debate around the Advance Medical Directive (AMD) Bill, and the “difficult grey area between prolonging life and prolonging death which AMD seeks to address sensitively.” He concluded: “Euthanasia as assisted suicide takes it too far.”

The respondents who supported Professor Koh agreed that people should be free to determine their destiny. Reader Ong Eng Kian wrote that: “Prolonged life has no meaning at all, it is no longer a life, merely a ‘living’. Eventually life is transient, I agree that all lives shall have their purpose in this world, but when the purpose is fulfilled, there is no point to linger further.” Reader Ali Ahmad Yaakub said that in a democratic society, rights, choice and freedom should be valued as long as they do not impinge on others. A right-to-die bill should have several caveats to ensure that the person seeking the right to die was not under duress;

had the mental capacity to make decisions; had given express consent for assisted dying; and had exhausted all reasonable options in seeking a cure. A comment from reader HH Tong referenced the pain that prolonging the life of a patient brings to themselves, their caregivers and family members, adding that “I have heard such patients express their wish to discontinue their treatment and even to appeal to the Gods to take them away but modern medicine continued to keep them alive till they lost all dignity and self respect.” For reader Richard Woo, a right-to-die bill would acknowledge that there are different views on what constitutes a meaningful life. Each individual assigns a value to their life based on their quality of life, and “the value assigned by this person may contrast sharply with the value assigned by another person in a similar position. In short, what you consider as palatable may taste horrible to me.”

The IPSCommons team would like to thank everyone who followed this inaugural debate and took the time to give their considered views and perspectives. The debate series was launched to promote a robust and civil exchange of views on policy issues that may not always come to the fore of public discussion, but are nevertheless of interest to many people. The next debate will take place in early-2015 and more details will be given in a future edition of the newsletter.

If you have comments or feedback, please email jps.eneews@nus.edu.sg



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