

COMPASSION: Baroness Meacher has proposed a change to legislation in England and Wales on assisted dying

# Keeping a suffering person alive because the law says so is a cruel absurdity



Alex KANE

MICHAEL Dobbs was, for 20 years, one of the most influential figures within the Conservative Party and is now a life peer.

He's probably better known as the author of *House of Cards*. He also supports Baroness Meacher's private member's bill on assisted dying. Speaking during the second reading of the bill last week, he said that his family's experience of the suffering they endured while his father and older brother died of prostate cancer (his remaining brother now has a terminal diagnosis) had made him more determined to lift the ban on assisted dying.

Afterwards he said that he would seek the help of the Switzerland-based organisation Dignitas if he found himself confronting 'impossible suffering': "I would try to arrange things such that I would be able to say goodbye to my family…and leave this world in a dignified, peaceful, calm and loving fashion. (I do not want) to die in a foreign country surrounded by strangers. I want to die in my own country, in my own home, surrounded by those I love, having settled everything I should have done by then. And you can only do that if you're free from pain, you're free from fear, you're free from anxiety."

I agree with Dobbs. That's exactly how I would want to go. I do not fear death. But I do fear a terminal illness leaving me mute, motionless, helpless and terrified: a form of locked-in syndrome in which I would be aware of my circumstances, yet incapable of being able to do anything about it or make decisions on my own behalf. I fear ending my life drugged to the eyeballs, feeling no pain perhaps, but feeling nothing else either. I fear my partner and children having to watch me deteriorate before their eyes. I fear the bleakness and utter, utter pointlessness of being trapped in a bed for months on end.

I love life. The past 20 or so years have been particularly wonderful years. I met Kerri and we fell hopelessly, helplessly, head-over-heels in love. I love my children. I love being an older Dad. I love what I do as a columnist and commentator. I love the conferences and panels and assorted speaking engagements that come my way. I love walks in forests and woods. I love pottering around my study. I love the school runs. I love the awful jokes and puns which embarrass children and friends alike. I love being stopped by people in shops and on streets who just want to talk about politics, or about my background as an adopted child.

But so much of the life I love is built around the ability to communicate. I'm a writer and talker. Fair enough, I may not be particularly good at either, but they are still the two things I do best. If I couldn't do them, I would cease to be me. Yes, I would still breathe and be capable of being propped up in a bed and sedated if necessary. For a while I would even still look like me – until the lack of physical activity, combined with a terminal illness and the drugs, would reduce me to a skin and bone shadow of my former self.

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I don't want to die like that. I want my suffering to end quickly and efficiently. I don't want to have to ask a friend or one of the family to bring the pillow. I don't want to fly to Switzerland. I don't want to have to kill myself – even if I were physically capable of doing so. I don't want to be like some character trapped in the never-ending death plot of a Gothic novel. I don't want to drift from a position in which I can still think for myself, all the while knowing that the end of the line exit will be merciless, relentless, brutal and humiliating. I don't want my children and Kerri to see the man they love die long, long before his heart finally stops beating.

The final breath doesn't worry me. It comes to us all at some point – and it's usually a fairly quick departure, even if it is unexpected, or at the hands of a murderer. But keeping a helpless, suffering, terminally ill person alive because the law says they must be kept alive is a cruel absurdity. That's why I support assisted dying legislation. That's why I support having the right to make my own choices in awful circumstances.

Others will want to make different choices. So be it, there are hospices, and volunteers and care packages and drugs: and there always will be. But that wouldn't be my choice. And it is right, surely, that I have some choice in the matter?

## ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 5 1921

### 'Singing Policemen'

A GREAT deal of attention was attracted in the streets leading to Cliftonville football grounds yesterday by the conduct of large bodies of uniformed Specials who monopolised several tramcars on their way to the scene of a match between the Newtownards Camp 'Specials' team and Bangor. The men were packed in the cars and they gave expression to their feelings by shouting familiar Orange 'war cries' and singing party songs on which a legal ban has been placed in Belfast. The public regarded their conduct with amazement.

[One eye-witness writes:] 'I was both astonished and disgusted when walking in the street on Tuesday. I saw a tramcar filled with men wearing the King's uniform of the RIC come towards me while each of these guardians of the public peace in a rather inflammable city were bellowing at the top of their voices: "The tune we played was Kick the Pope right over Dolly's Brae" and the end of the familiar chorus was emphasised by blood-curdling whoops.'

### Belfast Poet Alleges Corruption

A DÁIL Eireann inquiry was held yesterday at Wicklow into allegations made by Mr Joseph Campbell, Enniskerry, against Wicklow County Council. Mr Campbell was formerly a Sinn Fein member of the body. He said when he became a member of the County Council he went there for the purpose of meeting men who were prepared to carry out the duties in the furtherance of Ireland's prosperity. Instead he found that he had met men of graft and nepotism.

### Brilliant Belfast Lady Barrister

AT THE Four Courts, Dublin yesterday two Irish ladies were called to the Bar. Among them was Miss Frances Christian Kyle, BA, LL.B from Belfast. After her came Mr John Clarke MacDermott, LL.B (QUB). He was a lieutenant in the Machine-gun Corps and won the MC. He is the third son of Rev Dr J MacDermott of Belmont Manse, Strandtown, Belfast. Miss Kyle and Mr MacDermott had taken first and second places.

**THOUGH the USC had been officially suspended as a condition of the Truce, this armed, sectarian force would shortly assume responsibility for law and order in the new state. One of the last Northerners called to the Irish Bar was John MacDermott, later a Unionist Cabinet Minister and Lord Chief Justice though he was deprived of first place by Miss Kyle, BL. Meanwhile, in Wicklow Joseph Campbell (1879-1944), the Belfast poet and Sinn Fein activist, accused his fellow county councillors of nepotism. Later imprisoned by the Free State for opposing the Treaty, he would emigrate to the USA to teach Irish studies in Fordham University. He died in Glencree, Co Wicklow, in 1944.**

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