




Speech By
Michael Healy

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Record of Proceedings, 14 September 2021

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Mr HEALY** (Cairns—ALP) (5.50 pm): I rise to make my contribution on this unique and vitally important bill. May I say from the outset that I understand the strong emotions which this proposed legislation stirs within our communities and our chamber. Anywhere you want to have a discussion, you will have a lot of different points of view. It is engaging and it is encapsulating. I want to thank each and every one of those in my electorate who contacted me. I had meetings with people, I had emails, I had phone calls, I got letters. I learnt a lot from listening, particularly to those I did not necessarily agree with. It certainly was important for me personally to listen and give everybody that ear, but it also helped a lot of other people with these points. This is a bill like no other.

I, like many in this House, understand the responsibilities we carry as elected representatives, and this vote adds to that weight because of the rare and unique manner in which it is happening. I must say that I am not sure if this was the intent, but I am enjoying a lot of the discussions. Apart from learning about each and every one of us, it is interesting. There are a wide range of views and I get that. I harbour no animosity in any way, shape or form. I appreciate the fact that everybody is well and truly entitled to their views on this.

When we look at the process and carriage of this through the parliament, we go back 18 months to the former Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee. They received over 4,719 written submissions and conducted over 34 public and private hearings and briefings across Queensland, including hearings in Mount Isa, Longreach, north of Cairns up to Mossman, Palm Island and I believe also in your part of the world, Madam Deputy Speaker Lui. The recommendation was that the legislation should be introduced. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the chair, the member for Thuringowa, and all members of that committee. Regardless of their political colour, it would have been a very tough committee to be on and it had a fairly long journey. I want to recognise their input which was vitally important.

As a result of their work, the government then referred VAD to the Queensland Law Reform Commission in May 2020 to draft the appropriate legislative scheme and after 12 months of extensive consultation delivered recommendations for the scheme and a draft bill. I again would like to thank the Queensland Law Reform Commission and all of their contributors for their extensive work. I know it has been acknowledged in this House before, but it has to be said that it is the foundations of the legislation and it is hugely appreciated.

In addition, it is also important to take note of the general consensus out there, bearing in mind that we are a democracy. Polling from February 2020 found 77 per cent of Queenslanders supported laws that would allow voluntary assisted dying in circumstances where a person in the late stages of an advanced disease was able to take life-ending medication prescribed by a doctor. The 2019 Vote Compass survey, in which 105,000 Queenslanders responded, found 80 per cent supported the proposed legislation.

The government is committed, as we have heard and as we know, to ensuring the best end-of-life care is available for all Queenslanders—that includes hospital, aged care and palliative care. We have had a recent injection into the discussion. It is an area that is getting funding, and it will continue to get funding. I look at the federal government and I look at our government. We all have a responsibility in this sense. I do not want to make that in any way, shape or form a part of my contribution, but I think it is well and truly worth recognising. In 2020-21 the government will spend approximately \$149 million on palliative care services across Queensland. An additional \$171 million was announced in October 2020 to expand access to palliative care across the state. Importantly for people in my electorate and the surrounds, this also includes regional and remote areas—so, Lachie, you would be happy to hear that.

For some Queenslanders suffering from a terminal illness, palliative care is unable to effectively manage their pain, symptoms or suffering. For these people, the only options currently available are to refuse medical treatment, food or hydration, palliative sedation or suicide. An enormously concerning figure is that every four days in our state a person suffering a terminal illness takes their own life. I could only imagine how lonely that would be and the challenges it must bring for the family members. It does not have to be like that. This proposed legislation will provide many people with another option.

I, like many in this chamber and millions outside, have seen loved ones suffer, some terribly, in their final months and days. For me, this decision comes down to something that is very important to me, and it is freedom of choice. I believe a rational thinking person who is suffering from a terminal illness should be able to make their own decision about their limited future. I believe this decision reflects empathy. I believe it is compassionate. For me, I asked myself that question—what would I want?—and I arrived at the same answer.

I acknowledge the concerns raised by a number of my constituents and some in this chamber and other parties in a range of areas. However, without going into all of the details, which I do not feel the need to do right now, I personally am satisfied that the balance is fair and reasonable and that sufficient measures are in place to ensure appropriate outcomes. We have processes. We have duty of care. We have a number of processes out there that I am very comfortable with. I am sure that those applications, in conjunction with this, will see the best outcomes.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Premier, our cabinet and all of my caucus colleagues for this important legislation. As I have said, and I extend this to everybody, I understand and respect all who have struggled with this bill and cannot support it for whatever their reasons. I am hopeful that this bill will pass when the time comes, as I know it will mean so much to so many. More importantly, it will mean so much to so many in the future. As Sophocles once said: 'Death is not the worst evil, but rather when we wish to die and cannot.' I support this bill.