




Speech By
Hon. Scott Stewart

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Hon. SJ STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (Minister for Resources) (7.33 pm): This is an important and historic day for Queenslanders, as we all know. This is about offering people a choice, a real choice. It is about listening to our communities. It is not about politics. There have been countless stories from people throughout Queensland, including Townsville, about the need to introduce this legislation. It will not be a choice that everyone will make, but it is important that there is an option for people. For many people in Townsville, this will be the most important piece of legislation introduced into this Queensland parliament.

I am proud to be part of a government that has spent the time listening to a huge range of people throughout the state to make sure we get the voluntary assisted dying laws right. I am proud that everyone in this House has been given a conscience vote. Supporting these laws was not an automatic decision for me. In fact I watched my own father suffer from prostate cancer—to the point where he was told he only had 18 months to live. I sat beside his bed for 10 days with my mum, my brother and my sister. He said to me that he would never go easy, that he would go kicking and fighting to the very last breath. That was my dad. He was a tough old son of a gun.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr STEWART: I did not want to use unparliamentary language. That was his choice. That is how he wanted to go, and that is what I remember about him. But things change and you listen to your constituents—the people who elected us to this House to make these decisions. I have had so many people speak to me about this issue. I will be voting to have voluntary assisted dying introduced into Queensland as I want people to be able to have a choice if they are suffering at the end of their life. This is an emotional, difficult and tough issue for many people to discuss, and it is certainly not a comfortable one. It is one that I have had with my family. As for my decision, I do not know yet, but we have had that discussion. Having uncomfortable discussions and debates is an important part of being a member of parliament.

There has been a huge amount of work to get us to this point now and it is incredibly important. It is important to give people that choice. I was not definite in my decision and support for voluntary assisted dying until in my very first term I had a visit from a group of women. No doubt the member for Thuringowa had the same visit. These women spoke to me around our common table over a cup of tea and I think a packet of Iced Vovos. This was about the importance of giving people the choice at the end of their life. One of these people was Marj Lawrence, who many people in North Queensland know for her fierce advocacy for voluntary assisted dying. I know the member for Thuringowa has highlighted her already. Hearing from people like Marj is incredibly important as it is easy to dismiss something you have not had a personal connection with. Ms Lawrence's husband suffered horribly and was bedridden for 18 months. In her own words, Marj said that she—

... sat with him and held his hand until his last breath. After all his suffering, it was a blessing to see him finally at peace. I am sure that, given the option, he would not have wanted to live with the indignity he had to endure.

They were her words. These are powerful words from an individual and they rang true in my ears when those women came to visit me some six years ago now. We know that people suffer at the end of life and that they should have a choice. It is up to the individual, and that is what this legislation is all about. From that day forward, after speaking with Marj and her posse of ladies in that delegation, I supported voluntary assisted dying in principle. It has been a long process to get to where we are today, having legislation debated in parliament. Voluntary assisted dying is complex and it is absolutely vital that we get this legislation right.

If I can digress a little. I was out in Winton in 2015 with the now minister for tourism. We were at the world premiere of Michael Caton's film *Last Cab to Darwin*. I am sure that lots of members in the House have seen that film. It is a great film and it talks about a cab driver who decides to go down the road—no pun intended—of voluntary assisted dying and travels from South Australia to Darwin. It is a great story and I am not going to spoil the ending for members. I had an opportunity the very next day at a breakfast forum to ask a question of Michael Caton about his thoughts around voluntary assisted dying. He said that politicians need to step out of this and let people make their own choice. That is what we are doing tonight.

I would like to take this opportunity to give a special mention to my Townsville colleague, the member for Thuringowa. Well done, mate. As chair of the health committee, he has been through this very long process, as have many committee members from the past and present, to bring voluntary assisted dying laws before us in this House. I thank each and every one of them for their contributions. The member for Thuringowa has been right there from the kick-off. He has done the 80 minutes, he has played the full game—mouthguard in and ready to go.

Thousands of submissions and numerous hearings across Queensland show the majority of people want to be able to have a choice. This is not just about personal beliefs; this is about representing our community and I implore everyone in the House to remember that. This issue should rightly be above political parties, lines and religions. It is about people and about giving them a choice, something that everyone really should be entitled to.