Australian Public Desire for Legalisation of Assisted Dying in Restricted Circumstances

Whitepaper

Executive Summary
The desire of the Australian public for the legalisation of assisted dying in restricted circumstances (broadly, “voluntary euthanasia”) continues at record levels, new major national research conducted by Newspoll shows. In summary:

- The number of Australians who advocate assisted-dying law reform (82.5%) outnumber those who oppose it (12.7%) by more than six to one. Support is very high amongst Liberal/National voters (82%) as well as ALP (84%) and Greens (88%) voters.
- Public support for reform has been in the majority for decades.
- Whether assisted dying is legalised or not is significantly more personally important to Australians (80%) than other policy areas which have already been dealt with by Parliaments or are under current debate, including abortion (78%), capital punishment (71%), a national high-speed broadband network (64%), a carbon tax or emissions trading scheme (60%), and same-sex marriage (58%).
- Contrary to popular belief, personal advocacy for assisted-dying law reform is more deeply entrenched (84% more important vs 15% less important) than is opposition to it (66% more important vs 29% less important).
- More than a quarter of all voters (29%) will change their vote if their otherwise most likely candidate or party’s stance on assisted dying law reform is opposed to their own stance.
- A politician whose stance is opposed to assisted dying law reform will lose significantly more votes at a general election (23%) than a politician who supports reform (6%). A significant net loss of votes for election candidates who oppose reform applies across all major parties. This comprehensively explodes the deeply entrenched political myth that supporting law reform loses votes but opposing reform does not.

These results confirm and expand on existing research, showing that Australians want assisted dying law reform, that their attitudes for it are strong rather than weak, and that they are prepared to change their voting behaviour to get it.

Politicians are counselled to actively engage community consultation to inform the shape and extent of reform, to bring Bills to their Parliaments, and to enact the will of the overwhelming majority of Australians.
Introduction
It is well known that public desire for the legalisation of assisted dying in restricted circumstances is in the very great majority in Australia. However, little has been understood about the nature of such advocacy, and opposition.

This whitepaper provides an analysis of recent research in Australia, exposing the depth of advocacy amongst Australians for such law reform, and the election risks for politicians who block reform.

Methodology
The primary data reported in this whitepaper was collected via a national public opinion poll conducted by Newspoll on behalf of YourLastRight.com Limited. Residents of all states were included in the sample of 2,521 people. Interviews were conducted by telephone late October through mid-November 2012.

The research covered three main subject areas:

A. To assess ongoing headline support for legalisation of assisted dying, and the characteristics of supporters and opponents

B. To determine how personally important assisted dying legalisation is (or is not) to Australians, compared with other key policy issues currently under debate or already dealt with by politicians

C. To establish what if any changes in voter behaviour would occur for general election candidates who support and for those who oppose assisted dying law reform

Results and Discussion

Part A: Headline support and characteristics
Respondents were asked the question:

Thinking now about voluntary euthanasia, if a hopelessly ill patient, experiencing unrelievable suffering, with absolutely no chance of recovering asks for a lethal dose, should a doctor be allowed to provide a lethal dose?

An overwhelming majority said yes (82.5%), a very small minority (12.7%) said no, with 3.8% don’t knows and 1.0% refused. Support for reform remains significantly elevated over 2007 Newspoll results (79.7%) and not significantly different from 2009 results (84.9%).

These results are comparable with other research such as a 2010 Australia Institute survey reported January 2011, which surveyed 1,294 Australians. They asked:

This question is about voluntary euthanasia. If someone with a terminal illness who is experiencing unrelievable suffering asks to die, should a doctor be allowed to assist them to die?

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1 The Australia Institute (2011), Survey results – attitudes to voluntary euthanasia, Jan 6.
An overwhelming 75% said yes, just 13% said no, and 12% were undecided. The level of opposition was nearly identical to the 2012 Newspoll survey, although “don’t knows” were slightly more common in the Australia Institute study.

(Note that both News Ltd and Fairfax media stables acknowledge online readership polls run by newspapers are not scientific. Therefore, online readership polls that ask “should voluntary euthanasia be legalised?” cannot be validly used as opinion indicators or authoritative input to public policy. Indeed, some readership polls do not even include the word voluntary.)

This result is consistent with public opinion in Europe. A late 2012 ISO Public\(^2\) study (p6) found overwhelming support for personal end-of-life choice from 71% to 87% across a range of European countries, and a small majority in Greece (52%). A similar majority said they would consider assisted dying if faced with a serious incurable illness (p8).

Scientific opinion polls have been conducted in Australia for decades. Chart 1 shows the results of national polls since 1962.

Support for assisted dying law reform reached a majority at least by the 1970s. In the 1980s it was a significant majority. By the 1990s, support had increased into the mid to high seventy percents. Since 2000, support has been 80% or higher.

\(^2\) ISO Public (2012), Assisted suicide in the view of Europeans, November, [www.isopublic.ch](http://www.isopublic.ch)
Results by Gender
The 2012 Newspoll survey found that of males, 82% said yes to law reform, 12% said no, and 6% were undecided. Of females the rate was 83%, 13% and 4% respectively.

Results by Age
Chart 2 shows the age breakdown of support for legalising assisted dying. Support is very high amongst all age groups, but especially high amongst fifty-somethings. This group may be currently facing, more than other groups, the deteriorating health and increasing mortality of their parents.

Chart 2: Age group (doctor can provide a lethal dose)

- Advocacy for assisted dying law reform is very high amongst all age groups, with greatest advocacy amongst fifty-somethings.
Results by religion
Chart 3 shows the breakdown of support amongst major religious and non-religious groups.

Nearly nine out of ten Australian Anglicans, more than three out of four Catholics, and nearly all Australian atheists advocate assisted dying law reform. Religious hierarchy who comprise an organised opposition to law reform do not represent the views of the majority of their flocks.

Opposition to reform is highest amongst smaller Christian groups, but overall, even amongst this group opposition is a small minority.

Owing to limited sample sizes amongst non-Christian-religion respondents, no specific statistics can be reported for these groups. However it can be said that of those interviewed, majority support appeared amongst Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist respondents.

Advocacy for assisted dying law reform is very high amongst Australians with a religion, and is almost universal amongst Australians with no religion.

While an overwhelming majority of Australians with a religion advocate assisted dying law reform, of those who oppose it, substantially more of them have a religion than both the general population and those who advocate reform, as shown in Chart 4. Those opposed to reform are nearly seven times (6.75x) more likely to have a religion than not, compared with the total population at 1.5 times.
Results by party voting intention

Advocacy for assisted dying law reform is very high across all the mainstream parties and amongst independents voters as shown in Chart 5. The sample size for smaller parties was too small to permit specific statistical numbers to be reported, but support for assisted dying law reform was lower for the small, conservative and religiously-based parties Family First and the Christian Democratic Party.

There is a strong correlation between opposition to assisted dying law reform and having a religion, even though most Australians with a religion support reform.
Results by state
Chart 6 shows the breakdown of attitudes by state of residence.

Chart 6: State (doctor can provide a lethal dose)

- **Total population**: 13% very important, 5% somewhat important, 82% not very important or not at all important.
- **Queensland**: 12% very important, 6% somewhat important, 82% not very important or not at all important.
- **NSW**: 14% very important, 5% somewhat important, 82% not very important or not at all important.
- **Victoria**: 11% very important, 6% somewhat important, 86% not very important or not at all important.
- **Tasmania**: 17% very important, 5% somewhat important, 78% not very important or not at all important.
- **South Australia**: 15% very important, 5% somewhat important, 81% not very important or not at all important.
- **Western Australia**: 13% very important, 8% somewhat important, 79% not very important or not at all important.

Advocacy for assisted dying law reform is very high across all Australians states, and especially high in Victoria.

Part B: Personal importance of “burning policy issues”
Respondents were asked the following question:

*Thinking now about several public policy issues in Australia. Would you say that to you personally, each of the following issues is very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important? [The following policy items were asked in random order] * A national high-speed broadband system * Whether voluntary euthanasia is legalised or not * A carbon tax or emissions trading scheme * Whether the death penalty is allowed or not * Whether same-sex marriage is legalised or not * Whether abortion is legal or not*
Note that this question is not about advocacy for or opposition to each policy issue, but the personal importance to Australians as to whether it ought to attract politician attention and effort.

The “not very” plus “not at all” important responses were grouped as “less important”, and “somewhat” plus “very” important groups as “more important.” The results are shown in Chart 7.

**Chart 7: The personal importance of “burning policy issues”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Issue</th>
<th>Less important</th>
<th>More important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A national disability insurance scheme</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with asylum seeker boat arrivals</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether voluntary euthanasia is legalised</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether abortion is legal</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether death penalty is allowed</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A national high-speed broadband network</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A carbon tax or emissions trading scheme</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether same-sex marriage is legalised</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All eight policy issues received a clear majority of public support as “more important,” meaning politicians ought to attend to them. The social policy issues of abortion (permitted) and the death penalty (banned) have already been dealt with. A national high-speed broadband network is currently being rolled out and carbon tax/emissions scheme is in place. Policies on a national disability insurance scheme, dealing with asylum seeker boat arrivals, and whether voluntary euthanasia and same-sex marriage are legalised are currently under political debate.

The personal importance of only two issues, a national disability insurance scheme, and dealing with asylum seeker boat arrivals, exceeded the personal importance of whether voluntary euthanasia is legalised or not. All other issues rated lower, including the national high-speed broadband network, the carbon tax/emissions scheme, and whether same-sex marriage is legalised or not.

Federal MP Kevin Andrews stated on the 20th of November 2012 that “Australians are concerned about the rising cost of living and the carbon tax; euthanasia is not a national priority.”³ Mr Andrews is the politician who introduced a Bill into the Federal Parliament that in 1997 extinguished the Northern Territory’s Rights of the Terminally Ill Act. However, Mr Andrews is entirely wrong: Australians rate dealing with assisted dying law reform (80%) as far more important that a carbon tax/emissions scheme (60%).

Contrary to political opinion, whether assisted dying is legalised is a national priority for Australians, its personal importance exceeding a number of other current major policy areas.

Chart 8 shows the personal importance of whether assisted dying is legalised or not, amongst advocates and opponents of this reform.

Contrary to popular belief—that the attitudes of opponents are more deeply entrenched than attitudes of advocates—quite the opposite is true. “More importance” was significantly higher (84%) amongst advocates than amongst opposers (68%). Only half as many advocates (15%) as opposers (29%) consider whether voluntary euthanasia is legalised or not “less important.” Four times as many opposers (4%) as advocates (1%) were unsure of their attitudes (don’t know).

Section C: Effects of politician stance on voter behaviour
Respondents were asked the following question:

* The position asked was the opposite of the respondent’s position
Chart 9 shows that overall, 29% of voters would change their vote away from their “usual” candidate or party if that candidate or party’s stance on the legalisation of assisted dying was the opposite of the voter’s position.

Across all voters, a political candidate opposing law reform loses almost four times the votes (23%) at the ballot box as would be lost for advocating it (6%). For Liberal/National candidates the loss is more than double (15% versus 7%); for Labor candidates the loss is almost five times (24% versus 5%); and for Greens voters it is eight times (32% versus 4%).

The sample sizes for voters of other political parties were too small to draw conclusions.

In the 2012 ISO Public study (p21), “fear of election losses” was the most frequently-given explanation by Germans as to why their political parties have not supported law reform. The same study found (p23) that 31% of Germans said a party’s stance on assisted dying is decisive to or has a big impact on whether they vote for the party or not, a very similar result to 29% of Australian voters.

- Nearly four times as many voters will change their vote against an election candidate who opposes assisted dying law reform, than will change their vote against one who advocates reform.

This comprehensively explodes the deeply-entrenched political belief that supporting assisted dying law reform loses votes but opposing reform does not.
Summary

This national Australian research conducted in late 2012 by Newspoll has found that:

1. Public advocacy for assisted dying law reform continues at a very high level. Supporters of law reform outnumber opposers by more than six to one.

2. Public advocacy has been in the majority for four decades, yet apart from a brief period in 1996/7 in the Northern Territory, no State or Territory has enacted law reform. The law lags significantly behind the will of the people.

3. Attitudes of Australians advocating assisted dying law reform are far more deeply entrenched than attitudes amongst those opposing it.

4. Considerably more Australian voters will vote against an election candidate or party that opposes assisted dying law reform, than will vote against a candidate that supports it.

5. Results are consistent with other research conducted both in Australia and overseas.

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