

A Message from Archbishop Mark Coleridge

A couple of Sundays ago across Queensland we celebrated Dying Peacefully – No Euthanasia Sunday. Last Sunday, with impeccable timing, the Premier announced out of the blue that, if re-elected, the Labor government would rush euthanasia legislation before the parliament in February next year.

In May this year Annastacia Palaszczuk made a clear announcement to the parliament that she would refer the report of the parliamentary enquiry to the Queensland Law Reform Commission which would present its report to the Attorney General by 1 March 2021 for final consideration by the government before putting the proposed legislation to the parliament. She said in May that it was important to “get this right” and therefore not to rush the process.

So the question now is: Why the rush? The Premier says it’s because so many people asked her to hasten the process – but that doesn’t convince. It’s more likely that the Premier has succumbed to political pressure of one kind or another, and one can only speculate as to what that might be.

But the larger question concerns the politicisation of what the Premier has acknowledged is a complex and delicate issue. Of course it was always going to be political, but to make it front and centre in the maelstrom of an electoral campaign makes it intensely political in a way that does no justice to the complexity and delicacy of the issue. Inevitably too it makes people like me and Anglican Archbishop Phillip Aspinall who joined me in a public statement seem partisan in the electoral context when neither of us wants to play the partisan game.

The question of euthanasia is quite literally a matter of life and death; and there are no issues more important for a community and for individuals than those that touch life and death. They matter even more than politics. But the Premier’s decision suggests that politics trumps all else, that votes or support from key constituencies matter more than human life and human dignity.

The contradictions abound. A government which has set great political store on closing borders to protect life now pushes legislation which jeopardises life. At a time when suicide is a national problem – especially among youth and First Nations people – the government wants to sanction suicide in law, saying that suicide in some contexts is an acceptable solution. The government may also claim that they want both better palliative care and voluntary assisted dying. But the assumptions underlying palliative care and VAD are so utterly different that they are in the end incompatible. A choice has to be made, and the one really human choice is properly funded palliative care.