

Euthanasia: opponents reduced to underhand manoeuvres

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The [Vatican news agency proclaimed](#): “A decision by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to pass a resolution that calls for the prohibition of euthanasia, is being hailed as a major pro-life victory.” [European Dignity Watch](#), under a headline “Council of Europe bans Euthanasia” hailed “a major victory for life and dignity of the weakest”. The [European Centre for Law and Justice](#) hailed a “Major Victory for Life in Europe”.

Newspapers picked up the story from these sources: the London *Daily Telegraph* two days later headlined [its story](#): “Assisted suicide should be illegal throughout Europe, human rights body rules. Euthanasia and assisted suicide should be banned in every country in the Continent, the Council of Europe has ruled.”

What had happened? The Parliamentary Assembly works through specialist committees that take a year or more to study a subject in detail and make considered recommendations. Had we failed to notice a complete committee enquiry on euthanasia and assisted dying?

Not at all. The Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee had produced a careful and welcome report on living wills: “Protecting human rights and dignity by taking into account previously expressed wishes of patients”. It was [debated on 25 January](#) at the end of a long session after most members of the Assembly had left. Reactionary religious delegates saw their opportunity: having perhaps already influenced the timing of the debate, they ensured they had enough support to pass by narrow majorities several small amendments irrelevant to the report.

The main one, passed by 34 votes to 16 with six abstentions (totalling barely one in six of the 318 members), was to add a clarification that the report did not concern euthanasia. This was, however, worded so as to condemn euthanasia in all circumstances:

This resolution is not intended to deal with the issues of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Euthanasia, in the sense of the intentional killing by act or omission of a dependent human being for his or her alleged benefit, must always be prohibited. This resolution thus limits itself to the question of advance directives, living wills and continuing powers of attorney.

The resultant resolution [can be seen here](#).

What are we to make of this? It is in all essentials a repeat of the ambush of the resolution on conscientious objection in October 2010. It is an undeniable victory for these reactionary religious forces – an unlikely alliance of the Catholic Church and evangelicals like Pat Robertson (who is behind the European Centre for Law and Justice). But it is a hollow victory, achieved by underhand manoeuvring and manipulation of a democratic assembly. It remains to be seen what the result would be in a fair vote in a well attended Assembly. Could it be that our opponents recognise that in a fair debate they will most likely lose and so resort to ambushes and manoeuvres?

Meantime, if this vote is quoted in public debates elsewhere, it will be valuable to clarify the way it was obtained.

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