

67% of Canadians support legalizing assisted suicide: poll

Tom Blackwell Dec 29, 2011



Gloria Taylor, right, enters the B.C Supreme Court with the help of Lee Carter, a fellow plaintiff in the case challenging the law regarding assisted-suicide in Vancouver on Dec. 1.

More than two-thirds of Canadians support making it legal for doctors to help the terminally ill kill themselves, a new poll suggests as the assisted-suicide issue once again provokes heated debate across the country.

Advocates on both sides of the question say the findings from a Forum Research survey are no surprise, but argue public opinion should not be the guiding force in deciding whether to change the current law, now under scrutiny in a closely watched B.C. court case.

Supporters of legalizing the practice maintain it is a matter of basic human rights that transcends popular attitudes; opponents say Canadians' beliefs would change if care at the end of life were improved and death made more comfortable.

The poll of 1,160 adults, conducted Dec. 13, indicated that 67% of respondents favoured legalizing physician-assisted suicide of terminally ill patients.

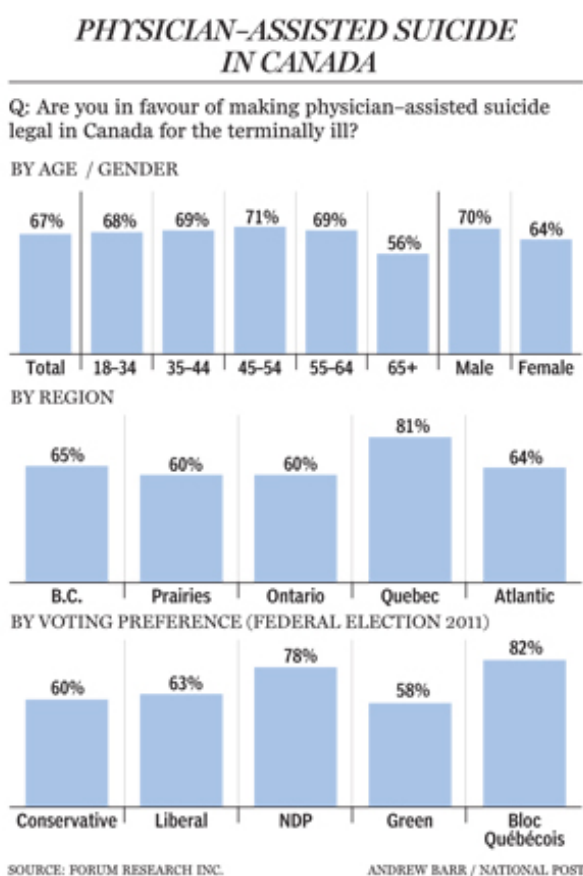
Support varied from 60% in the Prairie provinces to 81% in Quebec.

"It's a pretty high number," Lorne Boznikoff, president of Toronto-based Forum, said Thursday. "You don't often find that many Canadians agreeing on anything.... The public seems to be way ahead [of government] on this issue."

The question was asked just after the start of a B.C. Supreme Court challenge of the law by Gloria Taylor, who suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease. She says she is unable to look after even her most basic bodily functions and wants the right to end her life with a doctor's help.

The case revisits a question famously adjudicated by the courts almost 20 years ago, when Sue Rodriguez, another Lou Gehrig's sufferer, made a similar constitutional assault on the legislation. She eventually lost at the Supreme Court of Canada, but later did commit suicide with the aid of an unidentified physician.

Further stirring the pot is the report issued last month by a panel of bio-ethicists and other experts appointed by the Royal Society of Canada, the nation's premier scholarly academy. That group recommended the Criminal Code be amended to allow assisted suicide, as is already the case in countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland and in three U.S. states.



The Forum poll's results mirror those of similar surveys in the last two or three years, said Russell Ogden of the Farewell Foundation, which advocates for the right to get help in ending life.

"Twenty years ago Sue Rodriguez asked 'Who owns my life?' And most Canadians would answer that question with 'I do,'" he said. "It's as simple as that."

In the B.C. case, federal lawyers spoke in defence of the current "absolute prohibition" against all forms of assisted suicide, but the government should not change its stance based solely on the weight of public opinion, said Mr. Ogden. Polls generally show that Canadians favour capital punishment, too, but that does not justify bringing back the death penalty, he argued.

"We maintain it's a basic human right," Mr. Ogden said about assisted suicide.

Alex Schadenberg of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition said his organization's own polling has come up with similar results, but noted that more detailed surveys show that the bulk of those who favour assisted suicide only "somewhat" support the idea, rather than strongly back it.

Plus, even those who favour the practice express concerns about it being abused, with vulnerable people essentially killed against their will, he said.

The whole debate would be changed if the quality of services provided to people at the end of their lives – from palliative care to nursing homes – was improved and those final days were more often made less painful, uncomfortable and undignified, said Mr. Schadenberg.

"Canadians really do fear dying in painful situations, or having an unacceptable death experience," he said. "Guess what? I don't want to die that way either. And I don't think it's a necessary way to die in our culture today."

The assisted-suicide question was part of an omnibus poll conducted by Forum, considered accurate to within 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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