

Peers pledge not to vote against assisted suicide bill

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Moves to legalise assisted suicide will clear their first major hurdle after peers, who are opposed to changing the law, pledged not to vote against a bill during a debate this Friday.

In a letter to *The Times*, six peers who have led opposition on the issue say that they still object to the bill in principle and call the safeguards that it contains "minimal and perilous". If passed, it would allow doctors to prescribe lethal doses of drugs to terminally ill patients with only six months to live, if they request them.

However, the signatories say that after the Supreme Court ruled last month that parliament should consider the matter rather than leaving it to the

courts, they will not attempt to stop the bill at its second reading with a wrecking amendment. The peers include Baroness Grey-Thompson, the former Paralympian, Lord Carlile of Berriew, the former terrorism legislation reviewer, and Baroness Finlay of Llandaff, a professor of palliative medicine.

Lady Finlay said that the decision not to wreck the bill was not an admission that there was not enough support to block it, but an acknowledgement that the issue needed to be discussed properly. "In a debate where 113 peers have registered to speak, so will have three or four minutes each, how can you possibly dissect this bill line by line?" she asked.

She said that to license doctors to supply lethal drugs to patients, even if their life looked as though it were about to end, was fundamentally dangerous.

Lady Finlay urged all opponents in the House of Lords to let the bill pass so that it could be scrutinised closely during the line-by-line committee stage.

It is expected that the bill will come to the Commons for a free vote next year.

Lord Falconer of Thoroton, who drew up the bill and will steer it through the Lords, welcomed the peers' letter and said he hoped that other opponents in the Lords would heed their advice to let the bill pass on Friday. "I agree that it is the right thing to do to give the bill as full consideration as possible, including allowing it to go through all its stages in parliament," he said.

He also urged business managers in the Commons to make time for the bill. "The world outside is rightly putting pressure on parliamentarians to consider this," he said. Public opinion is

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strongly in favour of legalising assisted suicide. A poll released last night by Comres found that 70 per cent of people would support Lord Falconer's bill and only 10 per cent would oppose it.

In 2005, the last time a bill to legalise assisted suicide was debated in the Lords, a wrecking amendment was passed at the second reading by 194 votes to 141.

However, supporters of change believe that there has been a significant shift in the debate in the intervening years with the appointment of a large number of younger peers.

By convention, the House of Lords does not vote on a bill at its second reading, but if feelings are running high peers table a wrecking amendment.

The intervention of Lord Carey of Clifton, the former Archbishop of Can-

terbury, who broke ranks with the Church of England to support assisted dying, may also have an impact on how some peers vote.

Yet there are powerful opponents within the disabled lobby and doctors. The BMA, representing GPs, is opposed to any change in the law and many disabled people say they fear they would be pressurised into ending their lives.

In June the Supreme Court concluded that it had the power to declare a 50-year-old law criminalising the act of helping someone to take their life as "incompatible" with human rights.

However, the court held off, with Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury, its president, saying that it was doing so partly "to enable parliament to consider the position".

Letters, page 25