

Ethicist: Pro-euthanasia forces see Quebec as way into North America

OTTAWA, Ontario – International campaigners see Quebec as a vulnerable beachhead for legalizing euthanasia in Canada, then the rest of North America, said a prominent Canadian ethicist.

Margaret Somerville, founding director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at Toronto's McGill University, said she and others are keeping an eye on Quebec, where a legislative committee is holding public hearings on euthanasia.

Though many Canadians outside of Quebec were reassured earlier this year by the resounding defeat of a Bloc Quebecois pro-euthanasia and assisted suicide private member's bill, Somerville said pro-euthanasia forces regroup after each defeat.

"We used to think that's the end of it, but as soon as that's finished, the next one starts up," she said, noting pro-euthanasia campaigns are happening worldwide.

She compared the pro-euthanasia movement to an incoming tide.

"The tide comes in gentle, then stronger and stronger, and then it comes in and sweeps everything away," she said.

"That's exactly what we're in danger of seeing here," she said, adding that surveys show about 79 percent of Quebec residents "think euthanasia is a good idea."

"Many people are really asleep at the wheel," said McGill history professor John Zucchi, who presented a brief on behalf of 54 of his academic colleagues to Quebec's Select Committee on Dying With Dignity when it began its multicity sweep of the province in early September.

"Many who would be against it if they thought about it are thinking this is an issue kind of at the margins," he said. "It's there but doesn't come up on their radar screen."

Though the rest of Canada is opposed to euthanasia, Zucchi warned Quebec's

support of it could set off a domino effect.

Quebec has experienced a “a fair amount of pressure” from the euthanasia lobby, said Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition.

“Quebec society should not even be looking at this,” Schadenberg said, citing the province’s high suicide rate, an identified problem with elder abuse and its lack of adequate palliative care services. “What about the rights of disabled people?”

The province may try to bring in a de facto legalization of certain types of euthanasia by changing the provincial prosecution guidelines, he said.

Quebec also may argue that euthanasia and assisted suicide are health matters or medical acts, which are under provincial jurisdiction.

“We don’t want euthanasia and assisted suicide being smuggled into our health system under the guise of a medical act,” said Living With Dignity director Linda Couture. She heads a new group that is rallying anti-euthanasia forces in the province to respond to the Select Committee on Dying With Dignity hearings.

Changing the definition of euthanasia from a criminal act to a medical act softens the issue in the public’s mind, as does the focus on individual rights and autonomy and choice, Couture said.

The select committee announced the hearings in late May, giving a deadline for briefs in mid-July, a very tight time frame for response. Those who missed the deadline may show up at the hearings and get three minutes to speak, Couture said.

Pro-euthanasia supporters are very organized, she said, noting that at a recent hearing in Trois-Rivieres, they dominated the session.

She said Quebec residents are confused about palliative care. They also confuse the withdrawal of futile medical treatment with euthanasia, she said, adding that they do not realize that euthanasia is the intentional killing of someone.

Zucchi warned there are all sorts of opportunities for abuse if society legalizes euthanasia. Palliative care can allay physical suffering, but often people who are ill

suffer from loneliness and fear of being a burden.

“Solidarity is the answer to human suffering,” he said.