

Memo to Victorian politicians: Much greater electoral risk in opposing assisted dying law reform than supporting it

Neil Francis

12th June 2017



Rocking the vote for law reform

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Anti-campaign likely to backfire

In Australia, the Victorian Government is soon to introduce an assisted dying (AD) Bill into parliament. With an increased likelihood of the Bill passing, anti-AD campaigners especially have ramped up their rhetoric against the reform.

The [Herald Sun](#) recently reported that pollsters campaigning against the Bill surveyed a thousand people, reporting only cherry-picked results — that supposedly one third of AD opponents would change their vote against a supporting MP at the next Victorian election.

The pollsters refuse to be identified. Their methodology is unpublished and unknown. General descriptions of the questions suggest very poor quality. Without full publication it is of no credibility.

[The Age](#) has also reported that Right to Life and the Australian Christian Lobby have ‘taken off the gloves’ and are threatening sitting MPs in marginal seats who support the Bill.

As Victorian Parliament Members contemplate the upcoming AD Bill, some will be strongly supportive, some will be strongly opposed, and a significant proportion will be undecided. The opponents’ campaign is designed to scare undecideds towards opposing the Bill.

However, their misinformation is likely to seriously backfire: all other things being equal, Members would in reality be electorally far better off supporting than opposing the AD Bill.

In this memo I report four sources of compelling evidence to explain why:

1. Robust survey of Victorian overall attitudes towards AD;
2. Robust survey of Victorian attitudes about the personal importance of AD law reform;
3. Robust survey of Victorian intentions to change their general election vote in relation to AD; and
4. Direct experience of Members actively advocating AD reform.

1. A massive majority of Victorians support reform

An impeccable [Australian Election Study](#) (AES) survey run from Australian National University in 2016 found a massive majority of Victorians are in favour of assisted dying law reform (78.9%) while a tiny minority disagree (8.1%) (Figure 1).

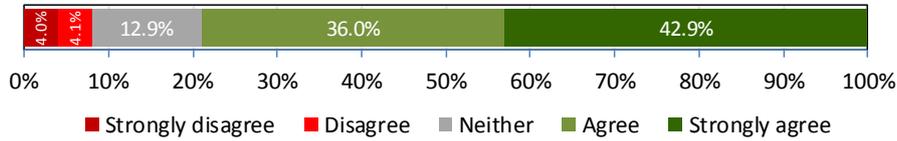


Figure 1: Attitudes of Victorians voters toward assisted dying law reform

Source: AES 2016

Victorians who *strongly* support the reform (42.9%) outnumber Victorians who *strongly* oppose it (4.0%) by more than ten to one.

Most Victorian voters support AD and few oppose it. Those who strongly support AD law reform outnumber those who strongly disagree by more than ten to one.

2. Reform is personally important to Victorians

Conventional political wisdom suggests that AD reform is not important to those who support it, while its non-reform is very important to those who oppose it. Such beliefs are evidentially wrong, and perilous to Members' re-election prospects.

A Newspoll survey^a in 2012 found that amongst Victorians who support AD, 80.4% believe the reform is more (very or somewhat) important, while just 18.7% believed it less (not very or not at all) important (Figure 2).

But amongst opponents of AD, significantly fewer (63.3%) believed that non-reform was more important, and a much greater proportion (33.0%) believed that non-reform was less important.

AD law reform is personally more important to those who support it, and relatively less important to those who oppose it.

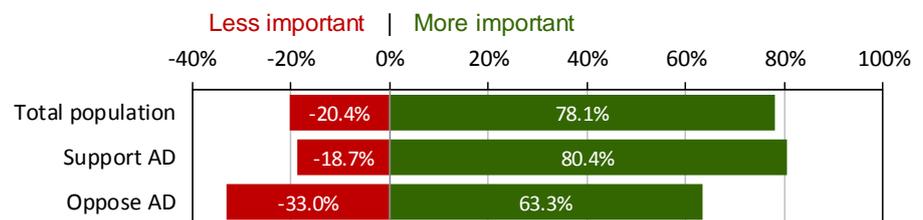


Figure 2: Personal importance among Victorians whether AD is legalised or not
Source: Newspoll 2012

Thus, the amongst Victorians who support AD, greater importance outweighs lesser importance by more than four to one (4.3 to 1), while amongst opponents of AD, greater importance outweighs lesser importance by less than two to one (1.9 to 1).

Figure 3 illustrates the importance amongst Victorians, weighted by proportion of supporters and opposers of AD.

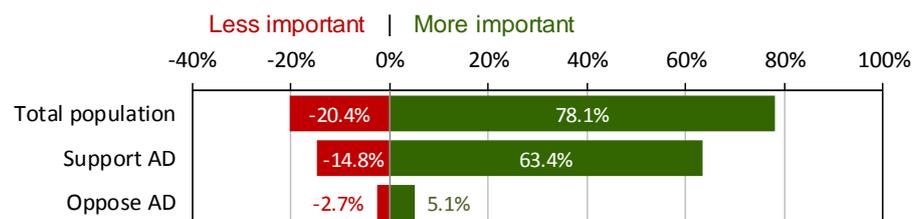


Figure 3: Personal importance among Victorians whether AD is legalised or not, weighted by proportion of AD supporters and opposers
Source: Newspoll 2012

Clearly, with so few opposing AD, their overall contribution to Victorians' beliefs about the personal importance of AD law reform is very small.

^a The methodology and results of the Newspoll survey are available [here](#).

3. Greater vote change amongst supporters

Anti-AD campaigners selectively report from their anonymous 'survey' that 33% of AD opponents said they would change their vote against a sitting Member who supported AD reform. They argue that this is reason for Members especially in marginal seats to oppose the AD Bill or jeopardise their re-election.

Such cherry-picking is thrown in stark relief by full, robust survey data.

The 2012 Newspoll survey also asked respondents whether they would change their vote for their otherwise usual party or candidate if the candidate's stance on AD was opposed to their own (i.e. voter supports but candidate opposes; or voter opposes but candidate supports).

While it is true that a greater proportion of AD-opposing voters say they would change their vote against a Member who supported an AD Bill, that fails to account for opposed voters comprising only a tiny minority of all voters.

The correct net potential vote changes are derived by adjusting results according to the proportion of voters supporting and opposing AD law reform.

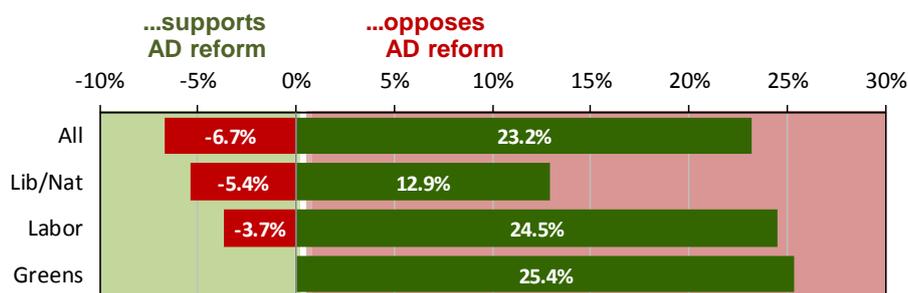


Figure 4: Victorian vote changes if otherwise usual election *candidate...*

Source: Newspoll 2012

Figure 4 shows that amongst Victorians, where the candidate opposes AD, 23.2% of voters say they would change their vote against their usual candidate or party. However, where a candidate supports AD, just 6.7% of voters say they would change their vote.

Thus, there is far more for a sitting Member to lose at re-election for opposing an AD Bill than for supporting it, by a ratio of 3.5 to 1.

The ratios in favour of supporting an AD Bill are 2.4 to 1 for Coalition Members and 6.6 to 1 for Labor Members.

(There were no Greens Victorian respondents who opposed AD, so the Greens ratio in favour can't be calculated: it's mathematically infinite.)

At a general election, far more Victorian voters will punish Members who oppose the AD Bill than will punish Members who support it.

Survey results are confirmed by experience, with the 2008 AD Bill sponsors returned at the following election with increases far exceeding their party's average performance.

4. Confirmed by Member experience

The survey data is supported by Victorian Member experience.

In 2008, Victorian Parliament Members Ms Colleen Hartland (Greens, Western Metropolitan) and the Hon. Ken Smith (Liberal, Bass), co-sponsored an AD Bill, the *Medical Treatment (Physician Assisted Dying) Bill*. The Bill was led by Ms Hartland since it was introduced in her Upper House, with Mr Smith in the Lower House.

Anti-AD campaigners threatened both sponsors for their active support, running campaigns against them at the subsequent 2010 election.

However, both Members were returned with very substantial increases in their primary votes (Figure 5).

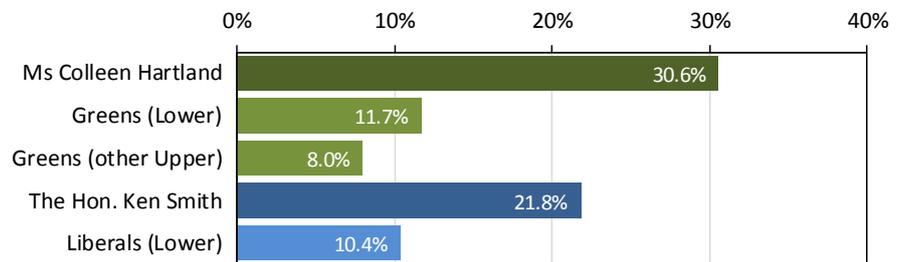


Figure 5: Primary vote changes in 2010 relative to 2006, after the 2008 AD Bill
Source: Victorian Electoral Commission

Ms Hartland was returned in 2010 with a 30.6% increase in her primary vote relative to 2006, compared with an average increase for her party (Greens) of 11.7% in the Lower House, and an average 8.0% increase for fellow Upper House Greens members Greg Barber and Sue Pennicuik.

Mr Smith was returned in 2010 with a 21.8% increase in his primary vote relative to 2006, compared with an average increase for his party (Liberal) in his Lower House, of 10.4%. Mr Smith had to rely on preferences in 2006, while in 2010 he was elected in his own right on primary votes.

Conclusion

While anti-AD campaigners are exercising their democratic right to promote opposed views, their actions are likely to backfire and alienate politicians and voters alike for several key reasons:

- A massive 78.9% of Victorians support AD, with only a tiny 8.1% opposed. Strong supporters outnumber strong opponents by more than ten to one.
- Significantly more supporters of AD believe that law reform is personally important, than opponents believe the status quo (no law) is personally important.
- At a general election, far more Victorian voters will punish Members who oppose the AD Bill than will punish Members who support it (3.5 to 1 overall, 2.4 to 1 for the Liberal/National Coalition and 6.6 to 1 for Labor).
- The co-sponsors of Victoria's 2008 AD Bill were returned with greatly increased majorities (including relative to their party's overall performance) despite campaigns against them by anti-AD campaigners.

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PO Box 303
Mont Albert
Victoria 3207
Australia



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