

Belgium Surprised at International Child Euthanasia Backlash

Belgian media expressed rank incomprehension over foreign criticism of the country's extension of **euthanasia** to children, portraying legislation as humane and dismissing any notion of sick children being pressed to their deaths.

Thursday's vote, the first to extend such provisions to children without any age limit, passed as easily as 2002 legislation allowing **euthanasia** for adults that had backing from 75 percent of Belgians. It created only minor ripples of dissent in the country, but a wave of interest and fury abroad.

"Belgium has allowed the killing on demand of terminally ill children and has headed for the ethical abyss. A state which allows something like this is a failing state," the conservative German daily Die Welt said in a column.

The law covering **euthanasia** of minors is different to the broader euthanasia law. Adults can opt for death by injection if they find their condition intolerable and pain too great. Cases have included deaf twin brothers about to go blind.

Children must also be shown to be terminally ill. The child makes the decision, with parental consent.

In allowing euthanasia for a child of any age, Belgium will move even beyond the neighboring Netherlands, known for its liberal attitude to a range of social issues, but where a minimum age of 12 is set.

"For the first time since 1830 we have evolved to being ethically progressive leaders. We can be quite proud of that,"

Belgian daily De Morgen said.

Some conservative U.S. commentators were particularly forthright in their criticism.

Christian televangelist and media mogul **Pat Robertson** saw the law as symptom of a broader brutality he said was evident in Belgium's colonial past in Africa.

"They tortured those natives, they cut off their hands if they didn't produce. They whipped them and branded them. It was just horrible," Robertson told U.S. Catholic Broadcast Network.

"So the Belgians are not necessarily known for their compassion."

U.S. publishing executive Steve Forbes wrote in an opinion piece last month: "We are on the malignantly slippery slope to becoming a society like that envisioned by Nazi Germany, one in which 'undesirables' are disposed of like used tissue."

Such foreign criticism, which featured prominently in Belgian media, met with bewilderment from local commentators who saw the law as a humane provision to be used only in extreme cases to end the suffering of children with no prospect of survival.

Bart Sturtewagen, chief editor of De Standaard, one of the country's largest daily newspapers, said that after 12 years of legal euthanasia in the country, Belgians had grown used to it as an option for the final stages of their lives.

"I'm annoyed at hearing 'you'll kill children' in the foreign media. We don't use that kind of language anymore. It's a very different debate on a different level," he said.

His newspaper's article on euthanasia on Friday headlined a quote from a well-known Belgian journalist.

"Not since Dutroux, have we seen such interest (in Belgium),"

it said, referring to serial child killer Marc Dutroux, whose crimes shocked the country in the 1990s.

The Catholic Church, at the forefront of opposition to the bill in Belgium, held **prayer** vigils and its leaders expressed their views.

Belgians are not shy of airing their views when they disagree with the decisions of their politicians, but the euthanasia question has not fired widespread debate.

More controversy has been stirred by the possible introduction of a per kilometer charge for car drivers. The mere suggestion has drawn over 165,000 signatories to an online petition to block the move.

“The highway charge affected everyone in the country with about two cars per Belgian family. The euthanasia debate is more abstract and everybody hopes never to be in the situation to have to take such a decision,” said Luc Rademakers, head of news at Belgian state broadcaster VRT.

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