

Back to the 80s? The Law of Unintended Consequences

My childhood in the eighties revolved around family, school, lessons at The Society of Christian Doctrine (MUSEUM), watching Kenshiro manga series and Lupin, swapping Panini football stickers, and football matches. I inevitably grew up within a social fabric which no longer exists, with idealistic galvanised values which have somewhat gone brittle along the way and a fierce appetite for social justice, which still persists. So much so, I co-founded a Youth Centre which is still running efficiently after 22 years. Why am I walking down the memory lane?

I cherish the gift of time, good health and people who are in good faith. I equally loathe suffering and honey & milk shortbread biscuits offered by people who are in bad faith. I empathise deeply with the vulnerable and sick especially those of a young age. Today I realise that sickness is essentially a roll of dice. Religion and faith have nothing to do with sickness [with some exceptions] but they may offer some degree of solace to many. Although I am a conservative person, I understand that society needs to progress to cater for different pockets of society which are facing inherent difficulties. However, I am equally aware of the slippery slopes, intentional or otherwise, which have sprouted and will inevitably continue to appear on our children's horizons because of socio-economic progress. Here, the Law of Unintended Consequences may apply.

I am in favour of IVF and will use it as an example. As of 2025, according to the UK fertility regulator (The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority) pre-implantation genetic testing (PGD) for monogenic disorders can be used to discard embryos affected by over 1,700 genetic conditions, including deafness. The UK also offers Pre-implantation Tissue-Typing or 'saviour siblings' technology. Parents can choose to have a child and use this technology to selectively chose embryos that are an exact tissue match to their older sibling who has a life-limiting blood disorder.

Of note is the fact that PGD was initially used in the UK in 1990 to prevent a handful of genetic conditions such as muscular dystrophy. The natural PGD evolution from around 5 to 1,700 genetic conditions (and counting) serves to illustrate that once a law is introduced with varying degrees of resistance, that law can be changed in due course with much less effort. In Malta to date PGD covers 9 monogenic disorders i.e. Finnish Nephrotic Syndrome, Gangliosidosis, Huntington's Disease, Joubert Syndrome, Maple Syrup Urine Syndrome, Nemaline Myopathy, Spinal Muscular Atrophy, Tay-Sachs Disease and Walker-Warburg Syndrome. In the forthcoming years, we will also see a similar expansion [albeit to a smaller degree] to this list.

Here I will not discuss abortion. I do not judge those who do it. But I oppose it. Please do not let us argue that we need to

widen PGT testing to avoid the introduction of abortion. The ceremonious introduction of abortion in Malta, sadly, forms part of the ineluctable tide of history.

At this stage, I will however touch briefly on the proposed introduction of euthanasia in Malta which, I envisage, will be included in the forthcoming electoral manifesto. I comprehend the logic behind it. My father had pancreatic adenocarcinoma. Period. Are all patients like my father? No. Do I agree with euthanasia? No. Again, do I judge those who want to use it? No.

Euthanasia constitutes a balancing act between moral and empiric imperatives. Can we discuss euthanasia when there is no community-based palliative care with 24/7 availability? Can we speak of euthanasia when on the one hand the state goes to great lengths to appear secular but on the other hand, depends on the church? The only hospice centre was made possible solely through the intervention of Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna. The Church handed Adelaide Cini Institute, valued at €8 million, to Hospice Malta for the establishment of St Michael Hospice. The government supported its refurbishment through a social grant. Here I salute Hospice Malta for their unwavering commitment to life.

As a parent, I worry about the ramified slippery slopes which my children will face if euthanasia is introduced. Currently, it is being proposed to apply for individuals ≥ 18 years with a terminal physical illness who have a 'calculated' life expectancy of 6 months.

Taking Canada as an example, euthanasia was introduced in 2016, initially for the terminally ill. This was amended in 2021 and extended to those experiencing 'unbearable suffering' from an irreversible illness or disability. Further extension to those who have a mental illness is being discussed. In keeping with this, Belgium and Netherlands also consider patients with unbearable suffering from mental illness as eligible for euthanasia. In specific countries, euthanasia has been extended to minors.

Malta did the Litmus test various times. Catholic Malta will arrive there sooner than you expect ... I'm afraid that there will be no Goldilocks principle ...

My advice to my children?

"Trust your gut feelings which have been moulded through osmosis by those principles which you see me practice ... beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice. Be a catalyst for change but never compromise your values. Respect life. Respect the patient."

Ian Ellul