

Case Study 5: Media article transcripts

Article one - The Age, 31 August 2006

Democrats MP details suicide tips

TIM DORNIN and STEVE LARKIN

Australian Democrats MP Sandra Kanck has detailed ways to commit suicide in a speech to South Australian parliament aimed at provoking a clash with the federal government. In an hour-long address, Ms Kanck, a supporter of voluntary euthanasia, used the protection of parliamentary privilege to catalogue ways in which people could take their own lives.

Ms Kanck, who earlier this year sparked controversy by telling parliament there was no evidence the drug ecstasy was dangerous, said she wanted her speech to highlight “odious” federal laws.

Under the commonwealth’s Suicide Material Related Offence Act, it is illegal to distribute information about suicide by electronic means, with a maximum penalty of \$110,000 for individuals and \$500,000 for organisations. Ms Kanck expected her speech to be recorded by Hansard and be posted on parliaments website.

She said today she wanted to provoke a “constitutional clash” between the commonwealth and SA parliaments that would result in the federal law being declared unconstitutional. “The law is truly an ass when information conveyed in an email is illegal whilst the same information written in a letter is not” she said.

Her actions were criticised by Prime Minister John Howard and South Australian Premier Mike Rann, who labelled it a publicity stunt.

Ms Kanck said the federal law undermined two fundamental human rights: the right to free speech and the right to die with dignity. “I cannot, in good conscience, allow the attack on human rights to go unchallenged”, she said. “The effect of this odious legislation will be to force desperate people to commit suicide by the most appalling of means. “As a consequence some won’t succeed and will be left in awful agony. “Others will die in grotesque ways that psychologically scar those who find the body”.

Euthanasia advocate Phillip Nitschke said the federal legislation made it impossible to properly inform people of their options at the end of life. “They want to know how to get the best drugs from doctors, they want to know what those drugs are”, Dr Nitschke said. “Now, we can’t answer those questions if we use the telephone, if we use the Internet, if we use the fax – we can only answer those questions face to face”. Mr Howard described Ms Kanck’s actions as reckless.

“I think that is irresponsible and I think it’s against the collective expression of public opinion on this issue”, Mr Howard said. “They are issues on which people will have different moral positions.



“I have a different perspective than her, I don’t think it’s responsible to encourage suicide, I never have and I never will”. Premier Rann said Ms Kanck’s speech was a publicity stunt. “We have seen some very silly things come out from the Democrats in recent times on drugs,” Mr Rann said. “I’m very, very concerned about these continuing stunts in the upper house which are about attracting publicity for a party that is going down the drain”. SA Mental Health Minister Gail Gago said Ms Kanck, who will retire after next year’s state election, should not have made her speech.

“Whatever your view of medically assisted euthanasia, there is no excuse for the behaviour that could see people vulnerable to suicide die”, Ms Gago said. SA’s Chief Adviser in Psychiatry, Dr John Brayley, appealed unsuccessfully to Ms Kanck not to make her speech, saying the ramifications could be devastating. Dr Brayley and suicide prevention expert Professor Robert Goldney both said publicising suicide methods could effect (sic) vulnerable people who may not otherwise have accessed the information. Those needed assistance can reach Suicide Helpline Victoria on 1300 651 251 or Lifeline on 131 114. AAP

Article two - The Age, 1 September 2006

MP’s block online how-to-die speech

South Australia’s Parliament has voted to block an Internet version of a speech by Australian Democrats MP Sandra Kanck, which detailed ways to commit suicide. The Government last night presented a motion to Parliament’s Upper House calling for Ms Kanck’s comments not to be displayed on Parliament’s website.

The motion was passed 10 votes to nine; with Liberal opposition voting against the proposal on the grounds it would set a dangerous precedent. The speech will be included in the Parliament’s Hansard but deleted from the Hansard version placed on the Internet. The vote followed a decision by state cabinet to prevent Ms Kanck’s controversial comments from becoming widely available.

On Wednesday, Ms Kanck used the protection of parliamentary privilege to detail how people could commit suicide, saying she wanted to challenge federal laws. Under commonwealth law, it is illegal to distribute information about suicide by electronic means – but such material can be given face to face, or provided in a letter. By giving her address in SA’s Legislative Council, Ms Kanck’s speech was required to be recorded in the Hansard and also on Parliament’s website – contravening the federal law.

Ms Kanck, a life member of SA’s Voluntary Euthanasia Society, said she wanted to provoke a “constitutional clash” between the federal and SA parliaments that would result in the federal law being declared unconstitutional.

But Premier Mike Rann described her action as shameful. “Even though the experts told her about the damage she might do she decided to go ahead with it anyway”, he said. “That demonstrates a shameful lack of responsibility because if just one person follows the methods she outlined in the Parliament, she will have a death on her conscience”. Ms Kanck remained defiant today and said the Government had shown it was out of touch with the community in its moves against her speech.

Article three - The Advertiser, 1 September 2006

DO NOT PREACH DEATH- Daughter who lost dad to suicide deplores Kanck's killer message

MICHAEL OWEN and LISA ALLISON

A young woman whose father committed suicide is questioning why Democrats state leader Sandra Kanck is telling people how to kill themselves.

Melanie Brook – who lost her father, Peter, two years ago when he was 48 – is urging Ms Kanck to “think before you speak”. “Those contemplating suicide now have a public “How to” guide, she said. “Yes we have a right to freedom of speech, however those in the public eye representing the people should realise they have a responsibility to the public”.

Her comments were among a chorus of condemnation for Ms Kanck, who during a Legislative Council speech in support of voluntary euthanasia on Wednesday used parliamentary privilege to explicitly describe suicide methods.

State Parliament voted last night to block Ms Kanck's speech from being published on the Internet as part of the record of debate.

Earlier, Premier Mike Rann labelled Ms Kanck's actions “beyond stupidity” saying it was the most shameful parliamentary performance he had seen in his political career of almost 30 years. “I have never seen anything more shameless or shameful. This is basically a roadmap to suicide”, Mr Rann said.

But a defiant and angry Ms Kanck yesterday accused the Government of being “out of touch”. “I made a speech the heart of which was about freedom of speech and now the Rann Government has responded by making a move to take even more of our freedoms away”, Ms Kanck said. She accused Mr Rann of being “very proud of himself” by following Prime Minister John Howard and “curtailing freedom of speech”.

She denied she had damaged the cause of voluntary euthanasia and accused MP's of having been “very, very timid, if not cowardly, on this issue”.

Ms Brook, 22, whose father hanged himself in February 2004, after a six-year battle with depression, said there was a high risk Ms Kanck's actions would lead to depressed young people taking their lives. “There are better ways for Sandra Kanck to make her point” she said. “If anyone is contemplating suicide, I urge them to talk to someone rather than doing it, because, unfortunately, it really hurts all the people around you”.

Ms Brook registered on the Adelaide Now website her opposition to Ms Kanck's actions. Her grandfather is a long-term smoker and quite ill. He is not necessarily opposed to voluntary euthanasia. “I would hate or him (grandfather) to have to suffer or have a long slow and painful death but, at the same time, I don't think a public figure proclaiming how to kill yourself is the best way”, she said.



Article four - The Advertiser, 1 September 2006

“Real risk” of rise in suicide attempts

GREG KELTON, LOUISE TRECCASI and MICHAEL OWEN

Health bosses fear a “suicide guide” made public by Democrats leader Sandra Kanck poses a “real and significant” risk that will result in more impulsive suicide attempts.

It emerged yesterday that the state’s most senior psychiatrist, Mental Health director Dr John Brayley, spent nearly 20 minutes on the telephone with Ms Kanck pleading with her not to outline suicide methods in her speech to Parliament on Wednesday. He said he had advised against referring to explicit details. “I made the point the suicide prevention message is one of telling your family, seeking help, getting counselling”, he said. “One of the means of preventing suicide is by removing lethal means – by giving out this information it can make the means more available”. He said he could see no benefit in such details being disseminated.

Asked if Ms Kanck’s comments could put lives in danger, Dr Brayley said that was a “real and significant risk”. “I advised her of that risk” he said, “The evidence is the reporting of suicide particularly when explicit details are provided, does see an increase in suicide rates”.

Australian Medical Association state president Dr Chris Cain said using parliamentary privilege to tell people how to commit suicide was “totally irresponsible” “She has effectively issued a suicide guide for anybody considering moving down that path,” Dr Cain said. “My plea to anyone considering ending their own life is that they can be helped. I urge people to speak to family members and their doctors”.

SA General Division of General Practice chief executive Dr Tori Wade, who is on the board of the National Advisory Council for Suicide Prevention, was concerned more people will be “tipped over the edge”. “Suicide is something that people think of doing suddenly if a crisis arises or they get one more rejection”, she said.

Ambulance Employees Association of SA general secretary Phil Palmer said, “Clearly our members wouldn’t support giving advice on how to commit suicide”. He added that the union supported voluntary euthanasia when death was inevitable.

Article five - ABC Online, 1 September 2006

Kanck's speech to appear on Nitschke's website

Euthanasia campaigner Phillip Nitschke plans to circumvent a vote taken in the South Australian Parliament yesterday, and will publish an MP's speech about suicide on his own website. Parliament moved yesterday to prevent the speech by Democrat Sandra Kanck about suicide methods from being included in Hansard on the parliamentary website.

Ms Kanck's speech on Wednesday was designed to draw attention to federal laws that ban all electronic publication of suicide methods.

She says about 120 people have asked for the speech and she says she has no concerns about any of them wanting to commit suicide. "I don't think anyone's at risk of committing suicide, they're saying the same things that I say, which is 'If I get to that point in my life I want to be able to end my life peacefully and humanely, particularly if we don't have the voluntary euthanasia legislation to allow it'", she said.

Dr Nitschke says he will make sure the speech is still accessible on the Internet. "I talked to Sandra last night, we're getting a copy of her speech now and we'll be putting it on our website, which is a New Zealand hosted site", he said. "The reason it's a New Zealand hosted site is, of course, because of the Australian Suicide Related Materials Act, a federal Act that came through this year. "So we'll be putting that up on our website today as soon as we can get a copy of it".

Article six - The Advertiser, 6 September 2006

Kanck's mail order suicide

MICHAEL OWEN

Doctors, lifeline, Australian and the State Government are pleading with Democrats state leader Sandra Kanck to rethink plans to post out, to anyone who asks, a copy of a parliamentary speech which instructs people how to commit suicide.

As of last night, almost 300 people had placed an order with Ms Kanck's officer for a Hansard copy of the speech she made a week ago today.

Ms Kanck controversially used parliamentary privilege to explicitly outline suicide methods in a speech to the Legislative Council. Amid widespread and heated community debate, State Parliament voted last Thursday night to block Ms Kanck's speech from being published on the internet as part of the record of debate.

In response, an angry Ms Kanck, prohibited by federal laws from publishing her speech on her website because it is illegal to distribute information about suicide by electronic means, vowed to post out printed copies of her speech to anyone who contacted her office and requested one.



A spokesman for Ms Knack yesterday said it was hoped the hundreds of copies requested would be sent out later this week. He confirmed there were no checks being made as to who were requesting copies of their reasons for doing so. “We haven’t asked people what they do or anything, we’ve just merely taken their order and promised to send one out when Hansard is completed,” the spokesman said.

Mental Health Minister Gail Gago yesterday appealed to Ms Kanck “not to continue to take this rash and irresponsible action”. “I again implore Sandra to stop making copies available to the public because expert advice says the ramifications of her actions could be devastating” Ms Gago said.