

Germany: The campaign for euthanasia

Dietmar Henning
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At the end of June, former Hamburg justice senator Roger Kusch assisted in the suicide of 79-year-old pensioner Bettina S., who lived in the city of Würzburg.

Kusch administered Bettina S. a deadly dose of chemicals consisting of anti-malaria serum and psychopharmacologic drugs. In order to avoid prosecution under Germany's current law, he left her apartment just prior to her death. He did, however, install a video camera that recorded her last moments. Following her death Kusch returned to the apartment and took away the camera.

He then informed the press and showed video clips of the woman prior to her death in which she is seen smoking and breathing heavily, but who in all other respects made a healthy and alert impression.

Kusch declared that the reason given by the woman for her planned suicide two months before her 80 birthday was her fear of being admitted to a nursing home. She was neither poor nor seriously ill. Nevertheless, as Kusch explained in an interview to German radio on July 3: "The notion that her life would now be determined by strangers, that she lies in a strange bed, and a sister with a faint smile on her lips asks her in the morning how she is—this notion was dreadful for her ... she wanted to be the one to decide on her life and decide who entered her room."

When asked why he had not offered to help Bettina S. and advise her against suicide, Kusch answered, "That went far too over my head" and that it would not have been possible to dissuade the woman from her planned course of action. He felt it would be "contemptible and disrespectful" to persuade the woman not to kill herself. He stressed that the individual's right to self-determination should apply "up to the last breath."

Kusch's provocative stance immediately unleashed a wave of indignation. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with whom Kusch has been affiliated for 34 years, described his behaviour as "deeply inhuman." CDU executive member and chair of the National Union of Seniors, Otto Wulff, spoke of a "scandal" and demanded

"the social isolation" of Kusch. His aid in this case of suicide was "an offence against the fifth commandment" laid down by God. The Social Democratic Party also criticised Kusch's behaviour.

Such howls of moral indignation do little, however, to explain why a man like Kusch, who headed the Justice Department in the city of Hamburg for five years (2001-2005), has now sought to make a name for himself with his nasty and bizarre campaign on behalf of the right of euthanasia. His provocative public appearances cannot simply be dismissed as the crazed ideas of a right-wing crank or explained away on the basis of his "vanity," as the conservative newspaper the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has sought to do.

Kusch is a lawyer who attained his doctorate on the subject of "intoxication." He has also written several articles on the topic of euthanasia for technical periodicals. In the Hamburg state election campaign last February, Kusch stood as a candidate for his recently founded "Homeland Hamburg" party. The central plank of the party's agitation was the legalization of assisted suicide.

In the course of the election campaign and in a blaze of publicity he presented a "self-made suicide machine" to the residents and staff of a nursing home. The machine enables those wishing to end their lives to do so with a deadly injection administered by the push of a button.

After his party received just 0.5 percent of the vote, Kusch dissolved his party and created the association "Dr. Roger Kusch—Assisted Suicide" in order to resume his campaign for the legalization of his brand of euthanasia.

His latest highly public and deadly stunt in Würzburg was evidently aimed at provoking legal proceedings. According to his version of events, he was aided in the assisted suicide by two doctors whose names he did not want to reveal for fear of legal repercussions. In the meantime, the local public prosecutor's office has dropped all charges against Kusch. Following an autopsy of the deceased it issued a statement declaring her death to be "a normal suicide with no legal implications for a

third party.”

What is behind Kusch’s grotesque campaign, which he likes to present as the struggle for the “right to self-determination up to the last breath”?

Undoubtedly one must respect the right of a person suffering extreme pain and disability to be able to decide to end his or her life, free from any influence by the state.

It is, however, by no means easy to determine to what extent a third party can or should assist in such a suicide. At the same time, the urge to make money and profit out of the misery of others opens the gates to all manner of abuse. Kusch has pointed out that he did not accept money from Bettina S., but was quite prepared to do so in similar cases in the future.

There are other important questions involved. At what age can one speak of a self-determined suicide? The suicides of young people who perform badly in school or lack any perspective obviously do not fall into this category. Such deaths are profoundly tragic and an indictment of society that offers no help or way forward for such youth.

Equally, how is one to judge the case of elderly citizens who seek their own deaths because they are confronted with intolerable conditions in their nursing homes, or because they are subjected to a continuous campaign arguing they are a burden to society? For many months there has been an ongoing and very public campaign in Germany deriding senior citizens who are allegedly “living it up at the expense of the younger generation.”

Such problems cannot be solved in a society that accepts the principle of profit-making as its highest good. A system that subjects its elderly and sick citizens to economic hardship, neglect and social isolation only serves to undermine their will to live. In such cases it is nonsense to speak of any sort of self-determination.

In recent year there has been one series of cuts after another in a large range of social and medical fields. Instead of being the well-earned reward for a life of work accompanied with the necessary medical and psychosocial support, confinement in a nursing home for many seniors is often a period of undignified suffering. The principle of custody, rather than care and support, applies to many senior citizen and nursing homes. Those employed in such institutions are also the victims of constant cost-cutting and the greed for profit on the part of many of the nursing home managers often become callous and inured to the suffering of residents. At the same time there is a clear lack of well-run and funded institutions and homes to deal with those suffering from

incurable diseases or subject to constant pain.

The treatment of senior citizens is a task for society as a whole, and it is only on this basis upon which the issue of “self-determination” can be decided.

Kusch has absolutely no interest in such problems. He belongs to a growing category of politicians who vehemently reject any social solution to the escalating problems confronting senior citizens. Such politicians react to the growing social crisis by granting absolute priority to the individual and his “rights,” which they then counterpose to democratic and social rights.

Against a background of mounting social polarisation they unconditionally defend the “right” of the individual to amass enormous sums of wealth. They respond to the consequences of social decline by demanding draconian forms of punishment for the treatment of delinquent youth and children. Their answer to the growth in the number of immigrants and refugees who wish to enter the country is a policy of reinforcing the borders ... And their response to the growing problems of poverty and isolation in old age is the “right to suicide.”

The former British prime minister and so-called “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher once declared: “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first.” In other words, there are only individuals and the state. The social consequences of this philosophy can be witnessed today in Britain, where social decay has assumed alarming forms.

In this sense, Kusch’s bizarre activities are in line with a specific social trend—suicide as the last demonstration of an individual’s freedom and “self-determination” in the midst of social decay. There could be no more telling indictment of a sick society.



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