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VAD tipping towards a 'yes'

But supporters fear the Bill could be diverted in Upper House



NICK BUTTERLY

There was a quickening of pulses among those State MPs campaigning for assisted dying this week as former Federal Labor member for the seat of Perth Tim Hammond surfaced as part of online video arguing passionately against the laws. Curiouser still, it was noted the WA branch of the Australian Medical Association — one of the main groups in opposition to the laws — had signed up former State Labor treasurer Eric Ripper's GRA Partners to do its logrolling. The lobby group — often touted as the most powerful in the land — had employed a lobbyist.

To those MPs fighting for the laws, it seemed as if the campaign against any change was finally finding some momentum just as the issue was entering its most crucial stage.

Debate on assisted dying laws got under way in the Upper House on Tuesday, with MPs set to argue their case for and against for the next two or three weeks.

While the laws were always a lock to get through the Lower House, the Legislative Council was more difficult to gauge.

It's become a cliché to compare the Upper House in Canberra or the States to the bar scene in Star Wars, but WA's Upper House is more akin to The Land that Time Forgot (an addendum to last week's column on dated parliamentary procedures — the Legislative Council gets an hour-and-a-half dinner break, while the Legislative Assembly gets only an hour — go figure).

Numbers were much tighter in the Upper House. Leaders of the Yes camp gave themselves about 19 or 20 votes in the Legislative Council. One more or two more than needed to squeeze the Bill over the line.

Tjorn Sibma's declaration in

Tuesday's The West Australian he would side with the Yes camp was something of a dial-shifter. Sibma is widely seen as one of the great future talents in the WA Liberals, in a party desperately crying out for new blood.

The surprise announcement yesterday that Liberal MLC Jim Chown would back the Bill — though only with amendments — had advocates for the laws daring to hope their work was done.

There had been claims conservative figures were threatening Liberals against voting yes. But Sibma was firm that the decision was his alone, and he came under no internal pressure.

Outlining his reasoning against the Bill on Tuesday, WA Liberal powerbroker Peter Collier began his contribution with a promise he had not lobbied anyone in his party over the Bill. He said he had not

even spoken to anyone on his side about the laws.

Debate is increasingly focused on two proposed amendments — the demand put forward by Labor MP Tony Buti that doctors be banned from raising assisted dying with patients and a growing push for a specialist doctor to be involved in the final sign off to allow a person to take their life.

The Buti amendment looks likely to get the tick. Health Minister Roger Cook has left the door open to the change and as some MPs advocating for the laws have noted, most people considering euthanasia as an option will know about it anyway when the time comes and won't need prompting from their doctor.

The specialist issue is fraught. The idea divides country members who raise concerns about access to specialists in the regions, while others warn inserting a specialist

into the process would make the whole thing so difficult as to make it inaccessible for most.

Thanks to Sibma and now Chown, the Bill should sail through a vote on the so-called second reading, but it still runs a real risk of getting bogged down in the committee phase.

Further delays would drag the Bill into Christmas or the New Year and could test the Government's resolve to bat on.

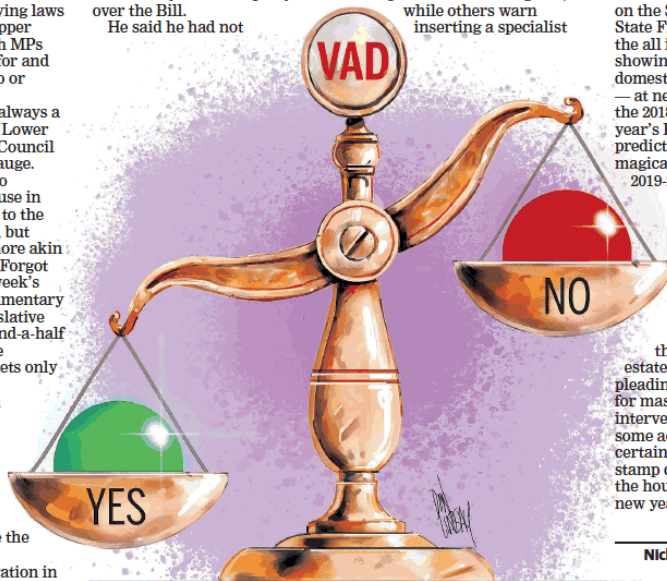
A good number of Labor MPs are open in their irritation at the time and political capital being poured into the debate, pointing to the growing pile of legislation and election promises that cannot be dealt with until assisted dying is clear of the Legislative Council.

And there are increasing nerves the local economy shows no believable sign of correcting leading into the March 2021 election.

Last month's annual report on the State's finances said State Final Demand — that's the all important figure showing the health of the domestic side of the economy — at negative 1.1 per cent for the 2018-19 financial year. Last year's Budget made the heroic prediction that figure would magically jump to 3 per cent in 2019-20.

The crook state of the housing market remains a particularly sensitive issue.

Labor strategists struggled to suppress their mirth last week as those normally muscular captains of the free market — real estate agents — issued a pleading list of demands calling for massive Government intervention in the sector, but some action in this area is certain. Look for some relief on stamp duty at the lower end of the housing market in the new year.



Nick Butterly is State Political Editor

It still runs the real risk of getting hopelessly bogged down in the committee phase or of being referred off to another Upper House inquiry.

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Bosses send smoko signals about smoker-free workplaces

They will assemble unceremoniously on the pavement outside offices, three metres to the left of the entrance, or to the right or in a nearby alleyway.

They are a dying breed, the last remaining smokers, who take time out of each working day to satisfy their number one urge: a quick nicotine fix. Drag your mind back to the time when workers could smoke at their desks. As offices filled with fumes, the anti-smoking siren wailed and smokers were banished to designated areas within buildings before being shunted outdoors. Now a survey by international

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advisory firm Willis Towers Watson has found that half the workers surveyed believe smoking breaks cause resentment among non-smoking colleagues. It appears to stem from the fact smokers are often automatically excused while others feel they need to justify taking regular breaks. Some bosses have made it a rule of thumb not to hire those of the puffing persuasion and there is

growing anecdotal evidence unemployed smokers take longer to gain employment than non-smoking counterparts.

At the top of their list is a perception that regular ciggie breaks result in a reduced amount of time seated at their desk — limiting smokers' productivity. On some bosses' estimates, a worker's smokos across one year alone add up to the equivalent of up to five working days. Bosses are concerned non-puffing staff could demand equity and extra annual leave to reward them for not smoking. However, some non-smoking workers have

leapt to their puffing colleagues' defence suggesting non-smokers take breaks in other ways — to check their social media feed, to stretch their legs or to step away to make a private call. They say things balance out.

But bosses leading the charge to smoker-free workplaces also claim smokers are generally more unhealthy and take more sick days, frustrate non-smoking colleagues by regularly being away from their workstations, drag fumes back into the office, and create an image of ill-health — particularly when the smoking areas are near the main

entrance. This type of discrimination is not unlawful because — unsurprisingly — smokers do not fall into a protected class. But is it really fair to ban smokers from the workplace? Probably not, particularly if the smoking takes place in a discreet nook beyond the office building.

But as many workplaces shift from smoking bans to smoker bans, the risk of a drained bank account through to having limiting job prospects might convince them to quit for good.

Professor Gary Martin is chief executive, Australian Institute of Management WA