ANDREW MARR:

Every fortnight, on average, one Briton goes abroad for an assisted suicide. After an all day long debate in the House of Lords on Friday, a bill to legalise assisted dying within the UK has cleared its first parliamentary hurdle. The proposed legislation would give doctors the right to provide the lethal dose to patients judged to have less than six months to live. The man behind the bill is the former Lord Chancellor, Charles Falconer, and he joins me now. Good morning, Lord Falconer.

LORD FALCONER:

Hello.

ANDREW MARR:

It’s slightly difficult for people to understand because there was no vote in the House of Lords. How important is this in terms of the bill’s progress?

LORD FALCONER:

Very important. This is the first time in eighty years that a bill like this has got through a second reading in the House of Lords. That means the bill now goes to what’s called the committee stage in the House of Lords and it’s looked at line by line...
ANDREW MARR:
So it’s a live, ticking thing that can complete its progress?

LORD FALCONER:
Precisely. And there’s an opportunity now for Parliament, if they choose to, to change the law. But that will only happen if the bill completes its Lord stages, then goes to the Commons and they decide to approve it.

ANDREW MARR:
Now it’s been very dramatic, great emotion on both sides, people changing their mind and so on. It seems to me that the biggest argument made by people against you, as it were, is the fear that there will be pressure, moral pressure on individuals who are ill and dying – perhaps from members of their family or charities they left money to or whatever – to kill themselves, to get themselves out of the way. And the problem is that we will never actually know whether people have been suffering that kind of thing. It’s so internalised - maybe I should do this for other people. We will never know if that kind of pressure is being put on people right at the end of their lives or not. Are there any safeguards or is there anything you can offer people like Lord Tebbit who’ve made that point?

LORD FALCONER:
Yeah and the safeguards are incredibly important. In my bill nobody is entitled to a prescription which they can take to end their own life in the context of a terminal illness unless two doctors independently have spoken to them and are completely satisfied that the decision that they’re making is their own decision, not one that is the product of pressure or duress. The safeguards are really important and that is what I believe the Lords will be focusing on when it goes through its line by line consideration. But at the heart of the bill is the view that people in their last illness should have a choice about whether or not they fight for those last few days, those last few weeks, or whether they want to choose to end their life at a moment of their own choosing when they’re dying.

ANDREW MARR:
Isn’t this a gate to much more widely accepted euthanasia, the beginning of a slippery slope? People like the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Tebbit described this as “opening the gates to hell”. That you start going down this for the best possible motives and society slowly slithers down towards a world in which older people are encouraged to kill themselves.

**LORD FALCONER:**
Absolutely not, and my view is this bill and no further. There are other countries like Belgium and the Netherlands that have euthanasia laws where people who aren’t dying but are unbearably suffering can in effect be killed by doctors. I am completely against that. Our model is the state of Oregon where this option is only available to people in their last few weeks or months or days, and that law’s been there for seventeen years and there’s been no slippery slope.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And what would actually happen in this country? If I was in that kind of state and your bill had passed, would I have the ri… Would I die at home? Would I die in a particular hospice? Would there be somewhere like Dignitas where people go specifically for this purpose? How would it actually happen?

**LORD FALCONER:**
You could die anywhere, but what would happen is if the two doctors thought that you were somebody who really had a clear and settled view that that’s what you wanted to do then a prescription would be written for you wherever you were – at home, in hospice or a hospital. A health professional would be there to make sure that either you took it safely; or, if you didn’t want to take it, the prescription was taken away. But it would allow people – as most people do – for example to die in their own homes rather than going to Zurich and dying a cold, lonely death.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So there would have to be a doctor there?

**LORD FALCONER:**
Or a nurse. A health professional.
ANDREW MARR:
Or a nurse who was prepared to be part of that process?

LORD FALCONER:
Yes.

ANDREW MARR:
Do you think this bill will get to the Commons and do you think it will become law?

LORD FALCONER:
I don’t know. I really, really hope it does. The courts are saying Parliament’s got to craft a new bill. This is the opportunity. It was a very impressive debate last Friday, but we’ve got to build on that in Parliament and produce a law that is giving people this option but is properly safeguarded.

ANDREW MARR:
For it to get to the Commons and progress in the Commons, it needs some MPs to sponsor it there. Do you have people who are prepared to do that?

LORD FALCONER:
Yes I do. And I also think …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Who are they? Sorry …

LORD FALCONER:
Well Richard Ottaway is a person who’s been very much in the lead in relation to this, but he is one of many. Heidi Alexander is another. And they’ve been very much supportive of what’s happening. But it’s for the business managers, which means the government whips in practice, to determine that it should have time.

ANDREW MARR:
Now obviously this is a matter for individual conscience. Do you think that any of the political parties as such will pick it up?

**LORD FALCONER:**
I don’t think that any political party will say “I support this”, but I think political parties should be saying Parliament should have time to resolve this. It shouldn’t be something that is just not dealt with by Parliament. And that was what was so important about Friday. It’s now got a trajectory that will lead at least to a decision being made.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So it’s a big moment really, isn’t it?

**LORD FALCONER:**
A very big moment on Friday, yeah.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Lord Falconer, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning. Thank you.

**LORD FALCONER:**
Thank you.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**