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COLUMNIST OF THE YEAR

Give us a plebiscite on any new assisted dying laws

I ADMIRE Gino Kenny for championing the new law on assisted dying. He is a compassionate person who has never wavered in the fight for what he sees as a human right. Until a few months ago, I agreed with him. I thought it inhumane to force a person to live through every last minute of agonising pain, knowing that they were going to die anyway.

But I've changed my mind. Now I think assisted dying might unleash something insidious in society, and I'm old enough to know that like the safeguards restricting divorce or the right to choose, the strict rules will be relaxed over time.

That's not to say that we will necessarily join Canada on the slippery slope where assisted dying is so much part of the fabric of everyday life that the homeless request it to escape the poverty trap. Or that we mimic the Netherlands which has broadened the rules to include infants who suffer unbearably. It's just that the rules will inevitably loosen.

Either way, it will have a profound effect on how we view life, ethically and politically. Even in our post-Catholic secular country, we regard life as sacred insofar as it's something we prefer to let run its natural course.

The dedication of doctors, nurses and carers to helping the very fragile and elderly survive for another month or even week of life is one of the jewels of our civilisation although admittedly it can be a double-edged sword if the patient is suffering unspeakably with zero quality of life. And there's the rub.

ASSISTED dying will ask doctors to play God, to predict how long terminally ill patients will live; an inexact science. Their deliberations will concern the vulnerable and, in time, possibly the old and the disabled. The healthy have nothing to fear.

We are told that safeguards are needed so that vulnerable patients cannot be coerced by mercenary relatives eager to get their mitts on the family farm.

Well, they do make a nice couple...

THE love lives of most septuagenarians don't invite gossip, but Meryl Streep is an exception with the frenzy of speculation about her romance with co-star Martin Short.

The couple, who are quite lovey-dovey on the red carpet, deny the rumours – while colleagues appear to confirm they are more than good friends.

Famously reticent about her private life, Streep was separated for six years from her husband Don Gummer before she told the world they had parted ways.

Call me a cynic, but was that seemingly out-of-the-blue announcement deliberately timed to clear the path for a new suitor?

▶▶ ONE day he was teasing us about running for the Dáil in Dublin Central, the next the Monk was arrested in Lanzarote and his family home searched as part of a money-laundering investigation. Never was the old adage about a week being a long time in politics so apt.

Surely a greater fear is that once assisted dying enters the culture, patients might feel guilty for not choosing it and for continuing to be a burden on their families and the health service.

Yet for all my reservations, I am not a hard 'no', and I suspect that Dáil members who voted by a 23 majority in favour of the assisted dying report – the bed-

rock of any new legislation – notwithstanding ideological diehards, also vacillate.

Yet the public's backing of the new law is practically an article of faith, as borne out by opinion polls.

But those polls are unreliable and as the referendums on women in the home and on care showed, cross-party support is no litmus test of public opinion.

Constitutional experts say that a referendum isn't required for assisted dying – and while that may be a relief in one sense it also robs the cause, should it win,

ON THE QUIET: Meryl and Martin – a hot item?

of undisputed legitimacy. But a plebiscite asking if we want the Dáil to change the law could be held to approve them taking such a serious legislative step.

No-one wants another round of culture wars, of polarised debates and ideological and religious point scoring.

But a respectful public discussion with compassion at its start and end should not be beyond a country that – after a generation of bitter controversy, often hide-bound by Catholic dogma – finally resolved a series of tricky moral quandaries with maturity.

Is a spike in shoplifting due to a lack of service?

WITH shoplifting at record levels, retailers are demanding action on several fronts, from night courts to deal with culprits to a change in the defamation law to allow retailers accuse someone of shoplifting in good faith, without risking an expensive lawsuit.

But aren't there things retailers could do to help themselves while waiting for the State?

Shoplifting is as old as prostitution and as complex. Culprits range from gangs of feral youth brandishing syringes to non-threatening and depressed people making a cry for help.

According to one of the checkout girls in my local supermarket, well-heeled mums squirrelling away packets of Pampers and other booty in their children's buggies is an everyday event. The price of nappies is a bugbear for many parents, so righting the wrong of perceived overpricing may be an element.

As indeed could righting the wrong of modern service standards that load more work onto the consumer and cause resentment. Supermarkets which once had checkout staff and bag packers at every till are often so short-staffed, customers can spend 15 minutes seeking someone who knows where the mayonnaise is hidden.

If there is a hiccup at the self-service scanners, they must wait for an assistant to sort it.

It's a far cry from the days of the late Feargal Quinn who gave roses to Superquinn customers on St Valentine's Day and bent over backwards to please.

I doubt any customer of his who snuck a box of Persil into their bags did so as payback for a long queue or impersonal service.

With the proprietor beaming at the shop door and his army of trolley boys circling the car park, helping load shoppers' bags into their boot – those were the days – they'd have been fools to try it.



▶▶ THE daughters of What Not to Wear duo Trinny and Susannah say their mothers would be cancelled today for body shaming women and holding them up to a restrictive beauty ideal. Too right. Who needs two overconfident women lording it over the little people, handing out subjective style advice? Certainly not Trinny and Susannah's twentysomething daughters who in an even more damning indictment of their mothers' careers, admit to never even having watched their ridiculous shows.