

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Poll had ?sanitized? question

One of the simplest tricks in making sure you get the answer you want to get with sponsored public opinion polls is simply to skew the question in your favour and rely on the fact that most people being asked are not terribly familiar with the details.

We're constantly polling people for their voter preferences, for example, and the answers are treated with an undeserved respect by the media ? despite a host of recent electoral duds by pollsters across the country ? yet we often don't even know a)-how many of the respondents even know who is running for what; b)- what their positions are on the various issues; and c)- whether the respondents are even going to vote or not.

Many years ago, right after newly elected premier Mike Harris brought in his first austerity budget ? sending the collective left into fits of madness which still exist to this day ? your correspondent was called at home (being one of the shrinking number of people who actually still have land lines, which further skews poll results) and asked if a)- the Harris spending cuts went too far or b)- were just about right.

When I replied in all seriousness that actually, I didn't think the cuts went far enough, the pollster said she'd put me down to the ?just about right? category.

Ah no, I protested, repeating that I think they didn't go far enough and she again muttered that they didn't have a category for that. And so it went. Given that Harris had just won a healthy majority on the strength of his pledge to cut government spending, it's doubtful I was the only one who felt that way. Yet the pollsters, as they always do, had decided on the questions to ask (they often provide a list, for example, when polling people on the issues that concern them most, whether or not they really are concerned about those particular issues.) That's how they work, which is why, as time goes on, fewer and fewer people ? except for the mainstream media ? pay a lot of attention to these polls.

All of which brings me to a well-publicized Ipsos Reid survey of 2,515 Canadians released last week ? heralded as the largest survey of its kind in the country, as if size alone overcomes the innate problems with polling ? sponsored by Dying with Dignity Canada, a group which seems to believe that the natural act of death is incredibly undignified and should be sped along ? with help from a doctor ? when the process becomes inconvenient.

According to the poll, it shows that an astounding 84 percent of Canadians supported assisted suicide ?IF? the patient is ?competent and suffering? and repeatedly asks for assistance to die.

And there, dear hearts, is the rub.

Advocates of doctor-induced deaths continue to write that the system is already in existence in other parts of the world and works well.

What they rarely tell you is that despite the stated rules about informed consent, etc., studies have found in places such as Belgium ? often heralded as the poster child for doctor-assisted killing ? hundreds of people have been euthanized without asking for it, and the state has approved such killing for things such as depression in otherwise perfectly healthy people.

This is the reality of any bureaucratic system. You can set up all the rules you want but the thing becomes routine and it isn't long before those rules are casually bypassed in the interest of convenience.

But it's such an emotional, gut-wrenching thing, and many Canadians have watched a loved one die in a less-than-ideal situation, that you have to know many are responding to the pollster based strictly on their bad experiences rather than the ugly reality of state-sanctioned deaths.

I don't believe that 84 percent of Canadians would say ?count me in? if, instead of being asked a sanitized question, they were told in a preamble about a recent study in one part of Belgium showing that up to one-third of the patients hadn't asked for the needle but were put to death anyway.

It's one thing to respond to a disembodied voice over the phone, quite another thing to actually put your arm out for the needle with the doctor standing there ready to jab it.

As you may know, the Supreme Court is taking another look at the question and, given their political makeup, alas, likely will reverse an earlier Supreme decision and allow it.

Yes, there is often suffering in death, and there is in birth too. And despite great strides in palliative care we could, and should, do more.

If you really want to die, you can right now. You can legally refuse treatment.

But that's up to you. It's not up to society and the medical profession to absolve you of your choice and actually be complicit in your death.

