

Tony Abbott commits to free vote on euthanasia

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott has promised a dying man that he will allow Liberal Party members to vote with their conscience on a euthanasia bill being developed by a Greens senator.

Peter Short, 57, said receiving the commitment during a half-hour phone conversation with the Prime Minister on Friday was like reaching "the top of a mountain".

Mr Short is preparing to spend his final Christmas with his family after being told in January that his oesophageal cancer – first diagnosed five years earlier – had returned and was terminal.

He has devoted the final stage of his life to campaigning for legislation that would enable terminally ill people to choose when and how they die. Mr Short said Mr Abbott had shown genuine interest in discussing some of the issues around voluntary euthanasia and listened carefully to his responses.

While Mr Abbott indicated that he was unlikely to personally support voluntary euthanasia legislation, he told Mr Short that he would not "whip" his members into taking a party line on the issue.

Mr Short said the commitment was vital for a bill being developed by

Greens senator Richard Di Natale to have a chance of passing the Senate. Dr Di Natale's draft bill would make it legal for medical practitioners to help a terminally ill, mentally competent adult to end their life.

A multi-party Senate committee recommended last month that party leaders allow MPs a free vote on the issue of euthanasia. Labor MPs automatically have a conscience vote on the issue, however the Liberal Party's position has previously been unclear.

Mr Short, who has just months to live, said he had not yet sourced a drug that would enable him to take his own life but knew he could do so if he chose.

He said he explained to Mr Abbott that without this option he would be given medication to alleviate suffocation at the end of his life, and "over a week or so I will zone in and out and eventually die.

"I could go that route or at a point in time I can say, 'No, I will go peacefully with my family and my dogs [by my side]'."

Mr Short said he believed he had helped to deepen Mr Abbott's understanding of the issue.

"I think he rang me because he truly wanted to hear what I have to say and I think he enjoyed the conversation as much as I did," Mr Short said. "If I can have a considered, informed conversation with the Prime Minister in what has to have been one of his more difficult weeks, I can't believe the rest of the country can't help ... in pushing this boat as we get it out from the dock."

A spokesman for Mr Abbott said he had "a warm and lengthy conversation with Mr Short" on Friday afternoon. "The PM has a standard policy of not talking about the content of private conversations," he said.