

Sir Nicholas Wall- June 2017

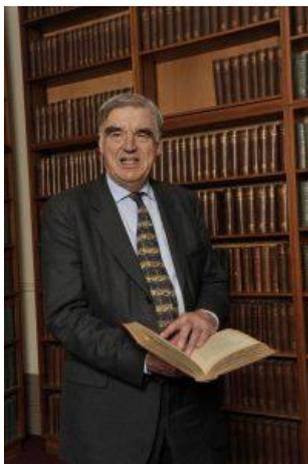
A FORMER leading family judge has committed suicide after being diagnosed with dementia, his family announced yesterday. Sir Nicholas Wall, who retired on health grounds in 2012, had endured 'years of suffering'. He ended his life at the age of 71 at a care home in Sevenoaks, Kent. Police were informed and an inquest was held. His family placed a notice in The Times announcing that Sir Nicholas had 'died by his own hand'. It was accompanied by a moving verse from Tennyson's poem Tithonus.

HIS POETIC EPITAPH

**The woods decay, the woods decay and fall
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath
And after many a summer dies the swan.**

From Tithonus by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Sir Nicholas had been Britain's most senior family judge, appointed President of the Family Division of the High Court in 2010, and was a champion of open justice and a forthright critic of shoddy practices by social workers, councils and politicians. He was instrumental in opening up to public scrutiny the notoriously secretive Court of Protection, which rules on issues concerning the care of those suffering mental illness. It had operated behind closed doors until he started the process of reform, saying: 'We don't want people quietly locked up in private.' But Sir Nicholas' poor health robbed him of the chance to finish his work, and he retired five years ago. His rare brain condition - fronto-temporal lobe dementia - was only diagnosed recently. The cruel and debilitating condition, also known as Pick's disease, affects parts of the brain that control behaviour, emotions and language. Sufferers usually have language or behavioural problems include impulsivity, loss of inhibitions and irrationality which become gradually more severe over time.



A source close to the family said the death was not connected to Dignitas or any other centre for assisted dying. Sir Nicholas died at Emily Jackson House, a care home for the elderly specialising in dementia. It is unknown whether anyone was with him when he died. A spokesman for Kent Police last night confirmed there were no suspicious circumstances. Sir Nicholas Wall said he had no hope for the future and believed his illness would mean he would lose his memory and have to remain in a care home. He retired due to health problems in 2012 and had suffered for years from the effects of his rare form of dementia, although it was only diagnosed shortly before his death in aged 71. Sir Nicholas was found hanged in his room at the Emily Jackson House care home

in Sevenoaks, Kent. The inquest heard that he had lost hope of ever getting better and had pushed his loved ones away in the belief his death was imminent. He left a letter for his wife of 40 years, Margaret, in which he said he believed he would never be able to return to live

at home. It said he had lost the will to live and he will not get better and that Lady Wall had a life to live. 'He said his time is over, it's nobody's fault and he respects what she has done for him.' In another letter, written before his condition was diagnosed, Sir Nicholas said he had no hope for the future, that he valued the help and support of his family but believed his condition would continue to deteriorate and he would lose his memory. The inquest heard a nurse was the last person to see him when she visited his room with a cup of tea and some medication the night before his body was discovered.

A graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, Sir Nicholas was called to the bar in 1969. He became president of the Family Division in 2010 despite opposition from Jack Straw, who was Justice Secretary at the time, possibly wary of his reputation as an outspoken critic of public officials. In 2009, Sir Nicholas had urged his colleagues to 'come off the bench' and speak out about the 'parlous state of family law'. In one memorable case he said social workers were, 'perceived as the arrogant and enthusiastic removers of children', who 'trample on the rights of parents and children in the process'. And in 2011 he called for a 'live-in lovers' law to protect women in long-term relationships from losing their home and their income following a break-up. The Family Law Bar Association described Sir Nicholas as a 'compassionate judge who thought and cared deeply about the outcome of his cases'. Family law barrister James Roberts said he was 'a most humane judge who always strived for the best outcome'. And in a tweet directed at Dignity in Dying, which campaigns for the right to assisted suicide, barrister Alan Bates said: 'A noble last gift by the wonderful Sir Nicholas Wall to justice and law reform to let it be known that he took his own life. He added later: 'I think it's quite poignant in highlighting some of the problems around assisted dying and suicide. I can well see why someone who was known for his huge intellectual power and who felt such compassion for people would find the thought of losing their mental faculties so hard to bear.' Sir James Munby, his successor as President of the Family Division, said: 'He was appropriately outspoken about the plight of children caught up in the midst of parental conflict. 'Sir Nicholas' life was one of very great achievement and he has left us a formidable and enduring legacy.' Emily Jackson House care home did not respond to requests for comment.

Comment

A brave and honourable man.