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Mouthpiece

Assisted dying means accepting loss of dignity

IN her Panorama TV programme on Monday on BBC Scotland, Margo MacDonald MSP indicated that Scots should have the right to decide when to end their lives and that assisted dying should be legalised.

However, she seems to have overlooked one consequence of assisted dying. And this relates to the manner in which we all consider human life.

Ever since the Second World War, most countries in the world have agreed that human dignity is conferred, without exception, to all human beings and cannot be lost. For example, this is reflected in the 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirms in its preamble "the inherent dignity and . . . the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family".

It gives the message that a life must come up to standards, says Calum MacKellar

Thus if assisted dying is legalised in Scotland, it would mean that society would accept that some people can actually lose their human dignity and have lives which are no longer worth living.

It would also mean denying the human dignity which is due to an individual in order for him or her to be legally killed. In other words, it would give the message that human dignity is only based on subjective choices and decisions and whether a life meets certain quality standards.

But we should never go back to the abuses of humanity in the past in which human dignity

was not believed to be present in certain persons and that they could therefore be exploited or killed. Indeed, a society that does not believe in the dignity of life cannot offer any argument against murder. It becomes a culture that has lost its faith in life and cannot comprehend why it should be endured.

Instead we should continue to affirm that all human lives are full of value, meaning and richness even though persons may be aged or dependent.

After all her long years of service to Scotland, Margo MacDonald should realise that many Scots will never believe that she cannot continue to be of value to her beloved country. She should never believe that her life will become worthless.

■ *Dr Calum MacKellar is director of research of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*