

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

Legalising assisted suicide risks the principle of the equality of all lives

Scottish society through its parliament should avoid being naïve or gullible when considering the consequences, writes **Dr. Calum MacKellar**



At the beginning of this year, I was invited to take part in an online debate on the topic of assisted suicide organised by a Scottish university in front of a large number of students.

During the discussion, I argued that it would be irrational for the Scottish Parliament to support the legalisation of state assisted suicide while at the same time supporting the Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention National Action Plan.

This seeks to reduce the very high number of suicides in Scotland including amongst relatively young persons. But during the question time, at the end of the debate, one of the students commented that she could not understand or accept how I could consider the prevention of suicides amongst young people as being similar to the prevention of suicides amongst elderly or disabled persons. On hearing this comment, however, I must confess that I was quite shocked and dismayed. I had never expected such a blatant ageist and ableist statement from a university student! Was this how many young people now considered elderly or disabled persons in Scotland?

In addition, I could not comprehend how the student had come to such a conclusion. Was it because modern society only recognises a good life by the amount of pleasure and lack of suffering it experiences? If it is, then the belief that a life can become unworthy of life and should be ended is indeed rational.

The expression of a life unworthy of life was coined in Germany in 1920 by the law professor Karl Binding and psychiatry professor Alfred Hoche. It then became a slogan used between the 1930s and 1940s in this country to defend the belief that if a person becomes unable to enjoy life, then his or her life could be ended. But when the German government, at the time,

also accepted the principle that certain lives were unworthy of life and that all lives were no longer absolutely equal in value, this then had catastrophic consequences. Indeed, it meant that some lives could be seen as having less worth than others, which eventually resulted in barbarity and the killing of many different kinds of persons. As a result, Scottish society through its parliament should avoid being naïve or gullible when considering the consequences of accepting that some lives are unworthy of life and that assisted suicide should be legalised.

Of course, because a life is seen as belonging to an individual, it could be argued that he or she should be able to decide for himself or herself whether it is a life unworthy of life. But for state assisted suicide to be possible, those around this individual (including society as whole) would also have to accept that this life is indeed unworthy of life so that they can assist in ending it. In other words, it would mean that the equality of all human life is, for the first time, no longer accepted by society. Thus, if a parliament legalises assisted suicide, the very basis of the equality of all lives on which this parliament is built would become a thing of the past. It would also mean that the protection in compassionate care of those whose lives are difficult or who experience suffering would become meaningless. Instead, it would be seen as preferable if the lives of such persons, considered to have unworthy lives, were ended even though palliative care may be available.

Scottish society can choose between absolute autonomy (enabling persons to believe whatever they want about the value of their lives) or absolute equality (enabling person to believe that all lives are equal). But it cannot have both. **Dr. Calum MacKellar, Scottish Council on Human Bioethics**



Breaking down the barriers to voting



Despite the success of disabled candidates, the elections showed the inequality in our democratic processes, says **Mark O'Donnell**

Everyone will have different views of the outcomes of the Scottish Parliament elections, but we should all be able to agree that a very important and positive aspect of the election was the high turnout.

A record number of people voted in these elections for Holyrood. It can only be good for our democratic process that there is a growing recognition amongst the electorate of the importance of our Scottish Parliament and the need to hold our elected representatives to account.

As a disability charity, we also welcome the fact we have a more diverse and inclusive parliament. We were one of nine charities to sponsor a pan-disability hustings during the elections.

Four of the five panellists spoke from their own personal experience of disability and sensory loss, and three of those candidates are now MSPs.

We hope this will lead to a parliament where this is a greater recognition of how much more we need to do to ensure we have a genuinely inclusive society for disabled people in Scotland.

While it is great we can celebrate the success of disabled candidates being elected as MSPs, these elections also showed that inequality in our democratic processes still remains.

It was shocking to learn that Pam Duncan-Glancy, now the first MSP who is a permanent wheelchair user, struggled to get access to the count for the results in Glasgow where she was a candidate. We were also disappointed to hear that, once more, too many blind and partially sighted people had problems casting their vote.

Ahead of the elections, we were pleased to work with the Electoral Commission in Scotland and other sight loss charities to provide information on voting for blind and partially sighted people. We also know that the Scottish Government is currently working on new methods of making it easier for visually impaired people to vote.

However, the experience of this election shows that progress is urgently needed. Blind and partially sighted voters told us they found staff at polling stations were not adequately trained to help them vote in private through using tactile voting devices, or did not even know where the tactile voting device was or how to use it.

There were also problems using tactile voting devices for the ballot paper for this election, and some felt there didn't appear to be procedures to support visually impaired voters in the context of Covid restrictions and social distancing.

We know that many blind and partially sighted voters chose to vote by post, particularly given the ongoing requirements of social distancing which is particularly challenging for people who are blind or have low vision.

However, the reality is that they will almost inevitably have required assistance from someone in completing their postal vote, robbing them of the ability to vote independently and privately which should be their right.

We hope that this Scottish Parliament will reflect the increasing diversity of its membership by



PHOTO: RUSSELL CHEYNE/APP

supporting the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons into Scots Law, and the ability to take part in the democratic process is a fundamental human right.

With the problems blind and partially sighted people have faced voting, it is astonishing that we are now faced with the proposal for UK elections that there should be a requirement for voters to have

Photo ID. This has the potential to make it even more difficult for visually impaired people to vote.

If we want our democracy to be fully inclusive for all our people, as it must be, we need to break down the barriers for blind and partially sighted people to voting and ensure they can all exercise their democratic right.

Mark O'Donnell is Chief Executive of Sight Scotland

↑ Labour MSP Pam Duncan-Glancy attends the Oath and Affirmation ceremony at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, on May 13, 2021.



breaks from caring would be a simple first step, but the root cause runs much deeper. For too long, unpaid carers' contributions to our communities and country have been undervalued, despite Carers Scotland estimating that their efforts are worth more than £43 million a day to the Scottish economy.

In large part, this skilled, vital work is undervalued because of who carries it out: in Scotland as is true around the world, the vast majority of unpaid carers are women. Our economy is built on the backs of women who relentlessly care for others behind closed doors despite the emotional, financial and personal cost they often face as a result. It's time to share responsibility for care, reallocating the cost of caring through investment in public care services and family-friendly work policies.

Encouragingly, all of the main parties made manifesto commitments on care but supportive statements and incremental policy changes, however welcome, are not sufficient. We need to build an economy that recognises the value of care.

Now is the time to make a generation-defining commitment to carers that they will be placed at the centre of Scotland's recovery from Covid. This demands the creation of a new National Outcome focused on better valuing

and investing in all forms of care and those who provide it, including protecting them from poverty. This would help drive sustained and deep policy and spending action so critically needed. After all, carers rarely clock off, the Scottish Government shouldn't either. **Jamie Livingstone, Head of Oxfam Scotland, and Sara Cowan, Coordinator of the Scottish Women's Budget Group**



Study is set to show hidden costs of unpaid care work

Some carers reporting 'carer burnout' and emotional exhaustion as a result of the time spent caring for a loved one, writes **Professor Kate Sang**



Unpaid carers have saved the UK taxpayer roughly £530 million every day over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Carers UK. Yes, you read that correctly: every day.

I was reminded of this last month, when campaigners understandably reacted angrily to the lack of any tangible plan for social care reforms in the Queen's speech, and then again this week, when the Alzheimer's Society described how inadequate social care has left dementia sufferers unprotected from infections, falls and dehydration.

The lack of progress on reform has a direct effect on social care workers and more subtle, indirect consequences for unpaid carers, in an exasperating double-whammy.

As the level of support provided to struggling paid workers decreases, reliance on unpaid carers is set to increase.

While much has already been written and said about the impact of home-schooling during the pandemic on women's employment, we know far less about other forms of unpaid care work and how this has been affected by Covid measures.

One recent study gave us a strong hint, in revealing that 70 per cent of the UK's unpaid carers are experiencing worsened mental health during the pandemic. Many more unknown impacts remain.

A new study we are conducting at Heriot Watt University aims to fill this knowledge gap, and to provide information and insight that will enable employers and the government to better understand how to support workers

who are balancing paid jobs with unpaid care work. Early findings from our research show the hidden, yet very real, costs of unpaid care work.

Responses received so far show that balancing unpaid care work for a disabled or long-term unwell adult family member places considerable strain on people, who report finding it nearly impossible to either work full-time, or to maintain a professional career.

This can result in workers having to leave professional careers for lower paid work, which offers greater flexibility, with the subsequent detrimental impact on their financial security.

Some carers are reporting 'carer burnout' and emotional exhaustion as a result not only of the time spent caring, but the toll taken by the intensity of providing care for a loved one.

And while the pandemic-induced shift to remote working has offered more flexibility for some unpaid carers, for others it has restricted access to respite and day care, exacerbating the work-life imbalances felt before the pandemic.

Our research is still in its early stages, and we would welcome more responses from anyone balancing unpaid care work with employment – particularly more men, whose views are underrepresented thus far.

Unpaid carers have been carrying the hidden costs of their work for too long. We have a chance to change that by understanding more closely the experiences of those who undertake this testing balancing act every day.

Professor Kate Sang, Edinburgh Business School



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