

Letter from Scotland

It's been a week for ethical questions. We've been examining our national conscience on assisted dying, the rights of women, the targeting of government benefits, the rights of those living in remote areas, the rights of the homeless.

The vote by MPs at Westminster this week on assisted dying may only apply to England and Wales, but we have a similar bill going through The Scottish Parliament and the issue has caused as much soul searching here as it has south of the border. The Scottish bill, sponsored by the Liberal Democrat MSP, Liam McArthur, is already at its committee stage and a formal consultation has resulted in 21,000 responses from individuals and 144 organisations. 72 per cent are in support of the bill, 24 per cent are against, reflecting the findings of the latest opinion poll from YouGov.



Time for reflection

In a rather Delphic contribution to the debate, the former Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said he wants a commission on palliative care rather than a bill on assisted dying. He spoke movingly about cradling his 11-day-old daughter before she died. But I didn't understand his argument that assisted dying is somehow in opposition to palliative care. The Church of Scotland, like the Catholic Church, is officially against assisted dying, but that position is under review.

Also under review by the UK Supreme Court is the definition of "a woman." This modern question has been raised by a Scottish campaigning group, "For Women" which seeks to protect the rights of women against trans-gender men. The judges are being asked to rule on whether a Gender Recognition Certificate is enough, in law, to over-ride the biological sex recorded on a birth certificate.

The particular case concerns the gender balance required on public boards, but it could have much wider implications for women-only events and places like toilets, prisons and sport changing rooms. Unless, of course MPs change the Equality Act, which would open up a debate politicians would rather avoid.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission this week raised another aspect of a person's "rights," the right to a decent life in the Highlands and other remote parts of Scotland. In a special report it says that the basic human needs of people living in rural areas are being neglected. Shops are too far away, public transport is patchy, housing and fuel is expensive, health and social care are difficult to reach. It raises that delicate balance between Town and Country and how much government money should be spent on each.

Life in the city is not always easy either. The anti-poverty charity "Cyrenians" has highlighted the soaring number of homeless people in the big cities. It's up by 10 per cent since the Covid pandemic to 7,500 in Glasgow, 3,800 in Edinburgh and 1,700 in Aberdeen. And the Cyrenians say that the figures are dwarfed by the number of people in temporary accommodation.

The Scottish Government has declared a "housing emergency" with 40,000 people on council waiting lists for permanent homes. Yet it was forced to cut the affordable housing budget by 26 per cent in its last budget, blaming Westminster austerity. Instead the government has brought forward a housing bill which centres on giving tenants more rights – a rent cap in housing hotspots and greater security of tenure.

The winter fuel payment is another example of our rights being hotly debated. The UK Chancellor Rachel Reeves's decision to end the universal right to the £300 winter fuel payment has been much criticised in Scotland. And the Scottish government has announced that it will re-instate the payment next year,

at £300 for those on pension credit and £100 for everyone else. It raises the issue of the targeting of benefits on those who need them most. Is this unjust to those who miss out ? And is it too harsh on those at the margins ? We will find out in the Scottish budget next week what other services will have to be trimmed to fund the new Scottish payment.

St Andrew's Day on Saturday is a time to contemplate such moral balancing acts. It's a day when we consider again what it means to be Scottish, what our values are. Alex Salmond was very fond of St Andrew's Day and would try to time a cheerful announcement for that day. This year it will be others singing from his hymn sheet at his memorial service in St Giles' Cathedral, notably the Proclaimers, Dougie MacLean and Sheena Wellington, the gospel singers of the independence movement.



Alba Party launch with Lothians candidates Calton Hill PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter