May I begin by saying that I give an affirmative answer to all six bullet point questions featured on your Call for Evidence website.

Though there are atheists who oppose assisted suicide and Christians who favour it, the opposition is in large measure religious. Yet we live in a predominantly secular society where polls consistently show roughly 8 out of 10 in favour.

If only as an expression of the will of the people this bill should be enacted.

Fortunately we have the firmly reassuring precedent of such legislation having been in force for (cumulatively) many years in Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Oregon and Washington state, where it persistently accounts for only a very small proportion of deaths and without any adverse consequences.

Even opponents of the measure concede that in some cases one particular symptom, namely pain, cannot be significantly relieved but maintain that the alternative would be so damaging to society that it must be accepted. While in relative terms such cases may be few, in absolute terms world-wide they constitute a vast number. Thus for some dubiously posited general good many are forced to endure indescribable suffering.

English law ceased to criminalise suicide nearly 50 years ago. That assisting what is not illegal is punishable by up to 14 years in prison is, as one legal authority pointed out, both anomalous and unjust. In reality however, the compassionate assistance of suicide is legal in a de facto sense, since it never results in legal sanction.

Margo MacDonald’s bill would extend not only to the terminally ill but to permanent physical incapacity with unbearable suffering. My own view, having witnessed the dreadful suffering of my parents both of whom developed the disorder, is that Alzheimer’s disease should come into the latter category particularly as it constitutes a physical degeneration of the brain even if its manifestations are largely mental. For those no longer able to make a valid request though suffering greatly, only a declaration which preceded the onset of the illness would suffice.

Functional psychiatric illnesses, unaccompanied that is by brain degeneration, nearly always resolve or at worst significantly improve and they must never be an occasion for assisted suicide nor indeed is the proposed legislation concerned with them in any way.

I strongly commend Margo MacDonald’s bill to the Scottish Parliament.

Gerald Patrick McGovern
11 May 2010