**Judith Robertson, Chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission on International Human Rights Day 2018**

**Human rights for people’s lives**

Today is undoubtedly a significant day for human rights. All around the world countries are marking the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - the bedrock of the global system for the protection of rights.

Here in the UK we also mark the 20th anniversaries of the Human Rights Act and the Scotland Act which together embed rights into our laws and public institutions.

And today also marks the 10 year anniversary of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, of which I am the Chair. Established by this Parliament as an independent body, charged with promoting and protecting human rights for everyone in Scotland, and to be a bridge between the international system of rights protection and Scotland.

It is a time to mark and celebrate progress. A time to remind ourselves of the importance of the rights we all have by virtue of our equal status and equal worth as human beings. Rights enshrined in law to ensure that we can all live free from oppression in all its forms. Free to live dignified lives where we can all flourish and fulfil our potential, both individually and collectively.

It is also a time to recognise the progress we have made in securing people’s rights by sharing ideas, challenging decisions, scrutinising and revisiting laws and policies and by working together on solutions to improve people’s lives.

Over the last 70 years progress has undeniably been made locally, nationally and globally to cement rights into the fabric of our societies and world order. Infrastructures have been built up at the United Nations, in regional courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights, in the development of national laws and bills of rights, in National Human Rights Institutions and civil society, all acting as human rights defenders. But we must not forget that people here in Scotland and around the world continue to experience human rights violations on a daily basis. We still face grave challenges.

After a decade of work it is clear to us at the Commission that too often people’s rights are not fully realised in everyday life in Scotland. Parents choosing between heating their homes or feeding their children; people unable to access mental health services when they need them most; disabled people still facing barriers to accessing basic services; violence against women and girls; too many people unable to access advice or representation when things go wrong.

These and many more challenges have been accompanied in the UK, and indeed beyond internationally, with a worryingly negative rhetoric around rights. Too many states are failing to acknowledge and uphold their international legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil people’s rights first set out in the Universal Declaration, seventy years ago today. And too many states are forgetting the lessons of history and turning their backs on the international rule of law and collective action to respond to global issues.

In Scotland in 2018 the situation is different. When I work with our sister National Human Rights Institutions around the world I am reminded we are fortunate to have both a government and Parliament in Scotland who consider rights as core business.

Increasingly we have seen human rights being used to frame policies, strategies and outcomes within government and a range of public bodies.

Rights are becoming better understood as more than a compliance duty, and as a useful, practical framework for addressing issues such as climate change, poverty and inequalities.

We have an Equalities and Human Rights Committee with a vision and a plan to realise this Parliament’s role as a guarantor of human rights.

And our First Minister has sought out the independent advice of an expert group on the steps needed for human rights leadership on economic, social and environmental rights in the context of Brexit.

But my key message to all of us today is this: Human rights are first and foremost for people, not governments. And where there are rights there are corresponding obligations, and for those obligations there must be accountability.

Human rights law developed as a way of holding states to account for their responsibilities, to ensure we all have the freedoms and conditions we need to be human and to thrive.

Rights can give power to people’s claims to be treated with fairness and dignity.

It can be transformative when governments and public bodies explicitly recognise people’s rights, and their own legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil them. For example, recognising social security as a human right removes paternalistic or philanthropic connotations or stigma.

However, if advancing human rights stays predominantly within the domain of those with power and policy makers - there is a danger that people become detached from them. We need to firmly root rights where they belong – with people themselves; theirs to own and claim, and theirs to seek redress and remedy for when things go wrong.

So as we look ahead to the next chapter in Scotland’s human rights journey we face a two-fold challenge.

First, to make sure that people know, understand and value their human rights. To get to a place where rights are truly owned in people’s hearts and minds as belonging to everyone. And where rights are claimed with confidence by people across the country in their communities, in care homes, prisons, hospitals and workplaces.

And second, to sharpen the hard edge of accountability for all rights. So that rights are real in practice for people. Going beyond the use of rights as guiding principles or as a general approach to making laws and policies. Establishing a broader set of concrete legal standards, building on those that already exist, that people can use to hold government and public bodies to account. Enabling human rights to do what they are meant to do – balancing power between people and the state in all its forms.

This morning the First Minister formally received the recommendations of her Advisory Group on human rights leadership which are made in this vein. They are significant and bold.

Our hope as a Commission is that we can all unite behind a vision of a Scotland where the full range of rights – civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental – are embedded in both our culture and our laws.

This will mean working together, for example through Scotland’s National Action Plan for Human Rights, to maintain a healthy balance across society of putting rights into practice, promoting their value for everyone, and securing accountability when they are not realised.

Today, we come together, here in Scotland’s Parliament to reflect on progress made and the distance still to travel in Scotland’s human rights journey.

Seventy years ago, in 1948, the drafters of the Universal Declaration could never have imagined some of the challenges and changes we now face globally - climate change, the pace of technological change, globalisation and privatisation. Some challenges, sadly, would be all too familiar - the demonization of people perceived to be “other”, extremism, the pursuit of narrow self- interest, poverty and inequality.

We must now face these and other challenges head on. We must show collective leadership. I would like to close by quoting one of the contributors to a series of short films the Commission has made to mark today’s anniversaries. Dr Donald Macaskill, Chief Executive of Scottish Care put it well when he said ‘Human rights, at their best, hold a mirror in front of us of a world and a humanity which we need to become and which we grow into.’ We look forward to growing into that world together.