

PE1623/B

Church of Scotland Church and Society Council letter of 16 November 2016

The Church and Society Council is grateful for the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Public Petitions Committee concerning petition PE01623 in the name of Mr Spencer Fildes writing on behalf of the Scottish Secularist Society. The Church of Scotland (the Church) is aware that a similar petition, petition PE01498, was lodged on the 13th of December 2013 by Mr Colin Emerson on behalf of Edinburgh Secular Society, and that therefore a great deal of consideration has already gone into this issue. We therefore do not wish to reiterate much of what has already been considered. However there are certain points raised by Mr Fildes that require a response as they display a certain level of misunderstanding or inaccuracy that may be unhelpful to the wider understanding of this issue.

The Church strongly challenges the view of the petitioners that the role of Church Representatives on Local Authority Education Committees is one of privilege. While the petition makes reference to the use of the term “privileged position” quoting from an old hand book for Church of Scotland representatives on Local Authority education committees, this quote has been taken out of context. While the phrasing has been amended in more recent editions, the clear intention of this original document was to highlight the responsibility that such a role entails, a responsibility which should not be taken for granted. Indeed, the Church’s commitment to education and equality of access to schooling has always been focused not on the life and the needs of the Church but of the Nation and the young people concerned. The Church would argue that the primary role of its religious representatives is to ensure the wellbeing of young people across Scotland.

Although the petition has stated that religious representatives are unelected they are in fact elected by their own bodies that represent a large cross section of Scottish society. Reference is made by petitioners to the 2011 census in which 56% of Scotland’s population affiliate themselves with a faith community¹. That gives the Church no “rights”, but it does suggest that participation by faith representatives in decision making structures is not inherently unrepresentative of the priorities of the majority of the Scottish population. The Church questions whether there is any evidence that, as implied by the petitioner, the 37% of the general population who have no religion would automatically be opposed to the continuation of these roles.

In that regard, it is interesting that the petitioners, the Scottish Secularist Society are a body, according to the most recent census, with which only 18 people profess affiliation whilst the same census identifies the Church of Scotland as a movement with over 1.7 million people specifically holding some affiliation to it.

Moreover, this petition singles out religious representatives on Education Committees. Other Local Authority Committees invariably include unelected voting members representing other bodies. Indeed, within Education Committees religious representatives are not the only appointed/unelected representatives on Education Committees; there are parent representatives, pupil representatives and teacher representatives. The Church feels that this breadth of voices enhances, rather than

¹2011 Census

diminishes, the work of Local Authority education committees. Indeed, amongst those nominated by the Church of Scotland there are former classroom and head teachers, parents involved in School Councils, former senior education officials, school chaplains, former senior education trade unionists and others. They bring that experience to decisions and an independent voice rooted in the local communities of which they are part. The Church's General Assembly regularly emphasises how important it is that Church Representatives are suitably experienced, well trained and given all support possible.

The Church would argue that, far from being undemocratic, Church Representatives on Local Authority Education Committees are an example of how democratic decision making can and should include a wider range of representatives than simply those directly elected. This is one of the key themes of the MacIntosh Report² which argued for greater participation by citizens, the scope here is to go beyond mere formal consultation, but of giving the electorate opportunities to participate in decision making. Community Councils have their place, in this, as do decentralisation schemes, area forums, citizens' panels, local referendums etc. As the Church noted in its response to petition PE01498 centralisation has significantly moved the balance from "participatory" democracy to a very singular form of "representative" democracy that is increasingly inaccessible to those affected by the decisions taken on their behalf.

Perhaps most concerning to the Church is the implication by the petitioner that the present situation "violates equality by excluding non-believers, and many believers." The Church does not see this to be the case. The third Representative in Shetland is a Baha'i, reflecting the strength of that community in Shetland and the current third Representative in Glasgow is from the Muslim community again reflecting the strength of that community. It is vital that the views of faith groups and that may include secularist, humanists and the non-religious who all have their own belief systems and creeds, are taken into account to inform Local Authority Education Committee decisions. The Church agrees that more clarity over the process for the appointment of third Representatives would be helpful. However, it would suggest that the answer is not to repeal legislation but instead to use this opportunity to regularise the process across the country, enabling greater participation from across society.

The Church would humbly suggest that its representatives on Local Authority Committees with a responsibility for education, bring a wealth of understanding and help expand Scotland's collective understanding of what real civic democracy can and should look like. Such a democracy enables people of faith and no faith to build a cohesive and tolerant community in which all our citizens flourish.

Your Sincerely

Richard Frazer

Convener of the Church and Society Council

² Report of the commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament p12