

PE1623/C

Andrew Strachan Email of 16 November 2016

This petition has been lodged on behalf of the Scottish Secular Society (SSS). In their background information they state that their petition “should not be portrayed as an attack on religion”. However, in their background information they do **not** give any details of their organisation’s stated aims. If you take a quick look at the organisation’s constitution you’ll discover that they campaign for a secular state where “religion plays no role in state-funded education”. This displays the true purpose of their campaigning and should cause you concern as you consider their latest petition aiming to remove religion from education.

There has only been a low number of signatories so far for this petition so it appears that amongst the public and parents there is little interest in pursuing the petitioners goal. Amongst the few who have indicated their support by adding comments to the Scottish Parliament’s online petition section you’ll find the following comments:

30th October “Remove ALL religious influence from schools”

22nd October “abhorrent that in this day and age we are still accommodating religious thought”

13th October “there is no place for religion in a modern democratic country”

It is saddening to hear these intolerant views and even some secular groups have stated in recent days that the SSS is not inclusive.

I do not always agree with what the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, says but she is right when she stated on the record that “the contribution of faith groups is essential in transforming lives and building a stronger, fairer and equal Scotland”.

This petition should be closed down as there is very little support for it and the basis for it is an attempt to remove religion from education piece by piece. The reasons provided are flimsy and do not stand up to scrutiny.

If the reason for the petition really is an interest in democracy why is the campaign just to remove the religious representatives? Currently in Scotland there are no directly elected local education committees or even committee members that I am aware of. The current situation is that every four or five years local council elections are held and councillors for local areas are elected. Once the results of these elections are finalised the councillors then carve up the various council committees amongst themselves (in a similar manner to how the public do not get the opportunity to vote directly for members of parliamentary committees).

This often gets done along party political lines and can result in education committees making decisions for political reasons rather than considering the best interests of pupils and parents. In some cases you could end up with a councillor getting elected to the local council having stood on a single issue agenda which had nothing to do with education but they could end up sitting on the education committee. Therefore, you can see that currently

the electorate have no direct input into the local education committees. Having religious representatives appointed on these committees can provide beneficial wisdom and balance within the voting process.

There is currently a significant attainment gap in Scottish education. It may well be the case that some of the religious representatives on education committees can provide valuable help by sharing their experience with working with families from underprivileged backgrounds.

You need to consider what the true aim of the petitioner is and I'll remind you again that their constitution states they want religion removed from state-funded education.

The First Minister has stated that she is committed to supporting pupils who have faith beliefs. The role performed by the religious representatives on education committees backs up the First Ministers commitment. If the religious appointments to education committees were removed then there would be no guarantee that there would be a voice on education committees for those who provide faith based education for local authorities.

There may be some instances where concern arises about some decisions made by some appointees. In some cases local councils have added leisure issues into the education committees which could lead to confusion. In any walk of life you will find different people perform their role to different levels of success. However, the failings of a few does not mean the system as a whole is broken. If that was the case we'd have the situation where one MSP or civil servant gets involved in a scandal and the outcome is the whole Parliament has to be scrapped! I'm sure you'd agree that would be the wrong thing to do. Likewise any examples of failings in the current system does not mean the system itself is wrong. It has stood the test of time providing many benefits for the education system of Scotland and can continue to do so for many years to come.

Up to the date of writing (16th November) there is only one written submission supporting the petition showing on the Parliament's website. It is surprising to see that it comes from an American letter writing group of secular clergy. Indeed the actual petition seems to have an American influence when it mentions the appointment of "School Principals". Given the SSS's previous concern about American religious groups being involved in Scottish education it is interesting to note that now they appear to be encouraging it. It seems that American groups who support the SSS are fine but any religious group which has a different point of view must be banned. This again shows their intolerance of religion.

In any case, it appears these Americans are heavy on rhetoric but light (lite?) on details. They seem to emphasise imagined damage to educational opportunities (without giving any examples) while failing to realise that, as the First Minister has confirmed, faith groups play a valuable role in Scotland. Perhaps the American system is different and as it is so far away I am unable to comment on it. I'd suggest that the distance involved makes these American letter writing secularists equally incapable of providing significant suitable insight to the Scottish education system.

In conclusion, I'd encourage you to reject the stated and underlying aims of this petition. I'm unsure if the questions on the website are from the committee or from the petitioner but I've provided brief answers below in any case.

Please keep me updated with how the petition progresses.

Andrew Strachan

1. Yes, they provide a valuable insight
2. No, they should adhere to the law as it stands
3. Yes, as stated above there are no directly elected members of local education committees
4. No, some members due to conscience may not even consider that they could/should stand for election but can still provide useful guidance to the committee
5. By being honest and open when explaining their guidance/decisions
6. Based on the low number of signatories there seems to be little interest in the matter anyway but perhaps more information needs to be available on all members, both "elected" and "unelected" because ultimately they are all unelected onto the local education committees.
7. No but guidance could be sought if there are specific issues that no-one on the committee has expertise/experience in