

PE1623/Q

National Secular Society letter of 15 December 2016

The National Secular Society (NSS), currently celebrating its 150th year, works towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. We campaign for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state, where everyone's human rights are respected equally.

We work across the UK and in Europe to challenge the disproportionate influence of religion on governments and in public life. We provide a secular voice in the media, defending freedom and equality as a counterbalance to the powerful religious lobby and some of the more destructive religious impulses that can threaten human rights worldwide. We are a non-party-political organisation with members from across the social and political spectrum. Our Honorary Associates include MPs and peers, as well as leading figures from politics, journalism, law and the arts. We are a democratic and independent non-profit organisation which receives no funding from government or other public bodies.

We wish to emphasise our complete agreement with our colleagues in the Scottish Secular Society who are bringing Petition 01623 to the Scottish Parliament.

It should be self-evident that affording a particular section of society an appointed privileged position within the decision-making process of local government, based solely on their personal religious beliefs, is profoundly and inherently undemocratic, unfair and discriminatory. It is also indefensible.

We wish to make special reference to the Church of Scotland and its [Guide to Good Practice](#) for its appointed religious representatives. In this document The Church claims it is entitled to a privileged position due to its historic links with education provision in Scotland which it traces back to the definitive Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 and beyond. However, the picture the Church paints is lacking in balance and does not give a fair or accurate representation of its role.

On the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act in 1972, the Principal of Aberdeen College of Education James Scotland (author of the definitive A History of Scottish Education) noted the gaps and weaknesses in educational provision in 1872, not least that one third of Scottish children attended no school at that time, especially those in industrial areas, and a sizeable proportion of the rest had no more than a year or two instruction. With regard to this situation, he notes:

“Churches, benevolent men and women and philanthropic societies tried to fill the gaps, many with some success, but not all with pure motives: children might be at the mercy of self-seekers or fanatics. Much of the inspection regime was denominational, with more time spent testing orthodoxy than efficiency. The schism in the national church produced wasteful duplication of effort in many areas, Free and Established Kirk schools competing for pupils,

while in many burghs there was guerrilla warfare between church and municipality for control of the burgh school.”¹

It is clear therefore that the Church’s claim to special privilege due to its historic role is somewhat overstated and unjustified, since (1) it was not the sole provider of education at the time, (2) it was not able to avoid sectarian conflict in educational provision to its detriment, (3) it was concerned only with proselytising and (4) its primary concern was looking after its own interests. This last continues to have resonance today, with the wording in its afore-mentioned guide that asks its appointees to endeavour “*to influence council education policies in areas of interest to the national church*”. It cannot possibly be right that the democratic process appoints to education committees individuals who place the narrow self-interest of their private organisation before the wider interests of Scottish pupils, parents, and teachers.

The National Secular Society therefore unequivocally supports the petition.

¹ British Journal of Educational Studies, Volume 20, 1972, Issue 2