



**PUBLIC PETITION NO.**

**PE01073**

**Name of petitioner**

Tom Minogue

**Petition title**

Catholics in Scottish Prisons

**Petition summary**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to investigate and establish the reasons for the apparently disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons.

**Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition**

On 10th May 2006 I wrote to the First Minister Jack McConnell asking him three questions: Did he know of this imbalance; did it concern him, and could he give an explanation for it?

After some seven months during which I sent the First Minister several reminders I eventually received a response on behalf of The First Minister which stated in answer to my three questions: The problem is not due to systematic bias in the criminal justice system; the likely cause of the imbalance is that Catholics are more likely to live in deprived areas.

The Executive response stated that this reply had been sent to me in June by post but not by e-mail which is the normal practice. This is unusual and doubly so when the Executive had sent me a holding letter on 7th September stating: "I am writing to acknowledge your recent letter to Scottish Ministers regarding Statistics showing a disproportionate number of Catholics in prison in Scotland. A reply will be sent to you as soon as possible". Not surprisingly—as the matter was still under consideration by the Scottish Ministers in September—I never received any letter from them in June. However In the interests of progress I set aside the correspondence difficulties of the past and raised several preliminary points arising from the answers by the First Minister. Before I addressed the substance of his regarding deprived areas dominated by Catholics response I sought to clarify why a denial of bias in the criminal justice system featured in his response since this question had not been raised or even hinted at by me.

Since raising this point the Executive has again taken refuge in the by now familiar tactic of failure to respond to correspondence. At present I have been waiting for four weeks for a response to my last request for clarification, and I have not received an acknowledgement of a reminder I sent regarding this request. I am not prepared to go through another 7 months of waiting for the Executive's purdah to lapse and I now intend to highlight my concerns in public including via the Scottish Parliament's public petitions system in the hope of a speedy solution to a question that seems too hot to

handle.

## Petition background information

The action requested is necessary because of the lack of action over a period of years on the part of the Scottish Executive who have failed to investigate and establishing the reason why so many Roman Catholics end up in Scottish prisons compared to their “average” fellow Scots.

Earlier this year when I discovered that a massively disproportionate number of Catholics were in prison in Scotland I wrote to the First Minister Jack McConnell asking him three questions: Did he know of the imbalance; did it concern him, and could he give an explanation for it?

If a similar statistical imbalance applied to any other religious groups in Scotland such as Jews or Protestants I am sure the clamour for a full and immediate investigation into the cause of the imbalance would be overwhelming. It seems to me that the reason for the imbalance is unknown and the Executive response on behalf of the First Minister admits as much stating:

“Census findings which **go some way** to explaining the **seemingly** disproportionate number of Catholics serving custodial sentences in Scotland”— then goes on—“19% of the Roman Catholic population reside in the most deprived areas (decile 1). Overall, 64% of the Roman Catholic population are shown to be in deciles 1 to 5 (more deprived areas), and 36% in deciles 6-10 (less deprived areas. As you may be aware, **various evidence** from Scotland, the UK and other countries **suggests close links** between deprivation and both offending and victimisation”. [Emphasis added]

The Executive are arguing that statistics showing that there is “various evidence” (the nature of which is not specified) to suggest that there is a link between people living in the most deprived areas (slum dwellers) ending up in prison and being victims of crime. Even if this were true the Executive admit that it would only “go some way” to explaining the problem in this instance. It would seem to me that the reasoning applied in answer to my question is hardly scientific, convincing, or satisfactory.

The answers given on behalf of the First Minister also seem to question the fact that there is a disproportionate number of Catholics serving custodial sentences in Scotland by use of the word “seemingly”. The facts of the matter that I put to the First Minister are as follows: In the latest year that prison religious statistics were available to me, 2004, there were a total of 1,809 Catholics in prison out of a total prison population of 6,962 which equates to 26% of the prison population. At this time according to the Catholic Church in Scotland, Catholics were estimated to number 669,185 out of a population of 5,078,400 which equates to 13% of the national population. So there is no question about disproportion—it is a matter of record.

Nor is this something new, in January 2001 Pauline McNeill tabled S1W-12876 : “To ask the Scottish Executive whether there is a significant difference in the number of Catholic prisoners as compared with those from other religious groupings and, if so, whether it will investigate the reasons for any such differences”.

Jim Wallace, Justice Minister answered this question on 9th February 2001 by giving the statistics which appeared to show that 28% of the prison population were Catholics while Catholics only accounted for 17% of the population of Scotland.

It is therefore apparent that in 2001, Catholics were 1.65 times more likely to serve prison sentences than the “average” Scot, while in 2004 this likelihood has increased to 2.00 times.

In 2001 Jim Wallace gave interviews to The Herald and the Sunday Times on this topic and stated that this matter warranted investigation but as far as I am able to ascertain **there has been no specifically designated investigation by the Executive to identify the causes of this imbalance. In fact it would appear that in recent extensive exercises in analysing statistics following on from the 2001 Census this**

**topic has been deliberately avoided.**

Such an omission cannot be acceptable as there is a need to identify what causes twice as many citizens of one particular religion to be jailed than their peers of other and no religious persuasion. People of the Roman Catholic faith cannot be lawless because of their religion. Similarly the Scottish Executive's excuse (for that is what it is) that Catholics are more likely to offend because they represent the largest religious group living in the most deprived areas in the most deprived region of Scotland (Glasgow and Clyde Valley) is questionable.

Surprisingly the Scottish Executive's recent 125 page report entitled "A compendium of statistics providing detailed information on the depth and concentration of poverty and disadvantage in deprived areas as defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 (SIMD 2004)" does not look at this phenomenon, and in fact while looking at every other possible factor affecting people living in deprived areas—including their susceptibility to being victims of crime—avoids the number and make up of the residents of deprived areas who will end up in prison! The very factor that the Scottish Executive claim may cause the disproportionate number of Catholics in prison in Scotland is not even examined or for that matter mentioned in what must be a selective exercise in demographics.

So while the First Minister in answer to my query states that various evidence from the UK and other countries suggests a correlation between living in deprived areas and going to jail when given the opportunity to investigate this anomaly (as the previous Justice Minister had promised) the Scottish Executive studiously ignore it. What a sad indictment on our "One Nation Many Cultures" society. The Scottish Executive's avoidance of this aspect of "Scotland's Shame" should not be allowed go on any longer and I would urge the Scottish Parliament to have a full debate on this matter, which in short I would summarise as being two questions: "Why do twice as many Scottish Catholics (twice as many as the average Scot) end up in prison and why do a similarly disproportionate number of Scottish Catholics live in our worst slums?"

Source documents and links:

Question S1W-12876 Pauline McNeill & Answer S1W-15069 Jim Wallace

Link: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/businessBulletin/bb-01/bb-01-29e.htm> &

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/pqa/wa-01/wa0426.htm> ; Herald article Jan 22, 2001 entitled "Bias Theory over jailed Catholics"; Sunday Times article Jan 21, 2001 entitled "High Catholic prison numbers sparks probe"; Letter and statistics file from Venetia Radmore, Scottish Prison Service; Statistics in e-mail from Father Paul M. Conroy, General Secretary, Roman Catholic Church information, Scotland; Letter and reminders from Tom Minogue to the First Minister of the Scottish Executive; Letters from the First Minister's officials to Tom Minogue; Scottish Executive Publication: "Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 (SIMD 2004)"

Link: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/2792129/21311> ;

**Unique web address**

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/PE01073>

**Related information for petition**

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**NO**

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131

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