



PUBLIC PETITION NO.

PE01498

Name of petitioner

Mr Colin Emerson on behalf of Edinburgh Secular Society

Petition title

Religious Representatives on Local Authority Education Committees

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to bring forward legislative proposals to repeal Section 124 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended by Section 31 of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994.

This would end the legal obligation on local authorities to appoint three unelected religious representatives to sit on their education committees.

Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition

The action we call for requires a change in primary legislation at Scottish government level. This is not in the gift or power of local councils or other public bodies.

Nevertheless, we have publicised our concerns in this matter, and sought wider public support. ESS has received the following statements from elected members:

Patrick Harvie, MSP for Glasgow:

"In a society in which increasing numbers of people don't practice any religion, it's high time that we questioned a practice which gives religious hierarchies an influence over every child's education. I'm particularly concerned at the involvement of people who would promote utterly unscientific notions like creationism; pushing this absurd ideology at children is the very opposite of education."

Sandy Howat, City of Edinburgh Councillor:

"Unelected, unaccountable and I would suggest untenable? Undemocratic influence over public education is fundamentally at odds with the principles of respect, equality and shared freedoms. All contributions to committee deliberations should be welcomed, yet continued undemocratic privilege of the few over the many is an outdated tradition we should remove. As we look to create a fairer Scotland with liberty at its core, we need to ask ourselves what this 'privilege' says about our values; it's time for a new enlightenment."

Bailie Dr Nina Baker, Glasgow City councillor:

"Whilst I can see that representatives of major world faiths might have a role in advising on curriculum content for the teaching of comparative religion in schools, I believe they should have no right to vote on councils' decision-making bodies. Those votes should be reserved for accountable, elected members only. A recent contribution from the Roman Catholic representative on Glasgow's executive was to make clear his church could never accept the principle and practice of shared-campus schools, a policy with full

cross-party support.”

Further information is available via the Edinburgh Secular Society website. See link below:

<http://edinburghsecularsociety.com/2013/07/17/edinburgh-secular-society-exposes-religious-interference-in-the-heart-of-local-democracy/>

Petition background information

- To afford a particular section of society a privileged position within the decision making process of local government, based solely on their particular and personal religious beliefs, is profoundly and inherently undemocratic, unfair and discriminatory. It strikes against those specific virtues of justice and integrity underpinning our society and which lie at the heart of the Scottish Parliament.

- 2011 Social Attitudes Survey shows that around 65% of young people (18-25) have no religious affiliation

http://www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/media/13421/bsa29_full_report.pdf

- The legal requirement for religious representative to have a 'recognised place of worship' discriminates against many minority faith groups and belief groups such as humanists, spiritualists, etc, and the non-religious.

- Despite the Church of Scotland claiming that they are impartial on Local Authority Education Committees, the Church and Society Council reported to the General Assembly that they ‘...estimate that these three Church Representatives hold the balance of power on 19 Local Authority Committees’ (Church of Scotland Church and Society Council Deliverance to CoS General Assembly May 2013 p3/31 para 11.4.3)

http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13790/3_CHURCH_and_SOC

- The legislation requires one Catholic, one Protestant and one other religious representative; this seems to reinforce the tolerance of a sectarian and secular divide in Scottish society.

- Edinburgh Secular Society in researching this issue compiled a list of the current 92 religious representatives (July 2013) who sit, un-elected, with full voting rights, on Scottish local authority education committees.

<http://edinburghsecularsociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Religious-Reps-Edinburgh-Secular-Society-July-2013.pdf>

Unique web address

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/PE01498>

Related information for petition

Do you wish your petition to be hosted on the Parliament's website to collect signatures online?

YES

How many signatures have you collected so far?

1

Closing date for collecting signatures online

13 / 12 / 2013

Comments to stimulate online discussion

1. Is it fair and democratic that unelected representatives should advise and decide on local education matters, simply because they espouse a particular religious belief?
2. Would it concern you to learn that, at least one religious representative identifies himself as a 'young earth creationist'?
3. Do you think that people who hold a religious belief have any particular skills not found amongst those with no religion?
4. Is it right that a statutory requirement (see above) treats the non-religious as second class-citizens by virtue of granting the religious a privileged position on local education committees.

More info at www.edinburghsecularsociety.com