



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1514](#)

Main Petitioner: Norman Bonney

Subject: Making Time for Reflection representative of all beliefs

Calls on the Parliament to ensure that each year its weekly 'Time for Reflection' fulfils its ambition of being representative of the diversity of religion and belief in Scotland by limiting representatives of religious denominations to one half of the presentations and ensuring that twenty five per cent of all sessions are presented by atheists.

Background

Chamber Business usually begins each week with Time for Reflection (TfR) when an external speaker addresses the meeting of the Parliament for up to 4 minutes. Invitations to address the Parliament at Time for Reflection are issued by the Presiding Officer on advice from the Parliamentary Bureau. In general, nominations for contributors are proposed to the Presiding Officer by MSPs or by the religions or faiths directly. There have also been occasions when individuals have written to the Presiding Officer with nominations. TfR was first agreed in the Parliament through [Motion S1M-131](#), which was moved by Tom McCabe MSP on 9th September 1999.

The motion proposed that contributions to TfR should follow a pattern based on the balance of beliefs in Scotland. In Session 2, the Parliamentary Bureau agreed (26 August 2003) that religions and faiths with smaller numbers of adherents should be included to a greater extent than the proportion within Scotland would indicate (based on the 2001 Census). Therefore, the current pattern is not reflective of the figures in the Census but is a loose approximation with this caveat factored in. In addition to reflecting the broad pattern of beliefs in Scotland, an attempt is made to take account of gender, geographical location and the length of time that a contributor has been on the waiting list.

The petitioner, who is an emeritus professor at Edinburgh University and honorary president of the Edinburgh Secular Society, argues that TfR over-represents Christian denominations and other religious traditions and under-represents those with no faith. He proposes that atheists, who according to a Westminster Faith Debate survey, make up about one in four of the Scottish population, should get one quarter of the time slots available for TfR. The petitioner has conducted his own research entitled '[Proportional Prayers: Time for Reflection in the Scottish Parliament](#).' He states that although only 56% of Scots indicated in the 2011 Census that they had a religion, the respective contributions by religious denominations to

TfR in the previous three parliamentary sessions from 1999 to 2011 were 98%, 87% and 86%.

SPICe produces a [Scottish Parliament Fact sheet](#) outlining the contributors to Time for Reflection in Session 4. It states that up until 1 April 2014, 13 out of a total of 103 contributors were non-faith. This represents just under 13% of all contributors leaving a remainder of 87 percent for religious contributions. [Table 7 in release 2A of the census data for 2011](#) outlines the religious breakdown in Scotland. It shows that 36.7% of the population stated that they had no religion in the latest census.

The petitioner also [wrote an opinion piece](#) which featured in the Edinburgh Evening News on 26 March 2014.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Parliamentary Bureau issued [guidance on TfR](#) in 2005 which is available on the Parliament website and outlines the chamber procedure as well as direction on tone and content.

The Presiding Officer has stated that she is keen to encourage diversity of speakers during TfR and the Bureau intends to review the 2011 census figures in relation to contributions in the near future.

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22 April 2014

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