

PE1498/B

RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIVES ON LOCAL AUTHORITY EDUCATION COMMITTEES

A Response from the Mission and Ministry Board of the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church

The Mission and Ministry Board of the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church is aware of:-

1. Public Petition PE01498, regarding religious representatives on Local Authority Education Committees; and
2. The Consultation by John Finnie MSP for a Bill to remove the obligation to appoint representatives to Education Committees

Since both of the above deal with similar issues, this paper constitutes a short response to both proposals. (In relation to Mr Finnie's consultation paper, this submission should be regarded as a response to Question 1 in his Consultation Paper.)

The values of wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity are rightly placed at the heart of our Scottish nation and we must ensure that we are served by democratic governance in all aspects of our political system.

Historically church representatives are part of Local Education Committees because of the role of the broad church in the development of our education system as all our schools were originally "church" schools in one shape or form until the Education Act of 1872 when this right was enshrined in law.

The legislation requires one Church of Scotland, one Roman Catholic and one other religious representative; which rather than reinforcing the tolerance of a sectarian and secular divide in Scottish society would seem to be a fair representation of Scottish Society.

Although Edinburgh Secular Society has stated that religious representatives are unelected they are in fact elected by their own bodies who, in turn, represent a cross section of Scottish society. In addition there are two parent representatives and one pupil representative on Education Committees although unlike the religious representatives they do not have a vote.

Councillors are themselves elected as representatives and the secular argument is flawed in that every elected member will have an individual faith / secular standpoint regardless of their political persuasion. This is clearly why 'open' or 'free' votes are applied across all levels of governance at national and local level.

More broadly, it is the case that there are some Local Authority Committees, other than Education Committees, which include unelected voting members representing other bodies (such as the health service). We therefore question why the proposals single out religious representatives on Education Committees.

Members of faith communities do take their role in governance very seriously and they contribute to the discussions bringing their own unique spiritual and pastoral dimension to the local contextual implementation of policy. The role of religious representatives is one of service rather than privilege and reflects the historic role of the broad Church in Scotland in education and the continued commitment of the Churches to the importance of education in the life of the nation. Policy is made by the Scottish Government ministers who instruct the Local Education Committees to implement them.

The 2011 census indicated that whilst 37% of people in Scotland stated “no religion”, over half (54%) stated that they belonged to a Christian denomination with a further 3% indicating affiliation to another faith. It is vital that the views of faith groups and that may include secularist, humanists and the non-religious who all have their own belief systems and creeds, are taken into account to inform committee decisions.

We live and work in an increasingly secular society but this must not mean that we lose sight of the fact that at heart we remain a Christian society and should be proud of our history and heritage in education. At the very least we should remain a society that honours the importance of the very Scottish and very spiritual values of wisdom, compassion, integrity and justice.

In response to question 1 in Mr Finnie’s Consultation Paper, we do not agree that the obligation on Local Authorities to appoint church representatives to Education Committees should be removed.

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