

scottish churches parliamentary office

The Convener and Members
Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh EH99 1SP
Via email petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Tuesday 24 June 2014

Dear members of the Public Petitions Committee

PE 01514

I have received notice through Interfaith Scotland and Action of Churches Together in Scotland that you are considering Petition 1514 and are seeking views from interested groups.

Graham Blount was a predecessor of mine; he served as Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer in 1999 when the Scottish Parliament was re-established. He played a critical role in working with the new Parliament, its members and officers, in the very early days, including the setting up of Time for Reflection. Graham gave the first Time for Reflection in October 1999.¹

I welcome the opportunity that this petition provides for some reflection on how Time for Reflection is run, and to point out how much it is appreciated by MSPs and members of the public alike. I do however think it would be a mistake to set quotas or targets for those giving Time for Reflection in the terms set out in the Petition. My concerns are:

- Contributors are invited to do so by the Presiding Officer. If a group felt that the diversity of religion and belief was not being represented then they might first want to make their views known to the Office of the Presiding Officer.
- Contributors are often nominated by MSPs; if an individual or group wished to have the opportunity of giving Time for Reflection then there are free and fair avenues which they could take to approach their MSPs to be nominated.
- Targets and quotas seems to me to be over-complicating a system which works reasonably well at present. Many of the best contributions to Time for Reflection have to my mind been rooted in a particular faith or belief tradition but which have been accessible and generous-spirited to everyone, regardless of one's own opinions. I would be saddened if a quota of representatives were to be introduced as a representative from one tradition might feel that 'their' slot was for 'their' community rather than Time for Reflection being for the whole Parliament.

In my recent conversations with MSPs I have discussed how they regard Time for Reflection. If I can broadly summarise, many of them have said that they value the fact that it is there, even if they are not always able to attend. Some might make a special effort to attend if the contributor is from the same

¹ <http://www.actsparl.org/about-us/history/first-time-for-reflection.aspx>

region or constituency, or to show honour and respect to a particularly distinguished and senior figure. It is true however that attendance at Time for Reflection is often fairly sparse; is this a problem for religion, or for Parliament? I would suggest neither, and base my thoughts on the debate in June 1999 on Prayers², the first substantive debate which took place in the Scottish Parliament. To me it is quite clear that the impetus for what became known as Time for Reflection was for Members who had a faith wished to start their work with a formal moment of prayer, meditation, contemplation or reflection. It is clear that such an activity would be voluntary. It is clear that it is for those people with faith. It is clear that it is for Members of the Scottish Parliament, and there is no indication that it would be a platform for the individuals or groups contributing to do anything other than help our politicians start their work thinking about something bigger and greater than any of the issues that they may have been facing. It most definitely must not become a religious, philosophical or political soap-box. In the summer of 1999 it was even suggested in the debate that no-faith 'prayers' could take place occasionally, with instead of a spoken contribution there could be simply a couple of minutes of silence, which would allow each and every person to reflect in their own way.

So I do not really worry that turnout at Time for Reflection is not closer to 100%, as it is an activity which is both voluntary and of the MSPs own creation. In my recent conversation with MSPs there has been no appetite whatsoever to making any changes.

To know that the Parliament starts its week with a moment which is devoted not to party politics or legislative debate but to considering the wider things of life is to me of inestimable value, whether or not it is delivered by someone of my own tradition, of the wider Christian family, or from another religion or belief. In my opinion the spread and diversity of Scotland's belief is already well-represented in Time for Reflection.

In conclusion I'd like to return to Graham Blount's Time for Reflection. In it he quoted the hymn *All are welcome* by Marty Haugen, which finishes: "Let us bring an end to fear and danger - All are welcome, all are welcome in this place." I believe that Time for Reflection has been characterised by a spirit of welcome and inclusiveness of all Scotland's religious, faith and belief traditions. My biggest fear about this petition is the message that it would send: you are no longer welcome because you do not fit into the prescribed representative calculation. I have full confidence in the Office of the Presiding Officer to ensure that the concerns and comments made by the Petitioner, and by other interested parties are taken into account.

If I can be of any further service to the Committee please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

David Bradwell
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer

² http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=4162&mode=html#iob_26591