

EDINBURGH SECULAR SOCIETY
(www.edinburghsecularsociety.com)

The campaign to
END RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN EDINBURGH SCHOOLS

PROGRESS OF THE PETITION

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The Petition proposed by Ms Veronica Wikman

In accordance with Section 8 of the Education (Scotland) Act of 1980, the City of Edinburgh Council is requested to organise a poll of electors in the city on a proposal to discontinue religious observance in non-denominational schools in the city.

Petition presented to the City of Edinburgh Council Petitions Committee

Veronica Wikman, supported by Professor Norman Bonney of the Edinburgh Secular Society and Alistair McBay of the National Secular, presented the petition to Edinburgh City Council's Petitions Committee on 3 June 2013.

The petition was supported by 896 valid signatures. The webcast of the committee proceedings can be viewed at www.edinburghsecularsociety.com

Religious observance in city schools to be investigated

The concerns about religious observance in the City Council's schools raised by the petitioners clearly got some of the members of the committee greatly concerned.

The Committee decided to mandate relevant council staff to discuss with the petitioners their concerns and consider evidence that has, or will be, put forward by them. Council officers will also gather details of all religious organisations that have access to schools and the activities in which they are involved.

There will also be an examination of how the access of these external religious groups to schools is arranged as well as who actually delivers

religious observance (RO) in them and what actually constitutes RO in Edinburgh schools.

Councillors' interests: contrasting behaviour

Two councillors on the Petitions Committee declared interests at the start of the meeting.

Cllr Keil (Drumbrae, Gyle - Labour) declared interests, absented herself from the committee and the discussion of the petition.

Cllr Jeremy Balfour (Corstorphine, Murrayfield – Conservative) declared interests as an ordained and accredited Baptist minister but vigorously participated in the discussion and challenged the intent of the petition. Cllr Balfour is recorded on the official Council register of interests as being a Director of the Bethany Christian Trust.

The Scottish Government's *The Councillor's Code of Conduct* (3rd edition Dec 2010) states that;

5.3 You may feel able to state truthfully that an interest would not influence your role as a councillor in discussion or decision-making. You must, however, always comply with the *objective test* ("the objective test") which is *whether a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard the interest as so significant that it is likely to prejudice your discussion or decision making in your role as a councillor.*

The preceding clause 5.2 states that councillors should err on the side of caution in making their personal decisions about whether 'a declared interest prevents you from taking part in any discussions or voting'. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/10145144/0>)

Religious interests in Edinburgh Council's Education, Children and Families Committee

The issue of councillors' and externally appointed committee members' interests will arise again when the petition is considered by the Council's Education, Children and Families Committee.

In its submission to the Council on the petition ESS pointed out that the Church of Scotland has claimed that the three externally appointed (almost all Christian) religious representatives on each Scottish local

authority education committee 'hold the balance of power' on 19 of the 32 of Scotland's local authorities. Edinburgh could be one of these authorities where the religious representatives actually or potentially control the key decisions of the education committee.

ESS suggested in its submission that a final decision on the petition should be made by all members of the Council and not by the Education, Children and Families Committee because of the undemocratic bias generated by external religious representation in the committee. The Petitions Committee decided, however, to forward the petition to that committee for consideration.

The externally nominated representatives on the Committee represent the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church and The Robin Chapel.

When the petition is discussed in the Education, Children and Families Committee councillors who have religious interests, and the three external nominated religious representatives, will have to make decisions in accordance with the Councillor's Code of Conduct as to whether they should declare such interests and/or withdraw from the meeting or not.

Cost estimates of ballot greatly inflated

During the Petition Committee's discussion of the petition grossly exaggerated costs of a ballot of electors in the city were offered by Cllr Balfour, and former Cllr Aitken, now representing the Church of Scotland Church and Society Council. Electronic balloting (as recently conducted over the naming of the new Forth bridge) and postal ballots can greatly reduce costs of conducting a ballot of electors.

The City of Edinburgh Council's initiative in enhancing the democratic process through its electronic petitioning system demonstrates the opportunities available in the modern era for enabling electors to be more closely involved in the making of council decisions.

ESS will be monitoring this aspect of the debate among councillors about the petition and will offer suggestions, if they are not forthcoming from the Council, which will enable a cost-effective ballot of electors to be conducted on this important issue of local educational policy.

Irreligious Councillors

It is ironic that councillors currently accept a school regime that requires religious observance in city schools when they themselves do not appear to be that religious.

A recent check found that only four of the 58 have registered religious interests, such as holding offices in church organisations, in the official register of interests.

And when the Lord Provost recently attended the annual ‘Kirkin’ of the Council’ in St Giles Cathedral, only five other councillors were present.

If councillors are representative of the Scottish public half of them will have no religious faith and 12 of them (20%) of them will be unequivocal atheists who do not believe in god or any other higher spiritual power. In all likelihood, like the general public, only a handful of them will be regular attenders at church.

Prayers ended at Edinburgh council meetings

Last year Edinburgh councillors eventually gave up the long tradition of starting their main council meeting with prayers when the National Secular Society pointed out to them that the practice was unlawful under Conservative UK government legislation dating from 1973 which is now, again, since devolution in 1999, the responsibility of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament.

It is clearly now time for councillors to consider whether they wish to continue requiring religious observance by pupils in schools in a city where probably more than half of the parents are not adherents of any religious denomination (an estimate based on the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2011 and 2001 census data for the city since 2011 Scottish census data on religion has not yet been reported).

Councillors should give voters the opportunity to make a decision in a ballot on this matter as provided for in the Conservative UK Government’s Education Scotland Act of 1980.

ESS will follow the progress of Veronica Wikman’s petition and report on it throughout all the procedures of the Council towards the successful achievement of a ballot of city electors to end religious observance in the City’s misnamed ‘non-denominational’ schools.

