

Edinburgh Secular Society

Challenging religious privilege

Petition Bulletin Number 2: December 2013

Remove religious observance from non-denominational schools Petition presented to City of Edinburgh Council on 07 Feb 2013, and heard by the Petitions Committee 03Jun 2013

This petition, presented by Edinburgh parent Veronica Wikman to City of Edinburgh Council earlier this year, requests that the council conduct a ballot of electors in the city, as provided for by law¹, on a proposition to end religious observance in city schools

It is currently under consideration by the Education, Children and Families Committee, and the City of Edinburgh Council will be required to make a decision during 2014.

Edinburgh Secular Society (ESS) is supporting this petition, and, as recommended by the Petition Committee on 3 June 2013, has sought further discussion with Director of Children and Families and council officers to progress this matter. We still await a response to our two letters².

ESS hopes that councillors and council officers will be able to find some time for restful contemplation on this topic during the approaching midwinter holiday. ESS respectfully draws your attention to recent deliberations of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee, which has been considering a petition (PE01487) from another organisation asking that Parliament change the basis of religious observance in Scotland's state funded schools from its current 'opt-out' basis to an 'opt-in' choice.

ESS does not support petition PE01487, since it seeks to amend, not end, the law on a parent's choice of RO in schools for their children. Nevertheless, the numerous responses that the petition generated from the public and interested parties provide a useful source of information for elected representatives called to make decisions on these related matters: the Wikman/ESS petition before CEC, and that before the Scottish Parliament.

The responses to petition PE01487 are on line at:

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

The matter of PE01487 remains stalled before the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee, since the PPC awaits reaction from Scottish Government ministers, whom they have requested give their views on the evidence submitted both by petitioners and by the various respondents.

ESS wishes to draw your attention to the following sources of evidence:

- The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, which finds current practices of religious observance insufficiently inclusive and which argues that current Scottish Government 'guidance' redefines 'religious observance' in a way that disregards the normal meaning of the latter term in order to avoid changes to the existing law.
- The Scottish Parent Teacher Council, which argues for a change to the law to remove the requirement for religious observance in schools.
- The Scottish Secular Society documentation of numerous inadequacies in the current implementation of the existing law and regulations.

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- The substantial paper by Edinburgh Secular Society which argues for the removal of religious observance from the compulsory school curriculum.
- The response of Stuart Campbell, an Edinburgh resident, who points out the impracticalities of the changes proposed by the petitioners, and who further argues for the ending of the requirement for religious observance in schools.

In reference to the Wikman petition now before the city council, ESS urges that, as elected local councillors, you:

- ensure that voters in the Edinburgh city have an opportunity to express their views on this important issue
- provide your electorate the maximum opportunity to influence policies affecting their lives and those of their children

by supporting an early poll of city electors on the proposition to end religious observance in City schools,

Edinburgh Secular Society wishes you the best for the holiday season.

We look forward to constructive engagement with Council members and officers in 2014 concerning the future progress of Veronica Wikman's petition to the City Council, which has the support of this society and 1,092 petitioners.

Professor Norman Bonney

Honorary President – Edinburgh Secular Society

¹ Petition presented to CEC 07 Feb 2013, and heard by the Petitions Committee 03Jun 2013:

Remove religious observance from non-denominational schools

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.

² The Petitions Committee on 3 June 2013 agreed:

2) To ask the Director of Children and Families to provide further information on:

[i) to v) . . .]

vi) details of further discussions with both sets of petitioners, the deputation and other interested groups.

To further these discussions, ESS wrote:

21 Aug 2013 to Mike Rosendale, Head of Schools and Community Services

29 Nov 2013 to Gillian Tee, Director of Children & Families (letter sent by email)