

Edinburgh Secular Society

Challenging religious privilege

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News release

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Edinburgh Secular Society petition to remove local authority religious representatives now referred to Scottish Parliament's Education and Culture Committee for full consideration

Edinburgh Secular Society (ESS) welcomes the decision of the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament, at its meeting of Tuesday, 18 March 2014, to refer its petition to the Education and Culture Committee.

- The petition argues for ending the practice whereby three unelected nominees are appointed to the education committees of Scottish mainland local authorities by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Scotland and another religious organisation.
- ESS believes that guidance from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to the Scottish Parliament has supported the progress of ESS's petition to the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament

ESS endorses the declaration and comments expressed by the EHRC in its written submission to the Public Petition Committee. In particular, ESS welcomes and endorses their assertions in relation to the Equality Act 2010, which states:

"My comments here relate to the relevance to the petition of the duties placed on Scottish Ministers by section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012¹ which flow from section 149. Section 149 of the Equality Act requires public authorities in Scotland to give due regard to the need to:

- *Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation*
- *Advance equality of opportunity between different groups*
- *Foster good relations between different groups*

The 1973 Act (as amended by the 1994 Act) of course predates the public sector equality duties; however, the Commission believes that, as concerns have now been raised, an appropriate course of action for Scottish Ministers may be to assess whether these provisions and the policies and practices which flow from them meet the requirement to give due regard to the three elements of the Equality Duty listed above."

The letter from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission can be seen at

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_PublicPetitionsCommittee/General%20Documents/PE1498_G_Equality_Human_Rights_Commission_11.02.14.pdf

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Prof Norman Bonney, Honorary President, Edinburgh Secular Society says:

“To afford a particular section of society a privileged position within the decision-making process of local government, based solely on their particular and personal religious beliefs, is profoundly and inherently undemocratic, unfair and discriminatory. This is an opportunity for our elected representatives to reflect and act on the changing demographics within Scotland. They can show vision and leadership by actively supporting the petition and the democratic principles that lie behind it. We sincerely hope they do so. “

Background Information

- Currently, every education committee in Scotland is statutorily obliged to appoint three religious representatives.
- The legislation requires one Catholic, one Church of Scotland and one other religious representative.
- The current position, whereby religious representatives are appointed to all 32 local authority education committees, is simply untenable in a democratic society based on civic equality.
- Religious representatives are not elected by the populous: they are simply nominated by their respective religious organisations, and yet have full voting rights on all education matters.
- Religious representatives are accountable only to their respective denominations: the public cannot vote them out of office.
- The Scottish Census 2011 shows those belonging to a religion total barely over one half of all Scots; however, over one third belong to no religion yet have no direct representation on education committees. There is no mandate for the privileged of religious influence over our education system.
- During research for the petition ESS discovered that despite the Church of Scotland claiming that they are impartial on Local Authority Education Committees, the Church and Society Council reported to the General Assembly that they: *‘...estimate that these three Church Representatives hold the balance of power on 19 Local Authority Committees’*¹

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NOTES TO EDITOR

- For further information contact Neil Barber – Press and Communication Officer on 07986183977.
- ESS believes in freedom of religion and freedom from religion.
- ESS is affiliated to the National Secular Society, although views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the NSS.

¹ (Church of Scotland Church and Society Council Deliverance to CoS General Assembly May 2013 p3/31 para 11.4.3)
http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13790/3_CHURCH_and_SOC_IETY_2013.pdf

