To the members of the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee,

We, students past and present of the University of St Andrews, bring to you a matter of grave concern, both for the autonomy of our institution and its ability to serve the Scottish people.

The Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill threatens to dismantle one of our oldest traditions by removing our strongest student advocate: The Rector.

The forthcoming legislation stands to dramatically alter the appointment of the Chair of the University Court - a role filled by The Rector in the four ancient universities since 1858.

In these four universities, The Rector is democratically elected by students and given the right to chair the Court, and is trusted by those students to ensure their voices are heard at the highest levels of university governance.

Making no reference to this ancient institution, while simultaneously proposing entirely new procedures for the appointment of the Chair, the bill offers an ambiguous future for the role of Rector. However, one thing is certain. This signals the end of the Rectorship as we know it.

Under the new legislation, if the Rector retains their power at all, their process for election would be replaced by an undefined panel which would pre-screen, interview, and shortlist candidates before even a single student vote could be cast. (HE Governance (Scotland) Bill, pg.3; Consultation Paper, pg. 13)

It is odd to invoke the autonomy of our university while committing clear ministerial interference, but stranger still to invoke democracy while destroying the democratic process.

Further still, should the Rector be sidelined on the University Court, it will impact their capacity to effect change in other areas of the University. Diminishing their stature will only diminish their ability to serve students. Our last three Rectors alone have:
• Helped to ensure academic excellence, by empowering students as school presidents and class representatives (Kevin Dunion, 2009).
• Established a widespread scholarship fund to enable students to pursue their career aspirations through summer internships. (Alastair Moffat, 2012)
• Reconnected notable alumni with the university and its current students for personal and professional development. (Catherine Stihler, 2015)

Furthermore, the committee should note it was a Rector that ensured their assessor would be a student (John Cleese 1970), enhancing the number of students serving on Court- a primary aim of this very bill.

Proponents of this bill have espoused worthy values of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. But these are not new ideas. Our Rectors have been fighting for them for over 150 years.

We implore the committee to stand up for this uniquely Scottish tradition, to protect and promote the unencumbered right of students to select and elect their Rector as Chair of the University Court.

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The University of St Andrews Students’ Association is a registered Scottish Charity (SC019883).