

Justice Committee

Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from John McKnight

The main elements that concern me in relation to the proposed Act are (A) Singing at football matches, (B) The responsibility for monitoring behaviour at football matches by the voluntary sector. (C) The fomenting of offensive behaviour by the media and other organisations.

(A) Singing at football matches

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Religious division in Scotland existed before organized football. There were sectarian differences within and outwith Christianity. The history of the churches although based on love, has paradoxically, a history of violence and hatred. Songs or hymns have words such “Soldiers”, “marching as to war”, “put your armour on”, “must not suffer loss” etc. The violence and hatred of Church history is not, however, in the public consciousness. No one would deem that these songs are intended to be offensive.

1.2 A Roman Catholic priest founded Celtic, and Celtic were further established by Irishmen, Scotsmen of Irish descent, and Scotsmen. Celtic attracted a Roman Catholic following.

1.3 Rangers and Heart of Midlothian were founded by Scotsmen and eventually attracted a Protestant following. This was probably as a counter balance to the Catholic supported Celtic and Hibernian.

1.4 At the time of Celtic’s foundation, all of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. There was no campaign of terror that involved the civilian population at that time.

2.0 The First World War

2.1 At the height of the First World War the IRA rebelled against the British at the Easter Rising. This was months before the atrocious casualties of the Somme. The British and many of the Irish people saw this as a stab in the back.

2.2 The First World War touched every household in Scotland and Britain. The stab in the back by the IRA was seen as a heinous crime of hatred. It was not viewed as an act of self-determination. A minority perpetrated it.

3.0 Songs of the IRA

3.1 I cannot trace the beginning of the Celtic supporters adherence to, at least in song, for the IRA, but it certainly was offensive to the rest of the Scottish population. It has been going on for years, almost without comment. It has become a kind of

institutionalised anti-Scottish, anti-British hatred. It has passed without comment in the media for years.

3.2 This stab in the back, at the Easter rising is still in the public consciousness. Paradoxically it lives there partly because of the offensive singing of Celtic supporters.

3.3 More recently we had the The Troubles in mainly Northern Ireland, although this extended to other parts of the British Isles. The atrocities during these Troubles are clearly in the consciousness of people in Scotland. The Celtic supporter singing, in support of the IRA, was still going on during these Troubles. This was at a time when the IRA was killing Scottish soldiers. The singing was hate filled and provocative and resulted in violence.

3.4 It is particularly offensive to those of a patriotic nature and is mainly directed against Protestants who are seen to be pro-Scottish and pro-British. Falling into this category are the supporters of Rangers and Heart of Midlothian.

4.0 *"Loyalist" songs*

4.1 During the Troubles Loyalist organisations were formed – UDA, UVF, LVF, and Red Hand Commando. A series of songs were introduced at football matches that sung the praises of these groups. These groups committed atrocities on innocent people just as the IRA. Ranger's supporters directed songs, which supported these groups at Celtic supporters. These groups are not patriotic in the normal definition of the word.

4.2 Songs in support of these "loyalist" groups are in the public consciousness, offensive.

5.0 *Traditional songs*

5.1 There are other songs that are sung at football matches that contain terms of violence. These songs are usually long standing and the battles they "celebrate" were long ago. They are not in the public consciousness seen as violent, provocative or crude. Into this category are Rule Britannia, The Flower of Scotland, The Soldiers Song, the Sash, The Fields of Athenry, and others. Just like the religious songs outlined in section 1.2 they are not generally regarded as provocative or an incitation to violence.

6.0 *Summary*

6.1 There is, therefore, a difference between songs and their intention. Hymns, religious songs, patriotic, nationalistic, or cultural songs can be benign when the battles to which they refer, are not in the public consciousness, provocative, aggressive, or intentionally offensive.

6.2 Songs, which celebrate terrorism, acts of violence, that were carried out in the recent past, are generally regarded as abhorrent by the general public. Songs that celebrate older acts of terrorism are not acceptable either. The Scottish people

cannot have a minute's silence to respect the dead of the First World War, and then be subjected to songs, which celebrate their deaths in Ireland. These songs praise acts of terror against the civil power and innocent civilians. They are used by one set of supporters to taunt, humiliate, and offend the other set of supporters.

6.3 Songs, which celebrate the myriad of so-called loyalist groups in Northern Ireland, are not patriotic songs. They celebrate groups who terrorised the civilian population and conspired, when it suited their purpose, to undermine civil power. These songs are used by one set of supporters to taunt, humiliate, and offend another set of supporters

6.4 Songs in section 5.1 should not be seen as offensive, and are songs that celebrate a patriotic, nationalistic, or cultural event. Songs described in sections 5.2 and 5.3 should be regarded offensive, because that's what they are in the public consciousness.

(B) The responsibility for monitoring behaviour at football matches by the voluntary sector

1.0 The voluntary sector has much admirable strength. Local knowledge of a subject and closeness to a subject can bring benefits. However the voluntary sector has a major weakness in that factions can overtake it, and it is subject to factionalism.

1.1 When one of the main problems at football matches is factionalism or sectarianism there is a need for complete and utter impartiality in the monitoring of sectarian and offensive behaviour. There is also a need for complete transparency. I feel that this is not the case at present.

1.2 I believe that the current groups receiving funding in relation to the monitoring of sectarian behaviour are not best equipped to deal with this issue. In addition there are allegations that one group is lacking in transparency, and has failed to satisfy a major football club, it's supporters, and the media in relation to allegations of sectarian singing. The allegations and modus operandi of this organisation are unclear.

1.3 Responsibility for monitoring offensive behaviour should be carried out by the Police. The Police have professionalism and transparency and are accountable to elected representatives. They are best placed to undertake the role currently carried out by the voluntary sector.

1.4 There is a danger that by using the voluntary sector the government is creating an anti-sectarian industry. Rather than seek to resolve the problem the voluntary sector will seek further funding to expand their operations and in fact create an industry. The Police, under existing financial control, will keep the problem in both financial and policy perspective

1.5 The Police, working with football clubs, would offer better training in techniques to deter offensive behaviour and sectarianism.

1.6 There is no need to extend the remit of groups like Nil by Mouth who appear to want enter the workplace to educate workers on sectarianism. If this purposed act is successful there will be no need for groups like Nil by Mouth.

2.0 Summary

2.1 The voluntary sector is open to factionalism and in the instance of sectarianism-motivated individuals who may potentially instil their views through coercion, and bullying.

2.2 The Police should carry out the entire operation, in relation to offensive behaviour and potential offensive behaviour. The Police should carry out all education, prevention, identification, policy development, implemetation and others. The football clubs should where appropriate, augment this.

(C) The fomenting of offensive behaviour by the media and other organisations

1.1 The Media and their spokespersons and “experts” who have attached themselves to anti-sectarian programmes and articles are often less than helpful. In fact, some of their ill found comments exacerbate the problem of sectarianism, extreme nationalism, and racism.

1.2 Comments are made in relation to a variety of problems especially Scottish racism against the Irish, and anti-Catholic behaviour. Allegations in relation to anti-Irish racism and anti-Catholic behaviour should be substantiated. Failure to substantiate allegations should be examined by the Police. The days of fomenting sectarianism and racism by unsubstantiated comment must end. This should be the case no matter the source of ill-founded allegation, whether it is media spokespersons, professors, religious media officers, and newspaper “sources”.

2.0 Summary

2.1 The Police should take responsibility in monitoring, not only Threatening Communications on social media and sports sites, but also in the wider media. No one should be absolved of responsibility in relation to offensive behaviour, or fomenting offensive behaviour.

John McKnight
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