

PE1498/E

by email to:
petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament



10 February 2014

Dear Clerk,

Consideration of Public Petition PE01498

I enclose the response of the Scottish Catholic Education Service to the request of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee for comments on Petition PE1498, lodged by the Edinburgh Secular Society and first considered on 14th January 2014.

The Scottish Catholic Education Service is an agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Its interests relate to all aspects of education, in particular the education of children and young people in Catholic schools. It works with parents, teachers, young people, local education authorities, local and national government officials and elected representatives.

This response has emerged following a process of discussion with the Catholic Education Commission whose members include parents, teachers, headteachers and Church representatives on Education Committees.

Please contact me if you require clarification on any point.

Yours sincerely,

Michael McGrath
Director

Background

The Scottish Catholic Education Service is an agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Its interests relate to all aspects of education, in particular the education of children and young people in Catholic schools. It works with parents, teachers, young people, local education authorities, local and national government officials and elected representatives. This response is made on behalf of the Catholic Church in Scotland at the request of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee for comments on Petition PE1498, lodged by the Edinburgh Secular Society and first considered on 14th January 2014.

Our response has emerged following a process of discussion with the Catholic Education Commission whose members include parents, teachers, headteachers and Church representatives on Education Committees.

Summary

We are totally opposed to what this petition seeks and we are aggrieved at the offensive language used by the petitioner both in his accompanying statement of 6th January 2014 and in his contribution to the discussions which took place on 14th January 2014. It is typical of a number of recent claims made on the basis of flimsy evidence and assertion. It is becoming increasingly difficult to view all of these as other than constituent of a concerted effort to silence the voice of religious groups on issues of national importance, particularly with regard to the education of children and young people.

Historical reasons

The justification for the Churches having representatives Education Committees is related to the history of Education in this country (and in many others). The Scottish Churches have always had a significant 'investment' in the provision of Education. This commitment was founded on the Christian vision of enabling each person to develop God-given talents and realising potential - "living life to the full".

Long before education authorities existed, schools in Scotland were established as "Parish" schools and run by the local Kirk. So, when these parish schools (and, later, Catholic schools) were transferred over to be managed, initially by local Public School Boards and then by local education authorities, the ongoing involvement and expertise of Church representatives was seen to be invaluable to the on-going development of the education system.

The Churches continued, then, to make a contribution to the development of educational provision, for the sake of local communities - the common good. This commitment continues today, at no cost to local Councils, thanks to the generous spirit of those Church representatives who offer their time to support elected representatives to develop education provision locally.

Current reasons

Those people who are nominated by the Churches to contribute to the work of education committees live in the local community and are familiar with local issues. Most are laypeople and many have significant experience of working in senior education posts. Their contributions are focussed on the needs of the local community and are influenced by their own particular educational interests and expertise.

As is evidenced in many endorsements by education officials and elected representatives, the input of Church representatives to the local democratic process is often greatly appreciated. Like other non-elected members on Councils, they freely give up their own time to serve their local communities and they operate on a non-political basis. In short, they make an invaluable contribution to local community representation which could not easily be replaced. They serve a different function from that of elected members of political parties, being independent of political allegiance. So far from contributing to a so-called democratic deficit, it is clear that Church representatives, working together and with elected members of political parties, enhance the democratic process by bringing to it valuable insights which they have gained through well-developed consultation processes in their communities. We reject as baseless the claims of the petitioner that Church representatives on Education Committees exert an undue influence on the decisions made by local Councils. We reject the petitioner's claim that these people are "controlled" in how they vote by Church officials or members of Church hierarchy. We call on the petitioner to withdraw these claims or to support them with substantiated facts rather than with anecdote, rumour and misquotation.

Catholic schools

So far, our arguments have related to the role of representatives of all Churches on Education Committees. Clearly, we believe that this role is significant and purposeful in serving the common good locally. We now turn to specific issues which relate to the provision of denominational schools in Scotland.

Catholic schools were "transferred" into state ownership in 1918 in the same Education Act which established local education authorities. That arrangement came about as a result of assurances that the specific characteristics of the Catholic school would be protected in legislation, as it still is today.

One of the mechanisms for monitoring the State's ongoing commitment to those assurances is the presence of a Catholic Church representative on every Council where there are Catholic schools. While Catholic Church representatives play a wider role than merely safeguarding Catholic schools, their role in doing so is seen by the Catholic community as being vital to the welfare of Catholic schools. For this

particular reason – as well as for those stated above - the Catholic Church is opposed to any attempt to dispense with the role of Church representatives on Education Committees.

The Petitioner's argument

It is with regret that we have to state that the petitioner's argument with regard to the Catholic Church is as muddled in its thinking as it is offensive in its tone. At one point he claims that the requirement to have both a Church of Scotland representative and a Catholic Church representative (as well as a 'third' representative) appears "to legitimate and endorse the division between Roman Catholics and Protestants". He then tries to claim the moral high ground by asserting that this flies in the face of the Scottish Government's efforts to eradicate sectarianism from this country.

Yet, in making this very point, he indulges in the most offensive and inflammatory language when describing the Catholic Church as "an outpost of a foreign power based in Rome" and its representatives on Education Committees as "sectarian appointments". Such rhetoric feeds only the baser instincts of some in our society who need little encouragement to express anti-Catholic sentiments. These claims do a great disservice to Catholics who have contributed greatly to the welfare of this country. Scotland needs and deserves a more civilised and enlightened public discourse.

Further, the petitioner's bias against the Catholic Church leads him to stray into areas of doctrine which have no bearing on this petition. It is unacceptable that the petitioner should take the opportunity to take issue with some of the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church on the grounds that they constitute "a direct affront to core public values".

In stooping to such tactics and language, the petitioner brings no credit to himself or to his cause. It is disappointing that the use of such language was not challenged by members of the Public Petitions Committee on 14th January 2014.

We call on the Public Petitions Committee to dismiss this petition.