



**PUBLIC PETITION NO.**

**PE01530**

### Name of petitioner

Spencer Fildes on behalf of Scottish Secular Society

### Petition title

Guidance on how creationism is presented in schools

### Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue official guidance to bar the presentation in Scottish publicly funded schools of separate creation and of Young Earth doctrines as viable alternatives to the established science of evolution, common descent, and deep time.

### Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition

This Section documents some of the many attempts that have been made to obtain official guidance on creationism and Intelligent Design from the Scottish Qualifications Authority and from Government Ministers, and how these have been unsuccessful. We apologise for the length, but feel it is important to quote official correspondence in detail.

The [Sunday] Herald (10 Oct 2010) reported at the time of the launch of Glasgow's Centre for Intelligent Design that the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association and the Educational Institute of Scotland had both requested guidance, but that none was forthcoming.

On 9 October, Prof Paul Braterman had written to a colleague, with copies to various interested parties, as follows:

*"Some of my colleagues feel, as I do, that the Curriculum for Excellence and the examinations syllabi should include, as the analogous documents in England do, explicit guidance stating that creationism and Intelligence Design are not scientific theories and should not be taught as such. Who should they write to express this view?"*

*The matter is given additional urgency by the recent establishment in Glasgow of the Centre for Intelligent Design. I enclose a background information piece on them that I put together on behalf of BCSE at the request of a Sunday Herald reporter, as well as a sample of the material sent to schools by Truth in Science, a group whose personnel and supporters strongly overlaps those of C for ID.*

*The matter has attracted considerable attention; a piece that I wrote about the closely related Discovery Institute for a local webzine attracted over 1000 hits."*

In response, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) advised that in their view this was a matter for teachers' individual professional judgement and, by implication, that there was no problem that needed addressing.

On 10 November 2010, a parliamentary question from Patrick Harvie to the Cabinet

Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning drew the response:

*"I say to Patrick Harvie that I can and will distinguish between belief and scientific fact; that is absolutely what I should do. However, I will not be a censor or forbid people from holding opinions or beliefs"*

**It is precisely because of the difference between individual belief, which must be free, and what should be presented as valid with the authority of the educational system, which must be scientifically and pedagogically defensible, that the guidance we seek is necessary.**

More recent correspondence has been equally inconclusive and unhelpful. To take the most recent of many examples, on 1 October 2013, in the wake of the Kirktonholme scandal, Caroline Lynch, then Chair of Scottish Secular Society (SSS) wrote on behalf of SSS to the SQA as follows:

Creationism and Evolution Denial in Scottish Schools

*"As you will no doubt be aware, creationism and the denial of evolution has been found in three separate Scottish schools in a very short period of time. This confirms our belief that such views and excesses may be endemic in the system.*

*The Scottish curriculum does not specifically state that teaching creationism as an alternative to the overwhelming scientific consensus on the origins of the universe or that teaching intelligent design as an alternative to evolution, or in any context as a viable alternative to accepted science, is unacceptable. This is not the case in England and Wales, where the Department for Education has stated that "We do not expect creationism, intelligent design and similar ideas to be taught as valid scientific theories in any state funded school." The National Secular Society wrote to you in 2010 with similar warnings and we are deeply disappointed that no unequivocal statement has so far been made. The potential for harm and abuse is now very clear.*

*Our repeated warnings about this, the vociferous parental backlash and the intense media scrutiny on these revelations, make it very clear to us that this issue needs to be addressed immediately.*

*Creationism and Intelligent Design are anti-scientific views that are not only deeply divisive and confusing in an educational context but are positions that defeat the hard work of teachers in other curricular areas. These topics have no rightful place in Scottish primary and secondary science education, indeed no place in our education system at all outside of discussions in Religious and Moral Education classes.*

*If this is left unchecked there is a very real potential that such views can continue to affect this nation's most precious resource – our children. The complacency which has underpinned government assurances that this is not and cannot be an issue in Scotland has now been shattered. Now is the time for positive and assertive action to safeguard the education of our children. We ask that you declare immediately that creationism and intelligent design are specifically excluded from the educational setting outside of RME classes, and that appropriate action including formal guidance is issued to all schools to underpin your statement"*

The official response to this, as to similar letters, was a simple reaffirmation of the official view, that there is no problem and that the matter can in any case be left to the good judgment of teachers.

1 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/education/would-you-adam-and-eve-it-top-scientists-tell-scottish-pupils-the-bible-is-true-1.1060545>

## Petition background information

We petition the Scottish Parliament to instruct the Education Secretary to issue guidance to publicly funded schools and colleges to prevent the teaching of creationism<sup>1</sup> and related doctrines as viable alternatives to established science.

Nothing in this request precludes the discussion of such doctrines in their proper place, as part of the study of ideas, neither does it nor can it infringe on individual freedom of belief. For purposes of clarification, we respectfully offer provisional draft language that would meet the case.

The most remarkable thing about this petition is that it is necessary. Evolution, meaning the common descent of living things and their change over time, is, and has been for generations, the unifying concept of the life sciences. It is so recognised by all major scientific Academies and by repeated references in the Curriculum for Excellence, and is endorsed by numerous religious authorities.<sup>2</sup> The deep time necessary for this evolution had been recognised by Scottish geologists over a century earlier. There is wide agreement that Scotland's future prosperity depends on science-based industry, including in particular our strong tradition of biomedical research.

Yet over the past few decades, this established science has come under attack, inspired by the importation from the US of the doctrines known as creation science, flood geology, and Intelligent Design. These maintain, respectively, that scientific findings should be judged according to their compatibility with biblical literalism, that the entire geological record is the product of a world-wide flood and other events within the past few thousand years, and that the repeated operation of mutation and selection is incapable of generating new significant information. All of these doctrines require the wholesale rejection of modern biology while some extend this rejection to cosmology, geology, and planetary science, along with much of present-day physics and chemistry. Nonetheless, we know that they are being presented in schools as viable alternatives to these established sciences.

For many years, voices within the educational community have been asking the Scottish Government for guidance on how to deal with these threats. In reply, the official answer from Government ministers and from the SQA, as documented in Section 4 above, has always been that such matters can safely be left to the judgment of individual teachers and school Heads.

This places school Heads and other teachers in an impossible position. In around a quarter of Scotland's local Education Committees, to whom they have to answer, one or more of the unelected representatives of religion is openly creationist. Schools, in the nature of things, rely heavily on the voluntary services of church chaplains and other volunteer visitors, who are not themselves trained as teachers or as scientists, and we have come across numerous cases where such people are enthusiastically proselytising creationists. Heads, teachers, and indeed parents concerned for the scientific integrity of their children's education needs to be able to point such volunteers towards clear official guidance specifying what is, and what is not, admissible.

The present situation places an unreasonable responsibility on teachers for the unaided monitoring of tendentious materials from creationist sources and of the activities of visitors and individuals such as volunteers and Chaplains who are not formally part of the teaching staff. There are even anecdotal reports of school science teachers negotiating (!) with their colleagues in Religious Education to ensure that creationism is not taught as true doctrine. Thus there is no doubt that guidance we seek is necessary. Moreover, as long ago as 2010, such guidance was requested (see Section 4 above) by the teachers themselves through their representatives in EIS and the Association of Secondary Teachers. Events since then only underline the need for these requests.

We know that present arrangements have led to unacceptable, even scandalous, situations. The distribution of Young Earth creationist and explicitly anti-scientific materials in primary schools last September led to a national scandal<sup>7</sup> that has now attracted international comment.<sup>8</sup> We know of openly creationist individuals, some without any explicit qualifications, who serve as school chaplains or as members of school chaplaincy committees, and as such have direct influence, but only on the conduct of Religious Observance, but on the development of the Religious and Moral Education programme. In one case, we found three separate creationist churches represented among the chaplaincies of the same Central Belt local authority. A volunteer organisation, which carries anti-scientific Young Earth creationist materials,

has buses visiting schools, and offers teaching materials in Religious Education at both primary and secondary levels.<sup>9</sup>

In all these cases, and no doubt in many others that have not come to our attention, people with the best of intentions will be bringing creationist convictions into schools, and creating an atmosphere where it is difficult or embarrassing for teachers to challenge them. Thus one reason why guidance is needed is to support the teachers themselves against pressures.

We have no wish to restrict the discussion of creationism as part of the study of religious or other ideas. We therefore suggest as a possible model the following language, which loosely follows the lead of that now in place in agreements between Churches and the Department for Education in England:

Pupils must be taught about evolution as firmly based science, and not presented with 'creationism' as scientific fact or as a valid alternative to evolution.

'Creationism' here means any doctrine or theory which holds that natural biological processes cannot account for the history, diversity, and complexity of life on earth and therefore rejects the scientific theory of evolution. Pupils should also be taught about the age of the Earth on the basis of established science, and not presented with Young Earth scenarios as credible alternatives.

This guidance is not intended to inhibit discussion of beliefs about the origins of the Earth and living things, such as creationism, in Religious Education and other cultural studies, as long as they are not presented as valid alternatives to established science.

1 Creationism here means the separate creation of different living kinds. No objection is being raised to discussion of the overall belief in God as the ultimate creator. Similarly, by Intelligent Design we mean the oft-refuted claim that natural processes cannot generate the kind of new information required for evolution. This claim should be distinguished from the respectable philosophical position that sees the operation of the Universe as a whole as the working of Providence.

2 For endorsements by scientific societies see e.g.

<http://royalsociety.org/document.asp?tip=1&id=4926> (Royal Society),

[http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=11876](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11876) and

<http://nationalacademies.org/evolution/> (US National Academy of Sciences),

<http://www.interacademies.net/10878/13901.aspx> (67 separate national academies from China to Peru and spanning counties dominated by all three Abrahamic religions).

For religious endorsements see e.g. <http://www.biologos.org> (mainly Evangelical),

<http://www.cin.org/jp2evolu.html> (Catholic), <http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/medical-ethics-health-social-care-policy/darwin/malcolmbrown.aspx>

(Episcopalian), <http://theclergyletterproject.org/> (Evolution Sunday and Clergy Letter Project; mainly US; inter-denominational, over 11,000 clergy),

<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6764> and links therein (various). See also

<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6764> and links therein (various). See also

<http://ncse.com/media/voices/religion>

For summary of scientific evidence, see <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/comdesc/> and

for refutations of creationist quote mining see

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/quotes/mine/project.html> and of other creationist

counter-claims (e.g. denial of intermediate forms) see

<http://www.talkorigins.org/indexcc/list.html> and links to primary literature therein.

3 <http://hillfootsalvabaptist.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=noah>

4 <http://www.aoglarbert.org/our%20beliefs.html>

5 <http://www.aoglarbert.org/our%20beliefs.html>

6 <http://www.bridge-church.com/about-the-bridge/>

7 <http://blogs.answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2013/04/10/reaching-scots/>

8 For content analysis of these books, see <http://wp.me/p21T1L-7U>. For press reports

of the incident, see e.g. <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/parents-outrage-extremist-religious-sect-2254926>,

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/education/school-heads-removed-in-row-over-radical-christian-helper.22143814>, and

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-24077924>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-24077924>

8 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-zimmerman/creationism-at-its-most->

e\_b\_5582955.html

9 We were advised that it was inappropriate to name individuals in this section, but documentation is available on request

### Unique web address

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

### Related information for petition

#### Scottish Secular Society Website

<http://scottishsecularsociety.com/>

#### Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/ScottishSecularSociety>

**Facebook Group for debate and discussion** (please note this is a moderated group and posts may not necessarily represent the views of the Scottish Secular Society)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/secularscotland/>

### Do you wish your petition to be hosted on the Parliament's website to collect signatures online?

YES

### How many signatures have you collected so far?

0

### Closing date for collecting signatures online

03 / 09 / 2014

### Comments to stimulate online discussion

Creationism in Scottish schools is present, insidious, and undermines science teaching and science teachers. Yet chaplains endorse it, teachers ignore the issue, children are confused by it, and the Government has refused to act or even acknowledge the problem. In the face of pressures, how can we help our teachers ensure that creationism remains where it belongs, in the museum of discarded ideas? How can anyone pretend in the face of recent dramatic evidence that there is no problem? How much more remains unreported? Don't our teachers deserve the support they themselves have asked for, in dealing with the professionally packaged anti-science of outright creationism, or the technically complex semi-science of Intelligent Design?