

Meeting Note: Cross Party Group on Religious Freedom

Initial Exploratory Meeting held on **Tuesday 15 September - Room TG 20/21 from 6pm – 7.30pm.**

Welcome and Apologies.

MSP in Attendance

- Murdo Fraser (Convenor)
- Nigel Don (Deputy Convenor)
- Anne McTaggart

MSP Apologies

- John Mason
- Michael McMahon
- Dave Thompson

Group/Individual Apologies

Linda Oxburgh - Development Manager (Release International)

Salah Beltagui of Scottish Council of Muslims

Kieran Turner of Evangelical Alliance

Alastair Reid – Quakers

Iain G Mitchell QC

Martin Johnstone

MSP Members of Group (confirmed)

- Dave Thompson (SNP).
- Murdo Fraser (Conservatives).
- Anne McTaggart (Labour).
- John Mason (SNP).
- Michael McMahon (Labour).

****Cross Party Support Achieved**

Convener	Dave Thompson.
Deputy Convener	Murdo Fraser and Anne McTaggart.
Secretary	Michael Robinson of Aid to the Church in Need UK.
Treasurer	N/A.

Murdo and Nigel welcomed the attendees, followed by introductions of those assembled, before moving onto the formal business of assigning duties.

Formalities Agreed

1.

Name: “*Cross Party Group on Religious Freedom*”

2.

Aim: The group will provide a forum for MSPs, enabling discussion and the widest possible engagement with the multi-faith community, locally, nationally, and internationally.

The group will provide a platform for MSPs to consider religious freedom in the knowledge that belief and freedom to express that belief is the hallmark of a democratic society, and fosters respect, and tolerance in our communities in the Public Interest.

4.

There is currently no equivalent group in the Scottish Parliament.

5.

Benefits in Kind

Michael Robinson of Aid to the Church in need UK has agreed £800 in kind on the presumption of four meetings annually.

Issues Arising/Future Discussion Topics

- Religious Tolerance in a multi-faith world.
- Funding Issues
- Awareness Campaigns on issues such as religious intolerance.
- Global matters e.g. Syrian refugee crisis. Exodus of religious people's fleeing wars.
- **Article 18** on United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

- **Article 19** on United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

- Ruth Donaldson of Christian Solidarity Worldwide draws group's attention to www.freedomdeclared.org as a template for the group going forward.

“We are a cross-party group of parliamentarians who believe that International Freedom of Religion or Belief is a crucial human right. We therefore seek to raise its profile in Government, in Parliament, in the media and among the general public. FREEDOM DECLARED is our website, designed to help you find out more about freedom of religion or belief and play your part in the fight for this right to be recognised worldwide”.

- Case Studies from similar groups in other countries (e.g. Lynne Paterson, Tearfund Scotland Director's example of “Faith in Wales” booklet. Similar information and statistics might be good idea for Scotland).

- Consensus that if/when group is formalised the group will endeavour to maximise participation of the group by inviting as many people from the faith community to participate e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, The Baha'I Faith, Paganism, Brahma Kumaris, Jainism and so on. In doing so, every effort will be made to consult the Inter-Faith Calendar.
- Discussion on finer details agreed to wait until proposed meeting in January. It is thought the group will have more teeth by focussing in on one meeting, especially as it is so late in the Parliamentary term.

Kevin's Note:

Main point is that it was agreed to keep things as **broad** as possible, certainly in the first instance. This meeting note attempts to reflect that and is in no way offered up as an exhaustive document of everything that was mentioned at the meeting. I hope, however, that the themes have been accurately recorded.

I think it would be prudent now to wait and see if the group receives approval and we can firm up on issues we are looking to discuss at the next meeting.

It was agreed that if the group is not passed by Procedures, it should continue informally, with Michael Robinson of Church in Need UK offering Secretariat.

Date for future meeting to be confirmed sometime in January 2016.