LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
CALL FOR VIEWS ON THE NON-DOMESTIC RATES (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM CRAIG MACDONALD

I am a parent of two school age children aged 15 and 12 years old. We live in Kilmarnock and several years ago because of the very poor standard of local schools we made the decision to have our children educated at Wellington School in Ayr. As you will be aware Wellington School is an independent fee paying school. We are not a wealthy family by any stretch of imagination, however we have made the choice to pay for our children’s education, which is over and above the taxes we already contribute to the local and national economies. Therefore I believe that I am qualified to give my submission to this consultation on the future implementation of this bill.

When I went to school in the 1970s, Scottish education was the envy of the world. Free education was introduced in Scotland well in advance of other countries, which I believe was fundamental to Scottish contributions in areas of medicine, engineering and other scientific achievements. However, in recent times other counties have upped their game and Scotland’s education has slipped down the world’s educational league tables. Our secondary schools have had to reduce the width of their curriculum in an effort to maintain the quality of teaching. School closures and amalgamations have been implemented to provide economies of scale. However these actions have limited the choice of study options for pupils and in many cases have led to greatly increased class sizes.

Scottish universities, with much less money coming from the Scottish Government, have had to significantly increase the proportion of pupils who come from outside of Scotland. The Scottish Government ‘pays’ Scottish university fees for Scottish students and EU students from outside of the UK. However, they pay a much lower rate per student to universities than these universities can charge for students coming from elsewhere. Furthermore, the number of places Scottish universities can offer Scottish and EU students is capped and they are forbidden from discriminating between Scottish and EU students. Therefore the opportunities for Scottish students to get a place at a good Scottish university are even further reduced. For example, although there is a much publicised shortage of qualified doctors in Scotland, less than half of the places available to study medicine in Scotland are available to Scottish students. Due to the restrictions on the number of places available for Scottish students, only students with the very highest grades can get a place on a university course of their choice. The irony is not lost on me that the Scottish government is trying to make independent schools less viable whilst privatising higher education in Scotland. This brings me back to Wellington.

We chose to send our children to Wellington to give them the best chance to gain a place at university. We pay our school fees in addition to the taxes we pay to the local
and national economies, which are already the highest in the UK. Wellington School is not a profit making business. Wellington School has charitable status partly because it provides bursaries for children from poorer backgrounds to gain a free education. Bursaries contribute towards the Scottish government’s ambition of closing the attainment gap. Changing the charitable status of Wellington School will not impact on the wealthy people who send their children to Wellington. Instead it will impact greatly on the children of parents like me who have sacrificed a lot to give their children the best possible start in life. If the school decides that bursaries are no longer affordable, then it will impact on the children who might have benefited from bursaries to study at Wellington, with the resulting impact on the attainment gap. If the school becomes unviable and is forced to close, then it would result in the loss of employment for teaching and auxiliary staff, which would have a significant impact on the local economy. Furthermore, closing independent schools throughout Scotland would make this part of the UK less attractive to the type of people who invest in business and create employment opportunities.

In conclusion, I believe that many of the current problems with Scottish education have been caused by a lack of investment by successive Scottish governments, past and present. I believe that careful consideration should be given to any actions that will dilute the quality of prospective Scottish students applying for places at Scottish universities. I would urge the Scottish government to resist any further actions that will make Scotland a less attractive place to live, work and study. During the two world wars ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean were protected by sailing in convoys that moved at the pace of the slowest ship and that system worked well in that time of need. However, this is not the way to close the attainment gap. I believe that we need to raise standards across the board by investing in primary and secondary education and let the stars shine. Let’s make sure that our universities are accessible to a greater number of Scottish students investing in all our futures. If we close the attainment gap by dumbing down the quality of prospective Scottish students then we do a great disservice to the legacy of the great Scots who came before us and we risk a monumental failure as a nation. Instead let’s take pride in what Scotland has achieved and work towards bringing state schools up to a standard where once again Scottish education is the envy of the world, so let’s scrap this new stealth tax and come up with something a bit more creative.

Craig MacDonald