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

I am writing in opposition to the proposed above Bill, in particular Section 10.

It is strange that the government is seeking to actively damage a sector of society that not only provides employment for a great number of people in Scotland, but provides a product that is vital for the moral, intellectual, spiritual and cultural well-being of our society: education. If the government wants a ‘Smarter Scotland’ it should be making it easier for schools to operate, not harder. It appears, however, that this government doesn’t value plurality of education, as this Bill would gravely impede the ability of the independent sector to continue with its provision of excellence; indeed it threatens to undermine the sector’s very existence, as a fair and democratic alternative to the state-mandated system.

How we spend our money in a democracy is our choice. Parents can chose to spend their hard-earned money as they see fit - some choose to forgo holidays and fancy goods and instead, they channel their salaries into an education that they feel suits their children.

The assumption that families who send their children to independent schools, could afford a hike in fees is misplaced. Very many parents are deeply worried about the affordability of keeping their children at these schools. Furthermore many children are able to attend independent schools because of bursaries - if fees have to be raised to accommodate the Bill’s proposals, this latter, charitable (and highly regulated) act, will have to be truncated.

A more iniquitous concern is the associated assumption that these parents wouldn’t bat eyelids in paying higher fees, i.e. that they don’t consider the rationale about sending their children to these schools, they just do so because they can pay whatever the fees might be and they get to crow about ‘exclusivity’. It is not fair to say that the children at these schools are from isolated, rich, arrogant backgrounds; from families that aspire to promulgating partisan and deliberately exclusive cohorts of children. The diversity in social background at a school like St. Mary’s, Melrose (where I teach), is clear and commendable.

If this Bill is passed schools like St. Mary’s will lose pupils. The pool of potential replacement pupils will shrink, thus causing further fee rises to make up that shortfall. The potential for closures then increases too, which results in the disappearance of the many jobs that independent schools provide. St. Mary’s is probably the largest employer in Melrose and were it to close the knock-on effect would be obvious, not to mention detrimental to the wider community. I have decided to stay in the district because of my employment at St. Mary’s. If it were to forced out of business my family would have to relocate, possibly to Edinburgh, or more likely, south of the border. That threat to employment seems to be one that this government is fomenting.
Then there is the consequential problem of fitting those now school-less pupils into the state system. Pupils at St. Mary’s generally live rurally, thus Scottish Borders council would have to factor in higher transport costs for getting these pupils to their new schools. Their parents are already paying for state-school places through their council taxes, but now that money would actually have to be ‘used’, putting further financial pressure onto local authorities - alongside the pressures of class sizes, facilities, resources and teacher recruitment. Teaching staff in the state-system are alas under enough pressures as it is.

What is frustrating is that state schools are funded by local authorities who also collect the rates - they don’t charge themselves. The Barclay Review’s idea of fairness and ‘a level-playing field’ is based on a mistaken belief of an existing disparity. Why isn’t the government instead positively pitching rate relief for all schools, rather than negatively removing relief from charities (all of which are regulated and rigourously so). Oh wait, it’s not advocating the removing of relief from all 23,000+ charities, just the small percentage (less than one quarter of one percent) of the charities that are independent schools. Is this not unfair? There is also disparity with VAT exemption; state schools get 100%, independent schools do not.

My colleagues will have already indicated the significant amounts of input we at St. Mary’s offer into the local and wider communities, whether it be charitable, educational, cultural, or environmental, as well as our own time we voluntarily offer to support these projects; not to mention the large amount of remedial education we provide. We are but one school. All the independent schools in Scotland offer these positive, societal benefits and all are under threat from this dishonourable and discriminatory Bill.