LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON THE NON-DOMESTIC RATES (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM HARRY DUTHIE

I would like to voice my concern regarding the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill and, in particular, Section 10, which removes eligibility to claim charitable relief from non-domestic rates from mainstream independent schools.

The arguments against this change to current regulations have been clearly and thoroughly laid out by John Edward, the Director of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS). It is clear from reading the documentation provided by SCIS that Section 10 is not designed for any reasonably defined definition of public good. As outlined in SCIS’ documentation, if one in thirty independently educated pupils finds the need to transfer to the maintained sector due to fee rises necessitated almost solely by this governmental change, then Section 10 will provide a net less to government funds.

As a teacher at Fettes College, that critical figure where the taxpayer accepts a net loss from this proposal amounts to just nineteen of our five hundred and seventy pupils in the senior school.

From reading governmental documentation regarding this proposal, it appears Section 10 has been written on the basis of being “fair”. There is no rateable relief for state maintained schools, but this is an academic exercise in paper shuffling as one state body ‘pays’ another state body, without any money actually being lost from budgets that already have rates factored in. As regularly happens in the arguments regarding maintained versus private education, Section 10 is based on creating fairness by making this more difficult for the private sector rather than raising up the maintained sector. If this proposal truly was about fairness, the government could have proposed to provide rateable relief to maintained schools.

It is in this negative view of creating fairness that the government’s real agenda can be seen. This is a clear political attack on a part of the Scottish economy that the government believes should not exist. Independent schools have passed the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator’s (OSCR’s) tests on charitable status but the government has chosen to single out just fifty-six of the twenty-four thousand Scottish registered charitable bodies, including many other fee-charging, restricted admission education bodies.

If the government believes this sector of the economy should not exist then it should make the argument clearly and plainly and try to win this argument on its merits. Instead, it has taken to trying to make it impossible to run a school and will, in turn, lead to an increase in fees and reduce the availability of bursaries as schools struggle to maintain their budgets, burden the Scottish taxpayer more heavily when pupils move to the maintained sector, and lessen the considerable but untrumpeted benefit that independent schools provide to their local communities.
I would like to lend my voice to many others and strongly voice my opposition to Section 10 of the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill.