I am writing in response to a request for views on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill with direct reference to the private sector schools who may find themselves paying full rates. I would like to speak about this issue in three ways – professionally, as a teacher in a private sector school after 20 years in the state sector; personally as a parent who has benefitted from the charitable status of private schools with my own children; as a citizen of a country where there are bigger problems out there.

I worked in Scottish primary schools for 20 years before moving to the private sector 4 years ago. It was not a conscious decision at the time – it was the only job locally offering a full time, permanent contract. LA schools were only handing out temporary contracts and any full time contracts were often word of mouth. Since moving here, I have found myself in an excellent working environment with good resources, plenty of staff and sufficient learning support to meet our learners needs. If we are looking for a charity providing benefit to the local community, then there are many ways in which my school adds value. Firstly, and most importantly, we have healthy happy children – 165 of them. All the nursery pupils are here on funded places with competitive rates for top up. We have a very well-resourced learning support department that takes children (mine included) from state sector that require support but who were unable to get the support they needed due to lack of staff. These pupils make tremendous progress and are better prepared for life ahead in the world of work where they will be paying taxes and contributing to their local community. They go from being low in confidence with very few skills to functioning well in class and looking ahead to a life of choices. The bursary system is well established and of great benefit – a means tested process where families pay what they can and still have access the full range of services that we can provide. Without this system, some of these children would be lost in state sector, taking up teacher time and failing everywhere. This surely is of major benefit to society. Private education may not be ideal if we are visualising an equal society, but the fact is that adding rates to private schools will actually make this divide worse – we will no longer have the funds to offer bursaries to families and we will not be obligated to do so.

We work outside school with various events through the year – a yearly science festival hosted on the grounds and free to the public, an adventure day to which all local schools are invited, we sing at local festivals, visit the elderly, engage in local initiatives like the food bank and litter picking, raise money for charity and provide parking and accommodation during sporting events and local fairs to name only a few.

Personally, I have three very different children. My eldest was very academic and just sat at the back of her primary classroom, working by herself and being teased for being
brainy. She was unhappy and under stimulated. Our second daughter is dyslexic. At age 9 she still could not read and her teacher asked me to get her eyes tested. My son is dyslexic and has other health issues. His primary teacher told me she did not intend on teaching him because he was disabled and there was not any point. The head teacher refused to intervene. The learning support teacher agreed that he could do with some support but it was not authorised and she did not have the time anyway. He could not read or write and was made to feel like a total failure. Over the years we were able to access bursary funds at our local prep schools and a private secondary, where all three children got the support they needed to succeed.

This is the untold story of the private sector. I have many friends who made the difficult decision to move their children to private sector because they were struggling to get the help their children needed at their local state sector schools and they all benefited from the bursary system. It is a financial stretch for all of us, but the new proposal will make it impossible for future families to access these funded places. They will simply no longer exist.

There is absolutely no way I would have such happy, confident children if I had not taken the difficult step to move them to private sector. There is no way I would have been able to do so without the financial support provided by the school’s charitable status. These three individuals have not taken their privilege for granted and will hopefully move into adulthood ready to give back to society, much more able to do so because they were successful in school.

Finally, what will be the actual benefit of this legislation? Are the council coffers really going to see much of an increase? The revenue from the rates are a drop in the ocean compared to the potential loss of jobs and the cost of accommodating the children that may need to be educated locally. It may be a short-term crowd pleaser, but targeting private schools in this way makes no long-term social or economic sense.