LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM HUGO MEYNELL

The Barclay review and Government response both stress being fair across the board. How is it fair to exempt independent nursery schools (my experience of which has been less about the care of the children and more about their money-making capability, which is why I moved them to a nursery within a school-based setting) and universities of non-domestic rates on the basis that they provide childcare and education to the future workforce when those arguments could be equally applied to schools? And what about the nurseries which are part of an independent school, why is it a different rule for them if fairness is the argument?

How is it fair to single out 50+ independent schools from 24,000 other charitable organisations in Scotland, to the collective public benefit test? Independent schools provide public benefit in allowing use of their facilities in particular their sports facilities. The impact of this has not been considered especially when considered in light of the Scottish Government’s targets to reduce childhood obesity by raising children’s activity levels. Also music teaching and rehearsal space provided when music education is being cut in Scottish state schools, careers and other community events, the charity work done.

The children who attend independent schools are not just from well-off families, their parents are usually working hard to afford the fees to send them there, and they make sacrifices to be able to afford it because they feel the standard of state education is no longer acceptable to provide them with a decent education or they have had problems within the state system that have necessitated a move to a more nurturing environment. Many children who attend these schools benefit from bursaries and scholarships on offer. Parents are already paying for their education through their local domestic rates, then have to pay for substantial school fees in addition which come out of their taxed income. For every child being educated at an independent rather than state school in Scotland there is a financial implication, a saving from the public purse of I understand £6500 per child so parents are already contributing by not taking up these places. If you do away with all the independent schools in Scotland, how would the education system cope? That may be an overstatement, but if you remove the non-domestic rate exemption and therefore cause the schools to raise fees to cover the deficit, that will be the tipping point for some families particularly when more than 1 child in the family is educated privately and there will inevitably be some children who will have to leave the independent school sector and take up a place at a state school costing more tax-payers money and it would only take 1 in 30 children to make this move to negate the revenues earned by removing the exemption.

Putting the financial implication of that aside for one moment, what about the impact that could have on moving those children - think about their health and well-being, leaving their friends, the stability of being at that school, the impact of perhaps going from a small nurturing school to one of the huge secondaries we have in Scotland of over 1000 pupils, or a move at a crucial educational stage such as before National 5s or Highers, perhaps even moving from a different type of curriculum or exam system?
I see no evidence that any of these factors have been considered, yet the Scottish Government accepts that mental health issues are becoming a major public health challenge in Scotland and are prepared to contribute more to this. Mental health reasons might be why an independent school is chosen for a particular child in the first place, they may be educationally fragile, and/or have additional support needs that a state school does not have enough resources to support adequately, the contribution independent schools make in this regard is underestimated. Another unfair aspect is that a smaller school in terms of roll size with a larger campus would have an additional rates burden compared to a school with a higher on a smaller campus which does not seem a fair system?

So my view is that this is a short-sighted measure to raise revenues which will actually cost tax-payers more in the long-run and it is done at the expense of the few who are already paying a disproportionate amount for their children’s education because the alternative education is in such a sorry state. We need to educate our young people for the future benefit of Scotland as a whole so I sincerely hope these proposals are not adopted into law. Worse the argument being used is it is being done for fairness when clearly it is not a fair proposal if you examine it in closer detail, so I urge the Committee not to accept these proposals to remove the NDR exemption for independent schools in Scotland.

H. Meynell