LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM P WALKER

I read with interest what is referred to as the Barclay Review and, in particular, its comparatively small, seemingly self-contained section relating to mainstream independent schools. Here, as you know, Barclay proposes removing the eligibility of these bodies, where charities, to claim and to be granted relief from non-domestic rates. As I understand it, Barclay states that saw an inherent unfairness in such a relief by contrasting the independent schools' position with schools in the state sector which pay rates.

Reflecting upon this I thought the examination of the independent school sector was important but, perhaps, given its importance, needed a greater focus as a distinct political issue.

Also, you may agree, that the matter here seemed to be taking rather rapidly into the 'private schools debate' - worthy of and perhaps overdue for consideration in itself - but this was becoming something of a distraction from Barclay's actual purpose which is to examine how future rating ought to operate.

Perhaps, like me, you need then to question whether, worthily, in the pursuit of equity, all the costs and benefits of Barclay's proposal have been assessed adequately?

Could the probable impact of removing the charitable relief from the relevant schools be either: to impact unduly upon the parents, in cases where school operating costs need to be passed on; or, for money to be taken from other funds a school has, such as to support the wider public benefit and/or to assist wider access by way of scholarship or bursary awards?

If some parents found this sudden increase in the cost of educating privately their child(ren) prompted them either to abandon (or in the first place not to entertain) the idea of independent education, what cost would then fall upon the state sector? Although each state sector extra pupil is presumably acquired at a marginal cost, surely this is cumulative; something which affects directly important, non-balance sheet items such as, for example, pupil-teacher ratios.

If some independent schools were to close, and most school charities operate intentionally with a modest surplus, could the impact locally, constituency by constituency, be significant?

Also, would any reduction in the total stock of independent school places, accessible only at higher cost, not then make the system more elitist and far less fair, directly contrary to Barclay's best intentions.

In places, the independent sector has, it seems, quite an international outlook and attracts many foreign pupils. Would additional costs attending 'a Scottish education' then simply deflect this foreign income earning potential for Scotland elsewhere, to
England or abroad? Is this something which would extend to personal attachments to Scotland which was never formed and might have proven beneficial over the longer term?

Cumulatively, presumably, the other, unstated aspect of Barclay, that of simply seeking more money for local governments' coffers, might be affected because the calculation of the yield from the current valuations of the independent schools could, be considerably less in itself because of school closures? [This ignores the economic multiplier effect of how much each of these schools actually contribute to local economies, as well as other public benefits provided.]

Much as I am too passionate about fairness, I wonder if a firm enough grasp has been achieved to progress into legislation this one provision within Barclay?

Surely 'a level playing field' is still achievable and ought to be pursued by turning the issue round 180° and exploring the idea of state schools being removed from rating? Would this not achieve Barclay's aim but without exposing us all to the almost certainly unexamined risks identifiable in the Barclay proposal? Surely some saving is genuinely achievable by removing the administrative element of public money being handed out only to be collected in again?

For my part I am unsure how beneficial it is to extend the otherwise focussed study Barclay conducted into bringing change to comparatively settled areas of activity such as charity law.