LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM ANONYMOUS

I write as both a former parent and now teacher in the independent sector and as such feel qualified to question the reason for the possible change in legislation to cause all mainstream independent schools to pay non-domestic rates.

Taxpayers are caused to pay for state school education, whether using the system or not, through the taxation system. We chose to educate our own children privately. The reasons for this decision were based on class size within the local state primary school and the fact that the school was totally open plan at that time (20 years ago). We felt that our son would become distracted in such a set up and our daughter who has both ADHD and dyslexia would not have coped. We were happy to continue to pay our dues and thereby donate to the state education system, although not using it. This continues to be the case for all our parents who contribute but then choose to educate their children through the independent sector. If non-domestic rates are to be applied to independent schools an increase in school fees will inevitably have to follow, resulting in parents deciding to return to the state sector. By doing so they will put increased pressure on the already crowded, under resourced and underfunded state system. The additional revenue raised from the changes in the non-domestic rates classification will have done little to ease the problems as more children flood into the state system.

St Mary’s School is one of the largest employers in Melrose, with the exception of the Borders General Hospital. A reduction in pupil numbers will potentially lead to redundancies as we balance the pupil to staff ratio. Staff and parents of the children who attend school support the local businesses in the town and contribute to the local economy.

As a school, we value our place in the community and actively encourage the involvement of local state primaries in our leadership and sporting activities. We also run a ‘free of charge’ science festival every year which attracts approximately 1,500 people from around the Scottish Borders. We contribute on an annual basis to many local and national charities, donating over 1000 items to the Galashiels Foodbank at Christmas, and giving to the Borders Children’s Charity, Clik Sargent, Cancer Research and many more.

Running as an independent school, we pay all our own maintenance costs, salting of driveways and clearing snow in winter and so are no burden to the local authority. We also provide all our own transport, so if attending a Scottish Schools event, do not require or expect the provision of buses.
The school has proactively campaigned to reduce plastic waste within the town and promote an increased awareness of the issues surrounding our environment at this time. We are helping to highlight the need to ensure we pass on a sustainable planet to future generations. The children are taking a very active role in this campaign. The change in the non-domestic rates classification could put all this good work in jeopardy as independent schools fail to be able to meet the costs, cannot raise fees any higher and ultimately are forced to close, placing many children back into the state system, approximately 30,000 in Edinburgh alone.

There are times when the independent sector does not have the expertise or experience to deal with a particular problem, e.g. behavioural issues. Under the GIRFEC principles we try to ensure that we have made contact and spoken with educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, behavioural experts in order to deliver a solution for a child (as per GIRFEC). While we are able to access Speech & Language and CAMHS services, it would appear we are not able to access support for behavioural issues and I quote from an email sent by the Local Authority Behavioural Support Team “Really sorry we don’t support in the private sector”. This would seem to be at complete odds with the GIRFEC principles. Given that we have all paid our contribution and thereby helped to fund the state system and in deed saved you money by choosing to educate our children privately, such a refusal would appear to be not only unjust and unfair but potentially immoral. Should our understanding of GIRFEC be that you wish to get it right for every child, so long as they are not in the private sector.