LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM JAMES BROWN

In response to the call for evidence regarding the proposed rise in non-domestic rates for Independent schools, I intend to outline a number of points below:

It is widely publicised that the Scottish State Education sector is floundering in comparison to other EU nations due to increased class sizes, a lack of skilled teachers and a distinct narrowing of the curriculum as financial pressures mount.

Removing charitable status from Independent schools will only seek to increase these pressures on an already trembling state sector. As parents are forced to send their children to their local authority schools, we will see a further increase in class extents. This will stretch the state sector to its limit, where understaffed and over worked schools and teachers will be under greater burden to achieve and accommodate, increasing stress and sick leave. In turn, this will result in an even greater exodus from the teaching profession.

Independent schools take the encumbrance off the Local Authority; parents have already paid their council tax, but opt not to take their child’s allocated position. Professional people who choose the independent sector do so as the Scottish State sector does not produce the quality of education it once did, and as we see, the gulf of attainment continues to broaden. Many of these parents will not be able to afford the increase in fees, with only the top earners being able to afford a private education.

In the Independent schools sector we currently educate many students from across our social demographic with the aid of an inclusive bursary provision, ensuring that the private sector remains open for those who wish to utilise it. As outlined above, with an increase in fees, comes a reduction in the size of the student body, resulting in only the wealthiest affording an Independent education. The irony being that the Independent sector will become more elitist and there being a reduction in equal opportunities.

Independent Schools offer a great deal to their local communities, for example allowing the use of facilities raising money for local and national charities, employing local residents and supporting a wide range of local businesses.

I myself, an Ambassador for Dyslexia Scotland, work within communities and schools all over Scotland offering advice and support to predominantly state sector pupils and teachers. I see first-hand the struggles both face due to the current state of education. The school where I am employed contributes massively to the public domain, many aspects of which I will outline below:
• St. Mary’s employs over 50 local people, the largest employer in the town.
• With over 100 families coming to Melrose and the surrounding area, we provide a significant boost to the local economy.
• We are constantly raising money for local, national and international charities.
• We host Bang Goes the Borders, a free science festival for well over 1200 children every year. This combined with the Farr out Challenge (an activity day for 15 local schools and students aged 8-10) we welcome all people to our school, building bridges not demolishing them.
• Our pupils perform concerts at local churches, hospices and hospitals and we contribute massively seeking to encourage sustainable living in the area with litter picks, tree planting, making bird boxes, and cleaning the River Tweed.
• Our school grounds are also self-managed and when they need gritted, cleared of snow or even the grass cut, we do it all ourselves, relieving the local council of some pressure.

The Scottish Government should raise the bar across the board to meet the standards of the private sector instead of aiming to remove it. Take the successes from both sectors and learn from their failures, to bring about positive change, instead of playing divisive and discriminatory politics… There is enough of that south of the border as we speak.