

PE1514/G

New Petitions

Time for Reflection (PE1514)

Comments from the Scottish Independent Celebrants Association

First of all, on behalf of The Scottish Independent Celebrants' Association (SICA) I thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on this Petition; it highlights important issues regarding the changing attitudes of Scottish society with regard to religion and religious views which, we believe, should be addressed in a full and frank way.

In Mr Bonney's opening statement, he referred to questions by some of his associates, asking why there is a Time for Reflection at all in the Scottish Parliament; he preferred not to address that question on the basis that it was unlikely to succeed at this time. I think that is a realistic point of view and an unfortunate state of affairs; a debate on removing the Religious affiliations of the Scottish Parliament would be useful. However, we agree that timing of such a significant issue would be important so that it would be given the attention it deserves.

We believe that Parliament's religious affiliations and connections should be addressed at a fundamental level, given the move in Society away from Religions as reflected in the Census' statistics. Mr. Bonney's Petition highlights a symptom of Parliaments religious connections that Time for Reflection continues in a mostly religious vein, despite the 1999 review. Chic Brodie's comment "However, I am still not sure why you think that you are being denied something that cannot be promulgated more widely than just in the Parliament." reflects complacency about this aspect of Parliamentary time, as if suggesting that because it was such a short time in the week, its importance is insignificant. We agree that the Time for Reflection is an important symbol and that "Parliament seems not to be living up to its principle of having time for reflection reflect the full diversity of belief in Scotland"

Mr Bonney asserts that, according to the latest survey data, which he made available to the committee, "people who have no belief in God or any higher spiritual power" make up something like twenty five per cent of the Scottish population. We would not argue with that statistic but we would question the inference then that the twenty five per cent are therefore "firm atheists" who should be "represented" in time for Reflection.

We would draw attention to the two, in use, definitions of the word "atheist":

- 1.) A person who lacks belief in a god or gods and
- 2.) A person who believes that no god or gods exist.

Mr Bonney is, it seems, suggesting that that twenty five per cent who "have no belief in God" according to the census are "firm atheists", that is, that they fall in to the second category of definition in that they actively "believe that no god or gods

exists". We would dispute this; it is our experience, as a group of professional celebrants dealing with people when thoughts of God and higher power are to the fore at time of death of their loved ones, that in fact the majority of non-believers merely "lack belief" and have no interest in considering the question further; the challenge posed by the second definition, i.e. an active belief, is irrelevant to them. Therefore to suggest that this group of people would be best "represented" by atheists in Time for Reflection is probably not accurate.

The question then would be – who best to represent the non-believers? Parliament might consider the beliefs of that twenty five percent of the public perhaps more accurately stated in the more recent survey as forty nine per cent – what aspects of life would they reflect on?

We would suggest that what would be of interest would be the joys of, say, music, sport, family life, travel and so on. We feel that only a relatively small number of that percentage would be interested in the views of a firm atheist representing them in Time for Reflection. More appropriately, representatives of Groups or Bodies whose aims are to promote general well-being by pursuit of their interest could be invited to speak e.g. from the Conservatoire of Music or Visit Scotland or the Sports Council and the like. It is clear that an increasing number of the public are without belief, then it is right that, increasingly, the Time for Reflection should not be either Religious or philosophical but merely interesting on subjects of general interest. In addition, Members may enjoy a time for personal private reflection in the Time allotted and would appreciate listening to a musician playing music conducive to quiet reflection.

Denis Madden
Chairman