

PE1514/J

Public Petitions Committee

Scottish Parliament,
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Submitted by Email to:

petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Monday 30th June 2014

**A response to petition PE1514: Making Time for Reflection
representative of all beliefs**



The Humanist Society Scotland would like to thank the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee for the chance to address this petition.

The Humanist Society Scotland has been invited to lead Time for Reflection only three times in the 15-year history of the Scottish Parliament. This is despite our organisation being mentioned specifically by future Cabinet Secretary Mike Russell during the initial debate on Time for Reflection¹.

Whilst we welcome the debate generated by Prof. Norman Bonney's petition, and support - in principle - a more representative form of Time for Reflection, we do not support the measures proposed in this petition.

The petitioner cites survey data to show that around 26% of the population stated that there is 'definitely not a god or some higher power'². Some of the respondents to this petition have claimed, erroneously, that the proportion of atheists in Scotland is 0.05%³. This figure was taken from the 2011 Scottish census results, where the question asked was "What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?". Clearly since atheism, and also humanism, are not religions, it's completely misguided for Interfaith Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church to attempt to use this data to artificially inflate the number of religious believers in Scotland.

The HSS believes that the petitioners suggestion of a quota system is wrong. As a secular organisation, we believe that the state should not interfere with the private beliefs of citizens, and that personal beliefs should not be a requirement or a barrier to civic participation.

As an organisation representing a range of people who believe that an ethical and fulfilling life can be lived without reference to the supernatural, it's important to note, that not all people who may identify as humanist or atheist are members of an affiliated organisation. This has two implications for this petition. Firstly, there has never been a comprehensive study of atheists and humanists in Scotland, and therefore it's impossible to tell how many they

¹ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=4176&i=26789>

² http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/mm7go89rhi/YouGov-University%20of%20Lancaster-Survey-Results-Faith-Matters-130130.pdf

³ http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_PublicPetitionsCommittee/General%20Documents/PE1514_C_Interfaith_Scotland_02.06.14.pdf

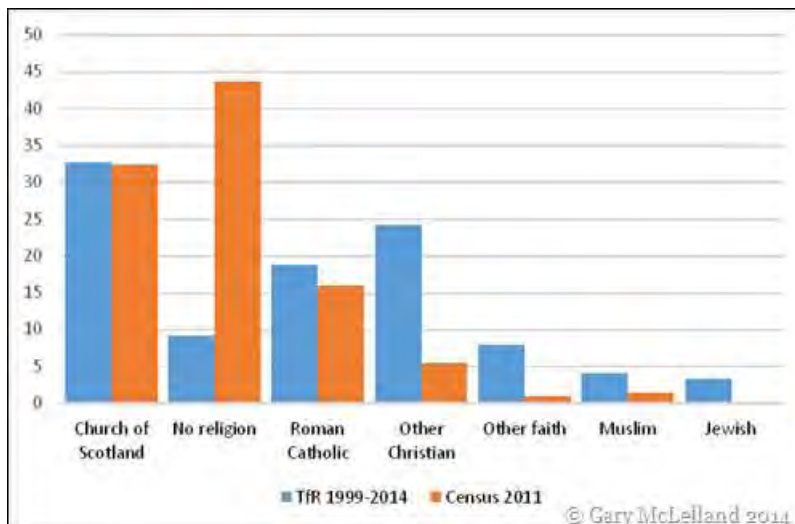
⁴ http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_PublicPetitionsCommittee/General%20Documents/PE1514_I_Scottish_Episcopal_Church_27.06.14.pdf

are, or to discern any common characteristics, other than their lack of religious beliefs. Secondly, supposing an accurate idea of the characteristics of non-religious Scots could be created, the petition gives no indication as to how the views of this group might be reflected.

Religious believers, and atheists and humanists may have many views and beliefs in common, and we think that the idea of limiting Time for Reflection contributions on the basis of the contributors personal beliefs is wrong.

We do, however, agree with the petitioner that current practice of Time for Reflection is not representative of the people of Scotland.

The following chart shows the contributions to Time for Reflection from the establishment of the Scottish Parliament until 2014 (session 3), with the contributions in orange, and the corresponding representation of that group according to the 2011 census in blue (*We have combined 'did not answer' category in the 2011 census data with 'No religion' in the graph*).⁵



It is clear to see that the number of 'no-religion' contributions to Time for Reflection is vastly unrepresentative of the public at large.

Of course, since there is no clear and transparent system of application for Time for Reflection, it is impossible to tell if the over-representation of religious organisations is a deliberate strategy, or simply due to the lack of applications from non-religious groups/individuals.

HSS would suggest that the Public Petitions Committee instruct the Presiding Officer and Parliamentary Bureau to begin a full review of the practice of Time for Reflection. In particular we would ask that the Presiding Officer and Parliamentary Bureau be required to publish the details of all individuals and organisations who are recommended or apply to lead Time for Reflection. We would also ask that the Public Petitions Committee instruct the Presiding Officer and Parliamentary Bureau to implement a much wider policy of

⁵ <http://esotericramblings.com/2014/02/23/my-reflections-on-the-scottish-parliaments-time-for-reflection-nice-graphs/>

participation, including civic and campaign groups, to extend the scope of Time for Reflection beyond religion altogether.

As a humanist organisation, we value ethical reflection in public life, however, we are also aware that the Scottish Parliament is an important institution, and that it's time and resources may be better spent in the detailed important work of it's committees and Parliamentary debates. As such, we would support the Public Petitions Committee to consider making recommendations to the Scottish Government to hold a debate in the chamber about the future of Time for Reflection. It may be that given that members would prefer, as suggested by Chic Brodie MSP⁶, to conduct their own private ethical/moral reflection prior to the commencement of the Parliament.

Yours sincerely,

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⁶ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9168&mode=pdf>