

Dear Mr Hynds

Public Petition 1514.

Making Time for Reflection more representative of belief in Scotland.

Thank you for the opportunity as the relevant petitioner to respond to the points that have been raised by third parties in relation to my petition PE1514

I note that the observations of the Equality and Human Rights Commission that it is the 'Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) which is subject to the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty, not the Parliament as a whole' and that 'The decision on which individuals and organisations speak at Time for Reflection lies with the Presiding Officer, not the SPCB'. The Presiding Officer acts, however, as an agent of the Parliament within the policy framework established by the Parliament for Time for Reflection (TFR) in 1999 and subsequently.

I am encouraged that the Presiding Officer states that the Parliamentary Bureau will consider 'Time for Reflection as an item in the Chamber at a future meeting to review whether contributions to Time for Reflection meet the objectives set out in the resolution of Parliament'.

The need for such fundamental consideration at an early point is apparent in the evidence submitted supporting the petition and in the forward programme of quotas for TFR outlined by the Presiding Officer.

The religion question in the 2011 census, now over three years old, provides one standard of ever diminishing value by which to judge the current relative support for various religious denominations and beliefs in Scotland and thus their corresponding relative contributions to TFR. By this standard the proposed contributions to the forward programme by the Church of Scotland is proportionate to the share of the population (32 per cent) recording affiliation with that church.

The proposal that a 22.2 per cent share of contributions should go to the Roman Catholic Church is however disproportionate compared to the 16 per cent of the population recording an attachment to that Church in both the 2001 and 2011 censuses. It is an over-representation of almost one third. It is difficult to see how this could arise or be justified other than by exercising a degree of preference and favouritism towards the

denomination – a phenomenon which ought not to be allowed to arise in the work of the Parliament and which may harm its public reputation. Parliament, the forum of the people of Scotland, must be scrupulously even handed in allowing access to it by external parties. It must, like Caesar's wife, be above suspicion.

The allocation of 19.5 per cent of appearances at TFR to non-Christian denominations when their cumulative percentage of the Scottish population is 2.1 per cent, as evident in the Presiding Officer's letter, also raises fundamental questions about the representativeness of the TFR forward programme and requires reconsideration.

The net effect of over-representation of some religious denominations is the substantial under-representation on those who say they have no religion. 37 per cent of Scots recorded such an answer in the 2011 census but they only get 14 per cent of allocations in the forward programme. The claim by Inter-faith Scotland that this is 'fair and proportionate' is manifestly unfounded. There must be action to reconsider and remedy these biases. However the suggestion by the same body that there should be a widening of the range of voices that are heard at TFR is to be welcomed.

The claim by Angus Logan, echoed by Interfaith Scotland, that the petition demonstrates a lack of tolerance towards Scotland's faith groups is not worthy of those who put it forward since the petition does not seek to ban religious expression but seeks for contributions to TFR to reflect the relative support for the different sets of beliefs among the people of Scotland.

The submission by the Scottish Secular Society which points out that the claim by the petitioner that TFR, as currently operated, is unrepresentative of religion and belief in Scotland is backed up by peer-reviewed academic research further strengthens the case for a fundamental review of TFR.

Because of the troubling issues raised by the petition *I suggest that the best way forward for the Committee in relation to petition 1514 is thus to request the Presiding Officer and the Parliamentary Bureau to arrange for a full debate in the Chamber about how TFR might proceed in the future as a matter of priority in October and November of this year.* MSPs might like to review the debates of 1999 which established the guidelines for TFR. If MSPs can repeat the quality of that first major debate in the Scottish Parliament in 1999, consider whether to

discontinue TFR, or make adjustments to it appropriate to the changed circumstances of a decade and a half later by giving considerably greater representation to non-religious Scots, they will have done the country a major service.

I attach an appendix which covers various technical points raised in submissions responding to the petition. These may be of value to the Committee and in any subsequent parliamentary discussions about future policy in relation to TFR.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Norman Bonney

Appendix

Comments on various other relevant points raised by Petition 1514 and responses to it

1. What proportion of Scotland's population is non-religious?

37 per cent reported in the **2011** census that they had no religion

53 per cent of Scots reported that they were not influenced by religious or spiritual attitudes to the **2013** Faith Matters survey by YouGov and Lancaster University.

In the same survey 82 per cent of Scots said they do not attend religious or spiritual events with other people. 21 per cent prayed in the previous month and 8 per cent read holy scriptures.

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

2. What proportion of Scots are atheists?

Answers to survey and census questions are, of course, shaped by the form of the question. Much is made in some responses to the petition of the low 'write-in' numbers of 'atheist' entry in the 'other' box of the census religion question. But the contribution from the Humanist Society Scotland rightly points out that *'some of the respondents to this*

petition have claimed, erroneously, that the proportion of atheists in Scotland is 0.05%. 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 (and the Church of Scotland - NB) to attempt to use this data to artificially inflate the number of religious believers in Scotland'.

Census results have a high level of public trust but they soon tend to be out of date. The 2011 census findings are now over three years old. Considerable more contemporary evidence is available from a wealth of Scottish and UK social surveys. The 2013 Faith Matters survey has specifically Scottish data which shows that 26 per cent of Scots say that 'there definitely is not a god or higher power'. All the religious respondents fail to deal with more up-to-date social scientific evidence.

3. Discrimination against women by religious denominations and by TFR

Respondents fail also to deal with a number of critical points raised by the petition and its accompanying presentation.

- Despite the Scottish Parliament's formal commitments to equal opportunities policies TFR provides a platform for some denominations which discriminate against women by not allowing them in their priesthoods and governing hierarchies.
- Only 27 per cent of contributors to TFR are female
- Reflecting this gender bias in religious hierarchies only two of the respondents to this petition are female.

Steps must be taken to remedy these inequities.

4. Quotas are actually in use in TFR

Several respondents are against quotas but in fact past experience and the forward programme proposed by the Presiding Officer suggest that they are actually operative. Otherwise how come that every year Church of Scotland representatives are the most numerous, Roman Catholics are the second most frequent and non-Christian religions get a grossly disproportionate share of contributions?