

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, along with Caroline Lynch, the chair of The Scottish Secular Society, I addressed your committee on the 3rd of September last year with regard to PE1487 which called upon you to ask parliament to change Religious Observance in Scottish schools to Opt In rather than Opt out. I am unable to be present in person at parliament on Tuesday, to listen to your latest deliberations on the matter, but because of a very late joint comment by the Kirk and the Humanist Society of Scotland and eleventh hour detailed discussions aiming to seek consensus amongst a significant range of stakeholders I wish to press our case again with renewed optimism for change. Change befitting a nation eager to embrace a new era of independence from the ideas of the past.

Much has been said and written in the intervening months but I hope that it has become clear to you that the mood of the public has changed since the last review of Religious Observance in 2005 and it is very clear that there is a public desire for change. The government does not agree and this does not surprise us. Government ministers, after all, have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. But most significantly, we initially believed that the Church of Scotland, with their joint statement with the Humanist Society of Scotland issued on 24th January 2014, had now fully recognised that the system has failings and is in need of overhaul. The fact that the Humanist Society of Scotland saw fit to alter their stance, so as to steer away from complete abolition, also gave us reason for hope of a lasting agreement on the matter.

The Kirk and the Humanists had made a renewed call for Time for Reflection and we have not and still cannot disagree with this proposal provided parents are asked first. Indeed we have stated twice before that such a move is very welcome.

Our position is that Time for Reflection is welcome provided that this is coupled with parental choice. For us this means Opt In. The breaking news yesterday from behind the scenes discussions was that these parties recognise and accept our premise that in the matter of Religious Observance parental choice is essential. With that agreement we could, with the assent of the committee, take the issue forward for further discussion and reach a solution that should be acceptable to all.

It now seems that the Church of Scotland position may have been the product of internal confusion, but such matters are not our concern.

In any case both of these parties have now issued statements clarifying their perceptions of their prior joint statement. The Kirk has said that the change to Time for Reflection is a change in name only and the Humanist Society of Scotland believes this is only workable when TfR is truly non-confessional and agrees with us that parental involvement is essential.

Even in the light of these glaring inconsistencies we still have hope for progress. We again remind the committee that we do not wish to remove religious observance provided parents are involved and are asked first. We again remind the Church of Scotland that TfR is acceptable to us with that proviso. We agree with them on the need for change but we would also urge the HSS to consider, as we have, that believers also have rights, and so long as they do not conflict with the rights of others, they ought not to be removed on purely ideological grounds.

So in actual fact we find ourselves in the position of being the compromise solution. The way forward may therefore justifiably be a reworked RO which includes both the religious concepts and secular ones, allowing all points of view to be included, as per our original intent.

We urge the committee to consider well our more nuanced and conciliatory approach and pass the issue to the Education Committee with the recommendation that all of these parties, inter alia, be involved in a root and branch review of RO as soon as possible.

Let the argument for our proposal be stated finally and simply by me quoting from the Scottish Parliament petition page comments section as follows:-

*"I can't see how anyone could object to 'an **instruction** to attend a religious service' being replaced with 'an **invitation** to attend a religious service.' "*

Ladies and Gentlemen of the committee the author of that statement is – a Religious Education teacher.

Mark Gordon (Co-Petitioner)
27th January 2014