

28 January 2013

David Stewart MSP
Convener, Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

cc. Clerk of Public Petitions Committee

humanist
society
scotland

By email to petitions@scottish.parliament.uk



Dear Mr Stewart,

PE01487 – Religious Observance in schools

You will have been aware of the reports in the media over the last few days covering the joint initiative announced by the Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS) and the Church of Scotland. The committee was informed of this by email on the 24th January (written submission PE1487KK). We asked that the Public Petitions Committee advise the Scottish Government to bring forward legislative proposals to remove reference to 'Religious Observance' in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, and insert 'Time for Reflection' instead.

The HSS was excited by this joint initiative and was hopeful that it could lead to both a positive outcome and demonstrate that two organisations with differing overall objectives could work together to 'celebrate diversity rather than see it as a problem'.

Unfortunately, late yesterday, the Church of Scotland appeared to change its position. Our joint statement stated:

"The change to a more equal and inclusive 'time for reflection' would echo the current practice of the Scottish Parliament, and bring legislation into line with modern views. It will also remove the current focus on 'religion', with which many non-religious people struggle."

It is clear that the moving from Religious Observance to Time for Reflection was more than mere name change. The statement included the aspiration to develop new approaches and make Time for Reflection a truly inclusive activity and not an act of religious worship. In fact, the Church of Scotland's submission to the Petitions Committee in October 2013 stated that "Time for Reflection is not, and should never be confessional in nature. It not worship or 'state sponsored' prayers either."

We were therefore surprised by a statement on the Church of Scotland website that appears to refute the joint statement and makes clear that "The nature of religious observance will not change, but the new name will better reflect what has been the case since 2005."

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This is not what the HSS agreed to and seems to also differ from their previously stated position. A mere name change will not address the concerns of many parents, nor meet the policy aspirations of the HSS. The guidance that has been in place since 2005 has been shown to be vulnerable to misinterpretation (or even ignored) by Head Teachers. For any change to "Time for Reflection" to be meaningful there would have to be changes to the current guidance in terms of content and scrutiny of practice by Education Scotland.

When the Church of Scotland submits its evidence about changing from Religious Observance to Time for Reflection please be aware that the HSS do not support a mere name change but rather a brand new Time for Reflection that is fit for children in the 21st Century.

Yours sincerely



Douglas McLellan
Chief Executive