

Scottish Secular Society, Petition PE01530, Final Submission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue official guidance to bar the presentation in Scottish publicly funded schools of separate creation and of young Earth doctrines as viable alternatives to the established science of evolution, common descent, and deep time. NB: “presentation” rather than “teaching”, since the problems generally arise from non-teacher visitors.

As the SPICe briefing makes clear, this is a very modest request. A simple policy statement would suffice. We are NOT calling for legislation, the walling off of science (or RE) from other subjects, or the restriction of discussion. We are not attacking religion, and one of our strongest and most informed support messages comes from the Reverend Michael Roberts who writes for the British Centre for Science Education. We merely call for the issuing of guidance against presenting to schoolchildren as true what we all know to be false.

The petition, whose 651 signatories included **three Nobel Prize winners and numerous parents, teachers, educators, and scientists**, has aroused widespread interest across Scotland and beyond. It has generated widespread media interest with over 25 reports, features and articles (including one in Forbes), and concern about the damage creationism can do to science education. Individual responses have been overwhelmingly supportive, as have institutional submissions from scientific and science education bodies including the Society of Biology, the UK’s leading professional association for the life sciences.

The Scottish Government’s initial response, like that of EIS, assumes that adequate safeguards are already in place. We demonstrated to the PPC, and show here again, that they are not, and that creationist influence in schools is institutionalised. The remaining opposition, including the pseudoscience of “Intelligent Design” against

which the Society of Biology warns explicitly, is from a small, well organised group of committed creationists who we believe enjoy disproportionate influence within our education system.

Inaction will be seen (as it has already been seen) by creationists worldwide as a licence to continue their activities, causing damage to Scottish education, and to Scotland's proud reputation for the advancement of knowledge, on which so much of our economic future depends. Our petition has attracted intense media attention, reflecting and amplifying deep public interest. Many now await the PPC's next steps, either with anticipative glee or with deep concern.

CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We respectfully suggest that the Committee forward our petition to the Education and Culture Committee, drawing attention to the following points emerging from the petition itself and the debate and submissions that it has stimulated:

- The problem of creationist infiltration into schools and the need for guidance need to be recognised.
- "Intelligent Design", as currently presented, should be recognised as creationism in a pseudo-scientific disguise.
- Good teaching and honest thinking both require that there be no artificial division between what is acceptable in science classes, and what is acceptable elsewhere. (Here we agree strongly with EIS.)
- As recommended by the Society of Biology, teachers should be professionally encouraged to learn how to answer questions about creationism appropriately and sensitively. For example, RE teachers should be aware that creationism and ID are scientifically indefensible, while science teachers should be aware of the bogus nature of creationist pretensions to speak for religion as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, some theologically conservative Protestants and Muslims have succumbed to the blandishments of "creation science" as such, or in

the guise of “Intelligent Design”. As a result, there are numerous groups and individuals who under the labels of RE and RO gain access to schoolchildren, despite being committed to doctrines of separate creation and a young Earth that we all know to be false. This is a direct threat to the children’s understanding of biology and Earth sciences: their understanding of who they are and what kind of planet they live on. That this is done in the name of religion makes it no less harmful: on the contrary, it brings religion itself into disrepute. It is shameful that this is allowed to continue.

This is why we are compelled to act, and are, in the words of the abstract to our petition,

“Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue official guidance to bar the presentation in Scottish publicly funded schools of separate creation and of young Earth doctrines as viable alternatives to the established science of evolution, common descent, and deep time.”

We are not requesting much, and certainly **not** asking for legislation. We merely seek a simple statement, similar to those in force in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We warned that refusal to make such a statement would be regarded by creationistsⁱ as a licence to continue their activities. This has already happened; Ken Ham’s *Answers in Genesis*, now the world’s most prominent Young Earth Creationist organisation, has welcomed the Scottish Government’s initial refusal in three separate web postings,ⁱⁱ while Scottish creationists will regard it as a green light.

At the time when EIS and the Scottish government made its initial response to our petition, they did not have access to the most authoritative of responses, that from the Society of Biology, and we urge them to use this opportunity to rethink their position. Most organisations responding, and all but oneⁱⁱⁱ of many individuals, have supported the petition. Such opposition as there is from organisations, including the Scottish Government, assumes that present arrangements are adequate; this is demonstrably not the case. (See Appendix).

The petition has attracted widespread interest in Scotland and beyond. We have logged over 25 press mentions,^{iv} including one from Forbes magazine^v warning of Intelligent Design as a vehicle for creationism that may well succeed in Scotland.

OVERVIEW OF RESPONSES

The most authoritative of responses (DD) is from the Society of Biology, the UK's largest Life Sciences professional body, which strongly supports us. This should be read both for its clear statement of the scientific issues, and for its sympathetic understanding of the problems facing teachers.

Out of 41 individual comments, 39 support the petition, one is opposed, and one too generalised to classify. Out of 43 written submissions, all but five support the petition; 34 of these are from individuals, all but one of whom write in support. These individual supporters include contributors with a range of experience and technical knowledge, and some of these speak from direct experience of the impact of creationist teaching in Scotland and elsewhere, while a former Edinburgh Head Teacher (Submission AA) speaks eloquently of creationist pressures and the need for the requested guidance. Of the contrary submissions, one (individual) is curiously off-topic, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [and we

do not understand] how he managed to ascertain SLS members' opinions in the very short time frame before his submission.

Regarding the pretensions of Intelligent Design (Submission A), note that the Society of Biology, like the guidance language at force in England, explicitly mentions Intelligent Design as a variety of creationism, an assessment confirmed by the content of Dr Noble's own submission, despite his denials (see endnote vi). **You can believe the Society of Biology, the Association for Science Education, the Royal Society, and the combined statements(L) of the world's Learned and**

Scientific Societies or you can believe Dr Noble, but you cannot believe both, and if you believe the Society of Biology and other supportive bodies you must conclude that what Dr Noble and his colleagues wish to impart is contradictory to the basic concepts of present-day life science, concepts whose fundamental importance is recognised in the Curriculum for Excellence.

The only two contrary submissions of substance (Scottish Government and EIS; BB and CC) assert without evidence (as does Cunningham) that the guidance we speak of is not necessary because adequate safeguards are in place, through professional and Local Authority supervision. In reality, the safeguards referred to do not exist, information on the problem is fragmentary, young Earth creationists have privileged access to schools as visitors, volunteers, and chaplains, unelected young Earth creationists are embedded in the supervising Local Authority Education Committees, and some of the bodies responsible for local education have told us that they do not possess the relevant information. More details in Endnote viii, and Appendix.

Out of the five organisational comments in support, three are particularly noteworthy. The (US) National Centre for Science Education (Submission L) have extensive experience of the damaging effect of creationism on education. The submission (B) from the British Centre for Science Education comes from a respected historian of geology who is also a school Governor and an Anglican priest and retired vicar. Above all, the submission (DD) from the Society of Biology, the organisation best qualified to speak on the issue, gives the strongest possible support. This was submitted on 10th November, no doubt in the hope that it would be available to the Committee when it heard evidence on this Petition, but through a failure in the Clerks' Office was not published until 17th December, meaning that it was not available to the Scottish Government, nor to EIS, when they prepared for their submissions. This in itself is sufficient reason for the Government and the EIS to reconsider. We urge the PPC to give particular attention to these three submissions above all others.

We believe the Committee wrote in November to the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association and the Association of Heads & Deputes in Scotland, but they have elected not to comment.

EIS AND SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

We agree with the EIS that there should be no banning of discussion of particular beliefs, and that there must not be separate rules for different parts of the syllabus. However, the safeguards they refer to are illusory. They refer to the General Teaching Council for Scotland as enforcer of standards, but our major concern is that the relevant standards do not exist. They also invoke the Local Authority as employer, but at least five authorities^{vii} (Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, N. Ayrshire, S. Lanarkshire, Western Isles) have unelected appointees of extremist young Earth creationist churches sitting on their education committees. Several authorities have told us that information about creationist visitors is not collected or not stored, and almost all have refused Freedom of Information requests for lists of chaplains' church affiliations, on the grounds that these are personal data.

We also note, concerning EIS's mandate to speak for the teaching profession, that six individual supporters of the petition identify themselves as teachers and educators, while the only individual writing in opposition makes no such claim. Finally the Scottish Government response, prepared through an administrative failure without the benefit of the Society of Biology's opinion, asserts that monitoring and safeguards are adequate. How can this be true when a fundamentalist Alabama-based sect was allowed to operate within a school (Kirktonholme) for eight years, with input into RE and RO, as well as individual tutoring and out-of-hours activities on school premises, only coming to light when children brought home materials stating that the Bible is literal historical truth, that scientists who deny this do so out of wickedness, and that dinosaur graveyards are evidence of Noah's Flood?

The Scottish Government claims that this is not really a matter for the Government, but for teachers. This is unconvincing when its own submission is signed by "Head of Curriculum Unit, Learning Directorate". It assures us that "Education Scotland will continue to monitor, through the school inspection process and by other means, any instances where schools are not ensuring the teaching of science is based on well-

established science and scientific principles.” We hope that this does not imply an artificial distinction, against which EIS explicitly warns, between “science” and “non-science” activities. The Government claims, as does EIS (and SLS!) with no evidence or descriptive detail, that present safeguards and reporting procedures are adequate. How can they be when a handful of amateurs, with help from concerned parents, have unearthed problems of which officialdom seems blissfully ignorant? And in conclusion, we note that Education Scotland promises to continue to monitor the situation. We hope that they will regard our own evidence here as input to that monitoring, and take appropriate action, as we ask.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Finally we note that the fact this is an issue at all is part of a larger problem, which has already come to the attention of the PPC at least twice, namely the embedded privilege of religion, including in the present context biblical literalist versions of religion, in the Scottish educational system. Thus we have three unelected representatives of religion on every Council Education Committee, including at least six Young Earth creationists; pupils are expected by default to attend Religious Observance which, despite protestations, is almost invariably confessional; and chaplains and chaplaincy teams play a role in developing the Religious Education programme, although this is supposed to be neutral between different worldviews. In a society as diverse as 21st century Scotland, this is surely unsustainable.

APPENDIX: SOME EXAMPLES OF CREATIONIST INFLUENCE OR ACTIVITY IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS

Although EIS refers to council authority Education Committees as a safeguard, these committees include, in Scotland, three appointees representing religion. One or more such appointees are from explicitly Creationist churches in at least 5 Councils (Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, N. Ayrshire, S. Lanarkshire, Western Isles), see Endnote viii.

There have been addresses by supporters of creationism (including ID) in Kelso High (source: Borders Council 2013), although in 2014 Borders reported that no such events had occurred in the previous 3 years), Bellahouston Academy (source: Glasgow City Council), and Williamwood (source: FaceBook posting), although East Renfrewshire Council denied knowledge of any such event.

Kirktonholme Primary pupils were handed textbooks that claimed that old Earth geology is a trick to discredit religion, that humans may have used dinosaurs as farm animals, and that there are human footprints in coal, among other gems. A chaplain linked to an Alabama creationist sect had been in place and advising on RE for 8 years.

Skerries School (a very small school since closed for unconnected reasons) showed US-supplied “creation science” material, despite being in a region (Shetland) that is among the least church-relating in Scotland. We do not regard this as major in itself, but as an indicator of the fragility of systems.

Five councils, when asked whether their schools had been visited by Centre for Intelligent Design or by Creation Ministries International, or “any other speakers who claim that macro-evolution is still speculative, or that the evidence supports separate creation over evolution, or a young Earth over an ancient Earth” said they did not hold the relevant information or did not fully answer as asked. (Source: Fol request responses). These were Fife, W Dunbartonshire, N. Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and Inverclyde. East Renfrewshire said they had had no such visits, evidently unaware of the talk at Williamwood.

Western Isles reports with commendable frankness: “Ministers of religion will regularly visit schools as part of the churches' contribution to religious observance or the Religious and Moral Education curriculum. Such visits occur weekly in many of our primary schools. Although the topic for study or reflection may not always be 'The Creation', it is possible that discussions may arise from time to time. It is not possible for us to provide a confirmation of each local minister's views on the topics you have referred to in this request. The Education & Children's Services department would not hold this information.”

Highland reports: “Schools do not always keep records of these visits ... Schools may also have associated chaplains who speak at assemblies or lead religious observance. It is possible that chaplains might make reference to creationism, but this is not recorded by schools or the Council. The Council, therefore, unable to answer your question with any certainty.”

Glasgow City Council refused to reply to an enquiry about all schools (describing it as “too onerous”), but reported specifically on Secondary Schools (see note on Bellahouston Academy, above).

We hear a steady stream of reports of creationist activity and individual schools, although parents are understandably reluctant to complain about or publicise such matters. A school in Kirkcaldy had children paint a "Six Days of Creation" mural, and then denied having done so until challenged with photographic evidence (which we presented when submitting oral testimony and added to the records). We have also heard of the school in the Highlands with a “Creation Corner”, where children displayed such artwork. A parent asking “Where is Evolution Corner?” attracted hostile silence. Schools in Peterhead, according to a former teacher, have links to a wide range of ultra-creationist churches, including the US-based Living Waters.

Information on creationist chaplains is fragmentary, but we have some information from the churches themselves, or from what a few councils have seen fit to supply.



Freedom City Church also supplies at least one school in North Lanarkshire, and the creationist freelance MAD (Making A Difference) Ministries has visited. South Lanarkshire when asked in 2013 had 19 separate representatives of creationist churches in its chaplaincy teams, not counting Scripture Union which is frequently although not necessarily creationist.

Challenger buses, of which there are now three, visit schools ostensibly to provide RE, but this RE includes hymn singing, which raises questions about how they see their role. It is run by People With A Mission Ministries, whose website portrays, with approval, young Earth creationist material supplied by *Answers in Genesis*. None of this seems have come to the attention of the regulatory authorities, on whom EIS, SLS, and the Scottish Government are asking us to rely. This to us indicates deep structural inadequacies, which our petition seeks, in part, to address.

ⁱ By "creationism" we mean, throughout, the separate creation of different living kinds, in contrast with the established science of common descent. This should be clear from our Abstract.

ⁱⁱ *Answers in Genesis*, <https://answersingenesis.org/theory-of-evolution/in-schools/academic-freedom-under-fire-scotland/>, <http://blogs.answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2014/09/07/nobel-winning-scientists-push-for-ban-of-creation-in-scottish-schools/>, <http://blogs.answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2014/12/23/scottish-government-rejects-creation-ban/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The only hostile individual submission, R, is an off-topic ad hominem attack and garbles the science.

^{iv} <http://wp.me/p21T1L-rt>

^v <http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnfarrell/2014/12/30/creationism-in-europe-you-bet/>

^{vi} As Prof Braterman testified in person and in Submission C, the C4ID submission, A, is clearly creationist in that it denies that common ancestry ("macro evolution") is established science and that the natural processes of evolution can give rise to new information. For a more detailed critique of C4ID's "introductory pamphlet", see <http://robertsaunders.org.uk/wordpress/c4ids-introduction-to-intelligent-design-a-critique/> by Dr Robert Saunders, reader in Molecular Biology in the Open University (who also, in Submission J, endorses the points raised by Prof Braterman in Submission C), and <http://wp.me/p21T1L-nY> by Prof Braterman. **Intelligent Design is also explicitly mentioned as a form of creationism in the authoritative Submission DD, from the Society of Biology.**

^{vii} <http://wp.me/p21T1L-8W> and links therein to the Churches' own statements