

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM INVERKEITHING BAPTIST CHURCH

I wish to respond to the proposed Hate Crime and Public Order bill to express my concerns.

While affirming the need to regulate the expression of hate towards others in society, I believe the new law impinges on free speech and the threshold for prosecution is too low. The need for behaviour or material to be threatening or abusive before triggering the law was sufficient, but the Scottish Government has now gone against its own advisor in adding 'insulting' to the possible description. This is a totally subjective term and indeed, terms such as 'homophobic' or 'transphobic' are now frequently used as insults against those whose views differ from the current code. Our use of language is constantly evolving and it is difficult for some to keep up! 'Queer' was once an insult, but is now a badge of pride. Similarly, 'cripple' was used by an older generation as a statement of fact, but is now used as an insult. In recent times, the definition of 'women' has even been challenged; teachers have been disciplined for using the 'wrong' pronoun for a pupil; and preachers have been arrested by the police for stating that the Bible calls homosexuality 'sin'. Whether they are eventually convicted or not, the effect is to repress the expression of any non- politically correct opinions.

I would also like to challenge the term '*likely* to stir up hatred' as another vague term open to interpretation used to condemn someone's language or materials: It does not even need to have the effect of stirring up hatred or been intended to have this effect. It is useless for the bland government blog to assure us, "The independent court will determine whether hatred is likely to be stirred up or was intended to be stirred up by a person's conduct"- A citizen should not have to go through the courts to prove that something is 'likely'.

The government identifies several categories of 'hate' which identify specific characteristics. The need to protect those who are attacked for their race, age or disability is self-evident as these are not chosen by the individual and often leave them vulnerable when they are a minority in society. The choices people make over their religion and sexual behaviour are of a different nature and should be open to debate, criticism and defence in a free society. The fear of restricted free speech is not a 'myth' as the government blog claims. To risk stating a traditional but unpopular opinion in public already brings censure, as the recent outcry over J.K.Rowling's views have shown. Open debate will inevitably be further stifled, particularly in educational establishments, which should encourage discussion, but are dominated by establishment views which are able to easily influence the weaker learners. In Scotland over the past year, we have seen a concerted effort from LGBTQI+ groups to influence young minds with everything from Drag Queens reading stories in nurseries to entire high schools being expected to celebrate 'Pride Week'. This is an imposition of beliefs on the young by a variety of well organised and financed pressure groups. At the same time, religion in state schools has all practically been removed as

an influence on young people, mainly I suspect because most major religions that are taken seriously by their adherents, would reject the current sexuality of 'anything is good'. Secularism is the new religion of Scotland now and will support this. The result is that to criticise a school for such behaviour brings cries of 'Hate', 'homophobia', 'bigot' and the new insult, 'extremism'.

As a Christian I have a genuine concern that the above-mentioned pressure groups are running the show here, and evangelical Christianity in particular is a threat to their influence. Speaking for my church fellowship, we are concerned that our freedom to clearly state what the Bible says will offend someone who is looking for offence. Our freedom to put things in writing or on the internet will be lessened if preachers find that sermons are used as evidence of statements 'likely to stir up hatred'. We are not reassured by government promises to retain free speech because we now have a multitude of previous examples where people were dismissed from their jobs or even arrested for answering questions about homosexuality, reading Bible verses publicly or simply sharing their faith.

I hope you will reconsider some of the wording of this bill and make provision for the freedom to discuss publicly matters of faith, identity and behaviour without incurring accusations of 'Hate Crime'.

I am responding for Inverkeithing Baptist Church as an organisation that represent the views of people in the West Fife area.

Inverkeithing Baptist Church
22 July 2020