

## **JUSTICE COMMITTEE**

### **HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER (SCOTLAND) BILL**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM WILLIAM BLAIR**

I am writing to you to register my concern at the watering down of the proposed elimination of Scotland's blasphemy law.

Whilst I am glad that we are finally moving into the 21st century as a nation on this issue, we must not allow a society to emerge whereby any person(s) or groups can claim offence for even minor criticism of their religious beliefs.

We have lagged behind other nations in this respect (England/Wales, Denmark, Iceland) and we should at least match their criteria for scrapping the blasphemy law. We cannot criticise other countries who have, and use, their law to harass, bully, charge and jail (or worse) their citizens. What if a Scottish citizen working in one of these countries was subjected to an arcane blasphemy law? A government could quite rightly turn around and point out that WE have a blasphemy law on our books! It does not matter that we do not ever use it. It is incompatible with basic human rights, and general common sense.

Religious belief should not be protected from scrutiny, criticism, satire or even mockery - ideas should not be shielded, but exposed to investigation. By definition, a belief has no evidence to back it up, but people choose to accept it as true anyway; that is their right, but the rest of us do not need to accept this - that is OUR right. Religions are powerful enough to look after themselves. The individuals within a religion should obviously not face violence or intimidation for their beliefs, but freedom of expression under the European Convention of Human Rights is protected, for both believers and non-believers. We need to differentiate between legitimate criticism of religion and deliberately provoking hatred and violence against individual practitioners of a religious faith.

We must also remember that a religion is not a race, we must not equate the two. People of any nation should be free to leave/join/transfer to any other religion on the planet.

Finally, the legislation that the government wish to implement to tackle behaviours "likely to" stir up hatred e.g. vandalism of places of worship, language or graffiti aimed at specifically stirring up violence against a particular religious group, are already covered under existing legislation. "Likely to..." is setting the bar too low. The intention needs to be proven, not assumed.

Please do not introduce legislation which will cause more harm than good, no matter how well intentioned. We ALL need our human rights and freedom of expression protected - scrapping the blasphemy law, with no add-ons, is the best way forward as a progressive society.

William Blair  
17 July 2020