

Remove religious appointees from education committees

In Scotland, citizens of all faiths and beliefs can contribute to decisions about education through the democratic processes of seeking election to the Scottish Parliament or local councils. Many civically minded individuals also volunteer on parent councils, attend public meetings, or contribute to consultations and public debates. Given this, it makes no sense for religious organisations to be given an additional institutionally privileged role in education policy.

What's the problem?

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 requires local authorities in Scotland to appoint three religious representatives to their education committees, at least one of whom must be appointed by the Catholic Church and one by the Protestant Church of Scotland. They are usually the only unelected members who receive voting privileges.

Reserving a special role in policy-making for representatives of specific religious institutions clearly runs counter to principles of equality. It automatically excludes the majority of Scottish citizens based on their protected characteristics of religion and belief. It also creates a hierarchy of inequity, caused by one place each being provided for Catholics and members of the Church in Scotland, while representatives of all other religions must compete for the remaining one.

What are we doing?

- We campaign for legislative change to remove automatic places on education committees for religious appointees. In the meantime, we campaign for councils to exercise their power to remove the voting privileges of religious appointees.
- We supported the 2013 and 2016 petitions by the Edinburgh Secular Society and Scottish Secular Society respectively and the 2013 private member's bill by John Finnie MSP; all of which sought to end the requirement.
- In April 2019, Perth and Kinross Council became the first to amend their standing orders to remove voting privileges from religious appointees following their controversial intervention in a school closure decision. We supported the council and wrote to all local authorities in Scotland urging them to follow the example.
- In August 2019, we again wrote to all Councils and MSPs urging them to support our proposals and advising them of our major new report on the topic.
- [***Religious Reps: Unrepresentative, Unnecessary and Unjustified***](#) surveys the positions of the Scottish Government, equality and religious bodies as well as all 32 local authorities in Scotland.

The report systematically examines and refutes the arguments put forward for retaining religious appointees. It has been endorsed by the Edinburgh Secular Society (ESS) and Scottish Secular Society (SSS), who led petitions on the subject at the Scottish Parliament in 2013 and 2016 respectively.

Churches have not owned our schools since 1872. That there remain these unchallenged religious privileges in education is tantamount to selling a house but retaining a back door key. Religious believers now account for fewer than half of all Scots with Christianity being a further subset of that minority and numbers plunge even further amongst the young. Faith groups argue that they bring a politically neutral wisdom to the table. This is an absurd idea. They lobby the government every day with their own ideologies. In our campaign of May 2013 Edinburgh Secular Society uncovered examples of creationist views held by religious nominees and of votes cast to maintain the sectarian segregation of children.

Neil Barber (communications officer, Edinburgh Secular Society)

This century-old arrangement was originally put in place to protect the interests of the Churches whose schools were being merged into the national system. But surely, now, we can agree that the only interests that matter are those of the children, and the wider community of which they are part.

Professor Paul Braterman (spokesperson on education, Scottish Secular Society)

What you can do:

Please share a copy of our case against religious appointees with your [MSP and local councillor](#). You can also help by sharing the report on social media and by signing the petition.

Take action

Sign our petition calling for an end to automatic religious appointees on education committees and in the meantime for councils to revoke existing appointees' voting privileges.

- [Sign the petition](#)

[Please share this new report "Religious Reps: Unrepresentative, Unnecessary and Unjustified". It makes the case for removing automatic religious appointees from education committees in Scotland.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

[Scots of all backgrounds should have an equal chance to participate in education decision making, it's undemocratic and discriminatory to give religious organisations special representation on education committees.](#)

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More information:

- [Religious Reps: Unrepresentative, Unnecessary and Unjustified](#)
Our 2019 report makes the case for removing religious appointees from education

committees in Scotland. It systematically examines the arguments in defence of religious appointees and the positions of local authorities.

- [The NSS in Scotland](#)
We're a national organisation, but some of our work has a Scottish focus.
- [2012 letter to all local authorities](#) (PDF, 87 Kb)
- [2013 Scottish Parliament petition on religious appointees](#)
Petitioner Colin Emerson on behalf of Edinburgh Secular Society: "Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to bring forward legislative proposals to repeal Section 124 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended by Section 31 of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994. This would end the legal obligation on local authorities to appoint three unelected religious representatives to sit on their education committees."
- [2016 Scottish Parliament petition on religious appointees](#)
Petitioner Spencer Fildes on behalf of Scottish Secular Society: "Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to remove the constitutional anomaly that imposes unelected Church appointees on Local Authority Education Committees."
- [2019 letter to MPS and council leaders](#) (PDF, 40 Kb)

While you're here

Education is a huge part of our campaigning, policy and casework. Please consider a donation to enable us to continue making a difference.

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