

From: Toby Keynes
Sent: 17 August 2017 18:54
To: Williams, Kirsty (Aelod Cynulliad | Assembly Member)
Subject: Petition P-05-757: ending the collective worship obligation

Dear Kirsty,

I am writing in relation to the petition P-05-757 to remove the obligation on schools in Wales to hold acts of religious worship.

I know that you have already been corresponded with Richard Church (who was our Membership Secretary for many years), and I do appreciate your offer to meet up with him during the Welsh Liberal Democrat Conference, when I am sure you will have many other calls on your time.

As Chair of a UK-wide Associated Organisation, I feel slightly awkward about writing to you in support of a policy that was adopted without contention by Federal Conference this Spring but which clearly applies only to England. I appreciate that it is for the Welsh party to determine party policy on Welsh education matters. I also appreciate that any legislative change would require a majority vote of Assembly Members, which certainly cannot be assumed.

In any event, I am sure you will be aware of the relevant Federal policy motion (Spring 2017, F16: The Role of Faith in State-Funded Schools), which calls for this obligation on schools to be removed, as well as for parents and sufficiently mature students (rather than just 6th-form students) to have the right to opt out of collective worship, and for suitable alternative activities to be offered.

REFERENCES TO HUMAN RIGHTS LEGISLATION

You wrote to Richard Church on 27th July that the petitions committee “has not raised the issue of human rights legislation with me”.

While this may be correct, the petitioners themselves, in their letter to the Petitions Committee, certainly did, writing

“One important point Dr Mawhinney made is that, in her opinion, forcing us to say a prayer against our will is a violation of our right to freedom of belief under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Yet that is what is happening under the current guidelines. We hope the Committee will take on board our concerns over this point in particular.”

The associated Research Briefing (“Acts of religious worship in schools”, Petitions Committee, 27th June 2017, RS Ref: 17/3149) sets out the human rights position very clearly, and extensively, from section 2 (UK Parliament) onward, pointing to the very significant conflict between the existing law and Wales’s human rights obligations to both parents and children.

I don’t know how the Welsh petition process works, but I do hope that you are able to take these elements into consideration in deciding on what further action can be pursued.

WAYS FORWARD

There are a number of ways forward that could be taken, of which removing the obligation on schools to conduct daily acts of broadly Christian worship would seem to be the least radical.

We believe that forcing schools to conduct daily acts of broadly Christian worship, regardless of the beliefs of the teachers, the parents or the children, is very difficult to defend in a society where the majority (or close to a majority) hold non-Christian or non-religious beliefs. This would be partly addressed by allowing schools to continue to conduct such daily acts, but removing the obligation.

However, this would still leave many non-Christian parents in the appalling position of having to choose between segregating their children from the rest of the school community, thereby excluding them from their school's one daily collective activity, or forcing their children to pray to a deity in which the parents do not believe.

Equally, it would force older children to segregate themselves from the rest of their community, or to pray to a deity in which they do not believe.

These are choices that no parent, and no older child, should be forced to make.

We believe that education should be inclusive - that it should bring children and teachers together rather than driving them apart.

We also believe that school assemblies should provide the ideal opportunity to create a sense of community – one that recognises and respects the various beliefs of the children and their parents, addresses issues of ethics, religion and belief, and teaches the children in turn to respect one another and to respect differences of belief.

We would love to see the Scottish model adopted in England and in Wales, building an inclusive “time for reflection” into the school assembly period.

However, even the very limited reform that is being proposed by the petitioners would allow schools to adjust their daily collective activity to reflect the beliefs (or the diversity of belief) of their communities.

I would like to think the majority of parliamentarians would accept that Christianity should not be forced on people, and I very much hope that you will be able to test the willingness of the Welsh Parliament to adopt some degree of reform.

WALES HUMANISTS

Finally, I know that Kathy Riddick, of Wales Humanists, has been trying for some time, without success, to meet with you to discuss the major issues of collective worship, the new curriculum and faith schools in Wales.

Wales Humanists are effectively the only group representing non-religious belief groups in Wales; as such, they are not permitted full membership of SACREs, nor are they members of the Interfaith Forum, although they try to work closely with both groups.

Consequently, the many non-religious parents, children and educators in Wales, who are deeply affected by these matters, are not represented by either WASACRE or the Interfaith Forum and do not have equivalent access to the Assembly.

I hope that you will be able to find time to meet with Kathy, to consider their concerns and to redress the balance a little.

With best wishes,

Toby Keynes
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