

Fair School Votes - Humanist Society Scotland

Humanist Society Scotland is a registered charity that promotes Humanist values to people in Scotland, campaigns for an ethical, rational and secular future and gives voice to the millions of people in Scotland who live without religion.

Introduction

Our Fair School Votes campaign calls for an end to the outdated and undemocratic system of conferring voting rights to unelected faith leaders on local education committees. This briefing sets out the background of the current set-up and explains why we believe change is required.

The Background

The [Local Government \(Scotland\) Act 1973](#) requires councils to reserve up to three spaces on their education committee (or equivalent) for local faith leaders. Representatives from the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church, and one other faith group are normally appointed. In most local authorities, the religious representatives are also given the right to vote on education matters in line with elected local councillors. However, the Scottish Government clarified in 2019 that “*voting rights on committees are a matter for each local authority*” and therefore not a legal requirement for councils to fulfil.

The Problem

We believe that granting voting rights to unelected religious representatives is anachronistic and undemocratic. Important decisions about the running of our schools, teacher numbers and education policy should be taken by local councillors who are democratically elected and accountable to the communities they represent.

Religious identity and observance in Scotland is now at an all-time low and awarding voting rights to three religious groups does not reflect the plurality of faith and belief in our society today. Indeed, the current set-up is a throwback to the dominant social position religious bodies played in Scotland’s past and has given church representatives more direct power in determining local education policy than teachers, students or parents.

One recent example that highlighted this outdated and undemocratic system was in 2019, when the Lifelong Learning Committee on Perth and Kinross Council agreed to close Blairingone Primary School by eight votes to seven, with the two religious representatives casting the decisive votes. That the will of the democratically elected councillors was overturned by the votes of unelected, co-opted committee members proved extremely controversial within the local community. Further, the [Courier newspaper reported](#) that the

two religious representatives who voted to close the school did not participate in the debate to give reasons for their decision.

On a purely democratic level, the proportional STV system used to elect local councillors means that votes are often tight. In many local authority areas, religious representatives will hold the balance of power on hugely important education decisions as was the case in Perth and Kinross.

The Solution

In response to local outcry following the decision to close Blairingone Primary School, the Scottish Government issued a [statement](#) clarifying that the legislation did not require councils to award voting rights to their religious representatives. Shortly after, Perth and Kinross became the first council in Scotland to rescind their religious reps' voting privilege.

Since then, a further six councils have taken the decision to remove religious representatives' voting rights, including **Edinburgh, Fife, Highland, Orkney** and, most recently, **East Lothian. Stirling** has voted for this change effective from the next council term in 2027.

Further, it is important to stress that - in line with the Scottish Government's clarification in 2019 - not all local authorities bestow their religious representatives with voting rights. Indeed, the faith leaders who sit on **Midlothian, Borders and Moray** councils are included in matters relating to education, but have not historically had the right to vote.

As an elected local councillor, we strongly urge you to review your policy on who is allowed to vote on education decisions and support efforts to remove religious voting rights from the Community Services Committee.