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Politics

Exclusive: SNP Government 'scared of upsetting the church' over school religious assemblies

The Scottish Government is coming under pressure to change its stance on religious school assemblies

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The Scottish Government is not allowing children to opt-out of **religious school assemblies** because it is "scared of upsetting the church", according to the Humanist Society.

Under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, all state-funded schools are required to provide regular "religious observance", with the majority of schools following Christianity.

Parents have the right to withdraw their child from these events under this law. However, **there is no equivalent for children to opt out themselves**, or opt in if their parents have withdrawn them.

Last year Scotland officially adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which gives children the legal right to freedom of religion.

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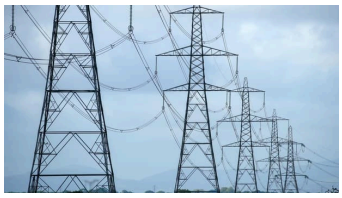

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The Humanist Society Scotland said allowing children to opt out of religious assemblies was the first real test on whether the Government was truly committed to the UNCRC.

Fraser Sutherland, chief executive of the Scottish Humanist Society, said: "This is something we have raised for a long time.

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"Young people are not able to independently make this decision for themselves and a recent Government consultation didn't make any changes despite evidence from children's rights groups.

Fraser Sutherland, CEO of the Humanist Society Scotland | Supplied

"This is the first real test on the Government's commitment to the UNCRC and if they don't allow young people to make this decision about their school day, it is a poor commitment."

Mr Sutherland said older pupils were allowed to opt out in England and Wales, and stressed most European countries had no religious observances in school at all.

He said: "The Government doesn't want to do anything that will upset the church hierarchy, even though the vast majority of the public agree with us."

Labour MSP Carol Mochan is due to question Government ministers on the issue on Thursday morning in the Scottish Parliament. SNP backbencher Emma Roddick - the youngest MSP in the Scottish Parliament - separately questioned First Minister John Swinney on the matter in Holyrood last week.

Mr Sutherland said: "This is not about banning it [religious school assemblies], but it is about giving young people a choice and allowing them to make a decision for themselves.

"There will be some quarters of course who disagree, but the vast majority of school-age children are not religious, so this is a backwards position.

"This is not religious education which is teaching young people about different religions in a non-confessional way. This is religious worship and we don't think it is appropriate that continues in the 21st century."

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "We have consulted with a wide range of stakeholders on changes to legislation on religious observance and religious and moral education in schools.

"Proposed changes will strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland, by ensuring their views are considered when a parent wishes to exercise their right to withdraw. This will bring legislation into line with existing guidance, building on our commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child."

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