Plans for worship in Scottish schools branded 'wholly inadequate'

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Scottish Government plans to make changes to rules around religious observance have been criticised for not going far enough *(Image: NQ)*

PLANS to make changes to religious observance in Scottish schools have been branded “wholly inadequate” after MSPs from a variety of parties have questioned the proposals.

Labour MSP Carol Mochan, the SNP's Emma Roddick and Greens co-leader Patrick Harvie have all questioned the Scottish Government in recent weeks on the plans, which do not currently give children the right to opt out of religious observance.

On Thursday, Green MSP Patrick Harvie asked Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth if she would respect the views of young people who want to make choices for themselves while Mochan also raised concerns.

Last month, Roddick highlighted to John Swinney during First Minister’s Questions that the Children and Young People’s Commissioner had said the plans do not represent significant progress towards UN Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC) compliance.

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She said: “In an increasingly secular and religiously diverse country, it is critical that young people of all faiths and none have their beliefs and choices respected at school. Is this something the First Minister will consider?”

The Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland told ministers in January the bill is incompatible with the UN convention on children’s rights.

Humanist Society Scotland has now said the cross-party criticism of the plans shows they are “wholly inadequate".

Currently, schools in Scotland are required to provide religious observance – or worship – on a “sufficiently frequent” basis.

Parents and guardians have always had the right to withdraw their children from religious observance, but pupils cannot opt themselves out.

In November, the Scottish Government announced a new bill on religious observance which would place in law school pupils' rights to share their views on the practice.

However, it does not propose allowing children and young people to make up their own mind on whether to participate in acts of collective worship.

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In its response to the consultation on the bill, Humanist Society Scotland told the Scottish Government that the current system does not comply with children's right to be heard or their right to freedom of thought, religion, or belief as defined by the UNCRC – which has recently been incorporated into Scottish law.

Fraser Sutherland, CEO of Humanist Society Scotland, said: "The Scottish Government should consider whether it really wants to protect children's rights as defined by the UN, or whether its new legislation is just window dressing.

“The Government has been repeatedly told – by UN committees, children's rights charities, and even the Children and Young People's Commissioner – that compulsory religious observance contravenes children's rights.

“Is it going to listen now that politicians in the chamber are adding their voice to the chorus?"

Swinney said in response to Roddick last month that ministers will consider all responses to the consultation, which closed on at the end of January.

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.”