

SNP depute candidates clash over Catholic schools in Scotland



Rival candidates split over freedom of Catholic schools; ‘no exceptions’ MEP Alyn Smith says over LGBTI policy

Two of the candidates for deputy leader of the SNP have feuded over Catholic schools this week with MEP Alyn Smith saying he would seek to diminish religious freedom in education.

Writing in *The National*, Alyn Smith said he was a keen supporter of the Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) campaign against homophobic bullying which seeks mandatory classes on LGBT issues in all schools.

“While freedom of religion is important, if any organisation is providing a publicly funded service then that freedom is surpassed by a duty to equality and the law,” he wrote. “We have curriculum for excellence, we’re more than capable of setting what our schools need to do, we need to set the bar a bit higher on LGBTI issues. In all schools, no exceptions.”

When asked by the SCO if he would seek a change to the existing arrangement on Catholic schools if elected deputy leader of the SNP, he said ‘the article is pretty clear and can be taken as read.’

“I support the Tie Campaign,” he said. “I think they’re doing a tremendous job.”

He said that it was ‘absurd’ to say he believed Catholic schools should not exist in Scotland. “There should be any sort of schools people want, but the law is the law and there shouldn’t be exceptions to it.”

Rival’s response

In response, Chris McEleny, leader of the SNP group at Inverclyde council, who is also running for SNP deputy leader, said: “Catholic schools are protected by an act of Parliament. As far as I see it that for as long as the Catholic community and Catholic families want to keep Catholic schools I will wholeheartedly support them.”

“Catholic schools came to be in Scotland due to historic discrimination and sectarianism our community faced. Without which Catholics wouldn’t have had an education,” he went on. “Therefore

there is a clear and unique legacy of how they came to be. Over the years we have made great strides in fighting sectarianism however Catholic schools have evolved into a whole lot more than just a school that allows Catholics to be educated.

“My Catholic education I received made me the person I am today. In an age that practicing your faith is increasingly difficult, I’m not ashamed of my faith; it defines me.

My faith, my family and my community are the driving forces in why I’m involved in politics, to improve the world as I see it for the better.”

“We must always reject and educate the argument that Catholic schools cause sectarianism in Scotland; study after study has proven this to be completely false,” he added. “One day perhaps we will live in a country that parents and the community no longer see the need to have Catholic schools, but at that point it should be up to them what they want for the future of their children’s education.”

Church reaction

In relation to the TIE campaign, a spokesperson for the Catholic Church said there was a zero tolerance approach to all forms of bullying in Catholic schools.

“There is a comprehensive programme of relationships and moral education in all Catholic schools that promotes the unique dignity of each person, made in the image and likeness of God,” he said. “Catholic schools work in partnership with parents, local authorities and other agencies to meet the needs of pupils and their families. All relationships within Catholic schools are founded on principles of mutual respect and, like all schools in Scotland, there is zero tolerance of discrimination of any kind.”

He stressed that ‘Catholic schools are welcoming, inclusive communities that support all pupils in their care’ and ‘the Church is working with the Catholic headteacher associations to ensure that all teachers have adequate knowledge, understanding and training and feel confident in addressing all aspects of relationships education, including LGBTI matters, in an appropriate and sensitive way.’

A spokesman for the Scottish Government, which supports the current arrangement with Catholic schools said: “There is no change of policy.”

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