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Contents

[Battling Bigotry](#)

[Trend on Family Continues](#)

[St Andrew but No Christmas](#)

[Prison Report Released](#)

[Current Legislation](#)

[In Brief](#)

[Incidents of Domestic Abuse Rise](#)

[Cardinal Lends Support to Hospice](#)

[Consultations](#)

Battling Bigotry

The Scottish Executive is continuing to monitor the effectiveness of measures designed to combat sectarianism. A recent analysis, for example, of the football banning orders applied for since 2003 shows that of the 245 requests, 48 were sectarian in nature. The Executive has also commissioned research projects into religious intolerance. Among other initiatives which it has supported was the “Anti-Sectarianism Conference” organised by Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office and Catholic Parliamentary Office. At that event Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Sheilagh Kesting spoke of the need to understand our history to overcome the shadow of sectarianism.

Episcopalian Bishop David Chillingworth identified the fatal error which creates sectarianism as the linking of religion with political or cultural interests. Sectarianism, he said, is insidious and destroys the spiritual life of Churches.

Monsignor Noel Woods, representing the Catholic Church noted the great force for good that religion in society brings, noting that two and a half million people make use of Church social services each year in Scotland. He identified the need for freedom of religion to be supported to create a genuine climate of tolerance. Minister for Community Safety, Fergus Ewing spoke at the event pointing out the different understandings of the term ‘sectarianism’, and said “we want to see a Scotland based on mutual respect and understanding, one in which negative sectarian attitudes are banished for good, and Scotland’s churches have a vitally important role to play in achieving this goal.” Government ministers joined representatives of the 12 Premier League Football teams to tackle bigotry at football matches. The First Minister and the club representatives signed a pledge to ‘Kick Out Bigotry’ from the sport. Ministers attended all SPL games on the weekend of 24/25th November as part of the campaign.

Stewart Maxwell, Minister for Communities and Sport, said: "It can be all too easy to turn a blind eye to the small minority who display open prejudice, but by taking an active stand and making it clear we find it unacceptable, we can help kick out bigotry from the terraces and our communities."

Trend on Family Continues

Any hope that the trends in family law would change with a new government administration have been quashed by the release of the new strategy document dealing with foster care. The

strategy will change the law to allow same sex couples to foster children. This is explicitly illegal in the Fostering (Scotland) Regulations 1996. The Adoption (Scotland) Act 2006 gave same sex couples the same standing as married couples and further Westminster regulations made it illegal to give preference to a married couple in placing children for adoption. However, the legal bar on same sex couples fostering prevented that situation being repeated when placing children in foster homes. The sociological evidence on the benefit of living with parents married to each other now seems to be glossed over as if of no consequence. Claims about the welfare of children being paramount ring hollow when it is not possible, without breaking the law, to give preference to the family environment which statistically provides the better opportunity for children's welfare.

The new strategy does state much that is reasonable and commendable but this glaring problem undermines the other good work and cannot be dismissed without comment. Another signal at the disfavour of marriage came in a debate in Parliament at the end of October on early intervention policies for supporting families. An amendment by Elizabeth Smith, MSP calling for support for "families and the institution of marriage" was defeated as members voted with their parties allowing the Lib Dems to unite with SNP members to defeat the motion. It is unfortunate that members split on such issues along party lines and some members vote contrary to their position during the debate. Minister Fiona Hyslop argued that she did support marriage but that it should not be the focus of early intervention policy.

St Andrew but No Christmas

The Scottish Parliament acknowledged the role and importance of our patron saint by passing the St Andrew's Day Holiday Bill in November 2006. The Feast Day on the 30th of November has not, as yet, been designated as a full national holiday. The Culture Minister, Linda Fabiani, however, has stated that the Government will engage with employee organisations and trade unions to encourage them to negotiate with their employees to come to a decision on St Andrew's Day and how best to celebrate Scotland's national day. St Andrew's Day packs have been sent to schools and universities.

The day was used to launch the programme announced by the First Minister as part of a 'Winter Festival'. Christmas is notably missing from the list which calls for special celebration on Hogmanay and Burns night. Over 100 events are planned between St Andrew's Day and Burns Night including a university conference and debate on Scottish identity, ceilidhs, history displays etc.

At the launch the FM said: "I am particularly delighted to launch our Winter Festival programme at a school - because it is only by ensuring our children understand the significance of St Andrew's Day that we will guarantee our nation's story can be told to future generations." Mr. Salmond has not neglected the international dimension and will be acutely aware of Ireland's success in marketing St Patrick's Day across the world. Included, therefore, in the festivities are international events including balls, dinners, lectures and concerts from Abu Dhabi to Washington

The First Minister commented further:

"St Andrew's Day is a celebration of Scotland at home and abroad. It is a chance to enjoy the multi-cultural Scotland we have become. But it's more than an excuse for a party - it's an opportunity to celebrate our history and our talents.

To celebrate Christmas the Scottish Parliament has over the last few years held a Christmas Carol Service this year, however the service is to be entitled a 'festive evening'. Deputy leader of the Conservative party, Murdo Fraser, expressed his anger at the politically correct

downgrading of Christmas and has tabled a motion in the Parliament calling for support to 'Reinstate Our Christmas Carol Service'. The motion presently has the support of 22 other MSPs whilst Patrick Harvie tabled a counter motion supporting an event which appeals to non-believers and believers. He only has the support of MSPs Ian McKee and Bill Wilson.

Prison Report Released

The Annual Report on Scottish Prisons was published by the Scottish Executive recently. In the Report, the Chief Inspector, Andrew McLellan, outlined the standards by which he assessed the prisons. These were concerned with three main areas: the safety and protection of prisoners from harm; the decency and respect for individual prisoner's legal rights; and the range and level of opportunities for prisoners to self-improve and access services and activities.

The Report points to many successes, such as slopping out having almost disappeared, the good relationships between staff and prisoners and the reduction of prisoner suicides from 17, ten years ago, to 9, last year. Prisoners were also able to report (83%) that they had not feared for their safety in the last month. Specific successes were highlighted such as the "bright spot" of the First Night Centre in Barlinnie which helped reduced the terror for new prisoners. Also the Report referred to the success of the new prisons building programme over the last four years. However, the "new-build" was to replace old dilapidated buildings and not to cope with the increasing demand for new prison places.

The growing prison population is causing more overcrowding and the Report highlights many of the problems this is causing. For example, there are not enough opportunities for prisoners to work in prison despite recognition that this is necessary and beneficial. Likewise, while there is high quality learning on offer, there are limited opportunities to avail of it. There is also a demand for better mental health care. The Report also noted that the single biggest health care issue is the level of demand put on the system dealing with addiction.

A concern was expressed about the growing number of children under 16 being held in Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions.

Another prison related issue was raised in Parliament, this time via a public petition. The Public Petitions Committee has been asked to support the call for the Scottish Parliament to investigate and establish the reasons for the apparently disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons. The Committee is asking the justice department for its views before considering whether to take further steps to seek an explanation. One such step might be to commission some research on the issue.

Current Legislation

Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill (Ex)

Stage 3 (debate, meeting of the Parliament) 20 December

Glasgow Commonwealth Games Bill (Ex)

Stage 1 (Subordinate Legislation Committee) 18 December

Lead committee – Local Government and Communities

Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill (Ex)

Stage 1 (debate, meeting of the Parliament) 20 December

Stage 1 Report – Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee (3rd Report, 2007)

Public Health etc. (Scotland) Bill (Ex)

Stage 1 (Subordinate Legislation Committee) 18 December

Lead committee – Health and Sport

(Ex) = Executive Bill; (M) = Member's Bill; (C) = Committee Bill; (P) = Private Bill.

In Brief

Queen's Speech

The UK Government's Parliamentary agenda and main priorities were announced by the Queen at the opening of Parliament in November.

Among the 21 Bills announced is the

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill (originally titled the Human Tissue and Embryo Bill). This contains an array of alarming proposals which will make the UK among the worst in the world for its research on humans and manipulation of human life. These include proposals to:

Regulate and widen the 'use' of human embryos outside the body

Allow the creation of embryos by mixing human and animal cells

Remove the reference to the need for a father when providing fertility treatment

Allow same-sex couples to be recognised as the legal parents of children conceived through the use of donated sperm, eggs or embryos

Amendments have already been tabled during the Committee stage of the bill in the House of Lords to have the bill deal with abortion.

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has produced a set of briefing papers on the bill which deals with the moral problems raised. These will be available at www.catholic-ew.org.uk and copies will be made available in Scottish parishes some time in January.

Counter Terrorism Bill

This bill will introduce various measures including strengthening rights of police to question suspects and make more use of DNA evidence in terrorist cases, convicted terrorists will be banned from travelling overseas, longer sentences will be introduced for terrorism related offences and an attempt to lengthen the time permitted for detaining suspects will be made.

Climate Change Bill

This new bill is intended to create a long-term legal framework to reduce the UK's carbon dioxide emissions up to 2050 and beyond.

Constitutional Reform Bill

Plans are that this bill will include provision to ensure that the approval of the House of Commons is necessary to deploy armed forces in conflicts abroad.

It will seek to rebalance the powers between the executive and legislative functions of government and the people of the UK. This will involve reform of the role of the Attorney General.

The bill will also enshrine the principles and values of the Civil Service in law.

The right of the monarch to pardon criminals is set to be removed and the right to peaceful protest will also be covered.

500th Anniversary of Sword of State

In 1507 Pope Julius II gifted the Sword of State to King James IV of Scotland. Along with the Scottish Crown Jewels and Sceptre, the sword forms part of the Honours of Scotland.

First Minister Alex Salmond hosted a reception in Edinburgh Castle to mark the quincentenary of that papal gift and representatives of the Catholic dioceses attended to witness a commemoration service led by Cardinal O'Brien in St Margaret's Chapel. The First Minister said "This gift is an honour that should be treasured and celebrated. It reminds us that the nation state of Scotland was a filia specialis (favourite daughter) of the papacy."

Cardinal Keith O'Brien said:

"The Sword of State is a powerful symbol of Scotland's historic identity. It is also a tangible reminder of the crucial role played by the Christian faith in the life of our nation."

Parish Water Charges

Changes to water charging for Churches could be crippling for parishes. The service to the community and the benefit of charitable and religious activities have been recognised in previous years such that Churches and charities get a considerable reduction under current regulations. The charging structure is being reviewed with a view to increasing efficiency and reducing costs. Part of that review will consider the continuation of reductions for charities and Church premises. It is important for parishes to make their case for retaining a reduction to the Consultation process. See website

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Consultations/Current> for details

Protecting Children

Elaine Smith, MSP raised an important issue in a motion she tabled in Parliament, where she criticised the use of a 'Spice Girls' pop video by the BBC to front its Children in Need campaign. She called for the Parliament to consider "the video to be offensive and degrading to women, adding to the desensitisation of society to pornography and... inappropriate for a programme for and about children".

Incidents of Domestic Abuse Rise

The Scottish Government published the latest figures on domestic abuse incidents recorded by police. The figure has climbed steadily since first being recorded in 1999 and this year shows a further increase of 7%.

Of the 45,812 incidents recorded 23,803 (48.8%) lead to a criminal conviction. Of these 'minor assault' is the most common charge accounting for 22% of all incidents and 'breach of the peace' accounted for 15%.

Married couples living together accounted for 17% of the incidents whereas 42% involved unmarried couples. In 34% of cases the incident involved former spouses or 'partners' no longer residing with the victim. Around 50% of incidents happen at weekends (Fri-Sun).

Known repeat victimisation accounts for 57% of incidents.

The police follow the definition that "domestic abuse is any form of physical, non-physical, or sexual abuse which takes place within the context of a close relationship, committed either in the home or elsewhere. This relationship will be between partners (married, co-habiting or otherwise) or ex-partners."

The Social Care Commission of the Bishops' Conference as part of the Ecumenical Group on Domestic Violence held a conference on the week of the figures being published looking at the impact of domestic abuse on its victims and the extensive emotional damage inflicted on children as a result. The Conference made available the latest statistics on children affected. These estimate that domestic abuse impacts on the lives of one million children in the UK and 100,000 children in Scotland.

Cardinal Lends Support to Hospice

Cardinal O'Brien took the opportunity of supporting the work of the St Margaret's Hospice in Clydebank by joining campaigners who attended the Scottish parliament in support of a petition being considered by the Petitions Committee. Cardinal O'Brien commented that he was known for his support of life at its beginning and that supporting life at the end was also a major life issue. He addressed the Committee along with Sr Rita Dawson and Professor Leo Martin giving backing to the petition submitted by Marjorie McCance. This called for Parliament to seek government assurances to retain continuing care provision for patients who require ongoing complex medical and nursing care, such as that provided at the 30 bed unit at St Margaret's Hospice.

Consultations

Title (with closing date)

Draft Quality Standards for Adult Hearing Rehabilitation Services (14/03/2008)

Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007: Part 1 (21/03/2008)

Draft Regulations on Development Plan Examinations (04/04/2008)

National Minimum Information Standards for Assessment etc for all Adults in Scotland (29/02/2008)

Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations (14/03/2008)

Scottish Road Works Register (Prescribed Fees and Amounts) Regulations 2008 (28/12/2007)

Draft Regulations on the Planning Hierarchy (21/03/2008)

Paying for water services 2010-14: A consultation on the principles of charging for water services (29/02/2008)

Consultation for Improvements to the Consultant Recruitment Process (15/02/2008)

The Revised Bathing Water Directive - Consultation on proposed Regulations (06/02/2008)

A statutory basis for disclosure in criminal proceedings in Scotland (25/01/2008)

Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 - Scottish Vetting and Barring Scheme - Consultation on Policy Proposals for Secondary Legislation (12/02/2008)

Consultation on the Scottish Agricultural College being designated as a Higher Education Institution and a body which may be funded by the Scottish Funding Council (23/01/2008)

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