

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Submission to the Smith Commission

General Meeting for Scotland is part of Britain Yearly Meeting, which unites Quakers in Scotland, England, and Wales.

Our submission includes five proposals for increasing devolved power, all of which reflect areas of concern in which Quakers have historically been involved and in which we are currently active. There has been an active Quaker presence in Scotland since the birth of Quakerism in the mid-seventeenth century.

PEACE

Quakers are best known for their peace testimony, which derives from the conviction that love is at the heart of existence and all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, and that we must live in a way that reflects this. Quakers are involved in a wide range of peace activities from practical reconciliation work in areas affected by violent conflict to the development of alternatives to violence at all levels from personal to international.

Proposal 1: Process for Approving Military Action

The requirement for parliamentary approval before the government commits to military action is currently a Westminster prerogative. No consideration of the views of other national parliaments and assemblies or exploration of peaceful alternatives, currently need to be taken into account.

We consider it would greatly strengthen the constitutional settlement if approval were to come from all national parliaments and assemblies in the United Kingdom. We also request that, when deciding on military action, ways of 'exporting peace' must also be identified and considered.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Quakers recognise the equal worth and unique nature of every person. Our longstanding work on human rights is rooted in our testimony to Equality and Peace and dates back to our work with refugees and prison reform over three hundred years ago.

Quakers in Britain work at all levels from the grassroots with local organisations to the international with the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva and New York to support the promotion and protection of human rights. We have frequent dialogue with the United Kingdom and other governments on ways that human rights can be appropriately embedded in legislation and practice.

Proposal 2: Consistent Application of Human rights Legislation

A key requirement for devolved powers should be that human rights are maintained or even enhanced. If the Human Rights Act were to be abolished by the United Kingdom government, public bodies operating under the UK government in Scotland would not have to respect it. If the Scottish Government tried to maintain or extend human rights legislation as it exists at the moment there would be a fragmented application of these important laws between public bodies.

We ask that Human Rights legislation passed by the Scottish parliament should apply to all public bodies operating in Scotland to ensure consistency of application and to give the Scottish Government freedom to enhance human rights.

Proposal 3: Additional Assistance for Asylum Seekers

Quakers have campaigned for better conditions and rights for asylum seekers for many years. In our submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Asylum we expressed concern that the findings of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, that the Government is practising a deliberate policy of destitution, have not been remedied.

At the moment in Scotland, the Scottish Government has limited powers to prevent the risk of destitution for asylum seekers.

We ask for powers to be transferred to Scotland that would allow for improvements in living conditions of asylum seekers. For instance these could include ensuring that asylum support rates are adequate for needs and that applicants for asylum are allowed to work pending the resolution of their case.

EQUALITY

The Quaker vision of equality springs from our profound sense of the worth of every human being. Every person's life is sacred and in this we are all equal. Nor can wealth be true riches if it is based on unlimited personal enrichment

Proposal 4: Tailoring Equality Laws to fit Scottish Circumstances

In our 2014 Statement on inequality we expressed concern about the growing inequality of wealth and income in our country. Devolution of powers offers an opportunity to adjust actions to tackle inequality in Scotland more closely to local circumstances.

We ask (in common with a number of equality organisations) for the devolution of equality laws, which would allow them to be tailored more closely with already devolved areas like housing, health etc. We note that Northern Ireland already has this legislation, which has been beneficial in creating a more equal society. Providing minimum standards are met, a Scottish government should be able to create additional protection and so promote the more equal society that we would like to see.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Quaker recognise our moral duty to cherish creation for future generations. We understand that climate change due to human activities is a symptom of the greater challenge of how to live sustainably and justly on this Earth and have committed ourselves to work towards being a low carbon community.

Proposal 5: Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by matching performance standards with fossil fuel industry regulation

Quakers in Britain have committed themselves to working to combat the effects of climate change on both the United Kingdom and the world. We recognise that current and unprecedented rates of greenhouse gas emissions, if left unchecked, are predicted to lead to global mean temperature rises of extreme detriment to human beings.

At the moment the Scottish government can set emission performance standards but the regulation of fossil fuel industries has not been devolved. For instance we currently have no right to object to fracking underneath our homes.

We ask for powers of regulation of fossil fuel industries operating on Scottish soil and in Scottish territorial waters to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament. Having the competence to limit the increased extraction and use of fossil fuels, would increase our ability to combat climate change.