



**Humanist
Society
Scotland**

From Scotland's Humanist Community

A Manifesto for the 2021
Scottish Parliament Election

Who We Are

As Scotland's national humanist organisation and voice, we have campaigned for a secular society and on human rights issues since 1989. After consultation with our members, our supporters, our Young Humanists Scotland representatives, our Board, and the wider humanist and secular community in Scotland, we have created a list of five priority areas that will help to deliver a Scotland that reflects and respects its predominantly non-religious population, as well as its religious population, and is built on respect for human rights and individual autonomy.



**Humanist
Society
Scotland**



**Young
Humanists
Scotland**

Introduction

Since devolution Scotland's biggest demographic change has been our relationship with religion.

The Scottish Household survey in 2009 found that 60% of people living in our nation said they 'belonged' to a religion; by 2019 that dropped to 45%. Our own research found that around three-quarters of the population did not consider themselves to be 'religious'. Scotland is not a 'Christian country' anymore. It is – based on all possible measurements of belief and practice – a secular one and has been for some time.


“ Scotland is not a 'Christian country' anymore. It is - based on all possible measurements of belief and practice - a secular one and has been for some time.

As humanists we defend everyone's right to freedom of thought, belief, and religion across the globe. We witness firsthand the dangers faced by religious and non-religious people alike where freedom of conscience is restricted. Whether it's the trumped-up blasphemy charges aimed at the Christian Asia Bibi in Pakistan, or the mass incarceration of Uighur Muslims in China, humanists stand opposed to these breaches of human rights. Indeed, the recipient of our Gordon Ross Humanist of the Year Award 2020 – Mubarak Bala – has spent over 300 days in a Nigerian jail without charge for spurious reasons. The reality is that he has been targeted for his humanist views. What these examples underline is the importance of a secular state that protects every individual regardless of their faith or belief. ▶

Since its establishment, the Scottish Parliament has delivered progressive policies that reflect a humanist demand for personal freedom and secularism: equal rights to marriage for same-sex couples, free personal care, protection for workers from secondhand smoke in the hospitality sector, the creation of a human rights commission, and the closing of a loophole that allowed children to be legally assaulted. Moving into its sixth Parliament, new and continuing challenges will face members, ranging from homelessness to drug deaths to rebuilding in the shadow of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our manifesto sets out five priority areas for change for Scots who have a non-religious humanist view of life in Scotland, and is built on the simple principle of giving people choice and control over their own lives and bodies, and argues for a Scotland that is built on respect for human rights and individual autonomy. A secular state is one that not only respects the views of the non-religious majority, but also protects the interests of Scotland's growing population of followers of non-Christian religions.

“ Our manifesto sets out five priority areas for change for Scots who have a non-religious humanist view of life in Scotland, and is built on the simple principle of giving people choice and control over their own lives and bodies





1.

**A secular education
system that respects
freedom of thought,
religion and belief**

The legal framework of Scotland's education system continues to echo centuries old arrangements with religious bodies.

In *Religion and Scots Law: Audit at the University of Glasgow (2016)* the authors highlight that Scotland has changed from being a nation where religious influence was amongst the strongest in Europe in the 1960s, to one of the least religiously-influenced countries in both law and personal practice in the 2010s.

Despite this overall shift, one area of law and practice remains significantly influenced by religious privilege – school education. We believe our school system should be inclusive, integrated, secular and break down the barriers between communities rather than exacerbate them. We have identified three key priority areas that the Scottish Parliament must address to ensure Scotland's school system fully respects parents' and pupils' right to freedom of thought, religion and belief.

Respect young people's right to freedom of thought, religion and belief by legally requiring religious observance provision in all schools to be a voluntary opt-in activity.

Scotland retains a system of worship during the school day that does not allow young people to choose whether they participate. This lack of choice has been criticised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, The Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland, and the Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights. The next Parliament must end this breach of young people's right to freedom of thought, religion and belief, and make religious observance an opt-in activity.

Remove the legal requirement for specific places to be reserved for religious representatives on local education governance committees.

Scotland's education legal framework requires all local education authorities to reserve three seats on the decision-making body for representatives from religious organisations. Specifically, the Church of Scotland enjoys the unique right to sit on all 32 education committees across the country. The reasons for such seats relates to historic agreements between church and state at the launch of publicly-provided education over one hundred years ago. There is no robust argument – beyond pleading to historical precedent – that evidences why religious groups should have more statutory say over schooling than teachers, pupils, parents, employers, or other interested parties. While there is no doubt that religious groups still wish to be involved in discussions around education, we believe a fairer approach would be achieved through the establishment of a consultative

relationship between faith groups and locally elected representatives. This approach would allow all of Scotland's diverse faith and belief communities to input views, whilst removing their privileged place over other groups.

Allow school headteachers the opportunity to explore alternatives to religious observance and worship.

The official guidance supplied to headteachers on religious observance requires schools to provide religious observance 'sufficiently frequently'. For non-denominational schools the guidance stresses that this should draw on 'Scotland's Christian heritage', while for denominational schools it is expected to reflect the faith position of that denomination. To better reflect the wide diversity of Scotland's population, greater freedom is required to allow teachers to create opportunities for pupils to explore philosophy and critical thinking options instead of a blanket approach in favour of Christian religion.



2.

**The Scottish Parliament
should legislate to
allow dying, mentally
competent adults the
right to choose an
assisted death**

Dying people should have the right to control their deaths and have access to a safeguarded system that allows them to choose a peaceful death.

People dying in Scotland who fear a painful or prolonged death face a stark choice: attempt to take their own life; pay thousands of pounds to travel abroad where they can access safe and legal options to end their lives; abide by the law and die a death they did not want. The current law takes away the opportunity for an assisted death in the UK and discriminates against those unable to make other choices due to ability or affordability. We think a law that effectively limits choice at the end of life to wealthy and able people is immoral.

This is not a debate between palliative care and access to assisted dying, but a debate about choice. All individuals should be given the choice over their end of life care. They should be able to do so in a robust system that has been proven to work well and that safeguards vulnerable people, as it has in Canada and the state of Oregon.

The current legal position is one of moral dubiety and double standards, with an inhumane legal approach that allows passive assistance at the end of life through starvation, but does not allow active support to a peaceful death.

“ We think a law that effectively limits choice at the end of life to wealthy and able people is immoral. ”



3.

**The Scottish Parliament
should introduce buffer
zones outside clinics that
provide abortions to stop
women facing harassment
from anti-choice protesters**

Across Scotland every year protesters target people accessing sexual health and reproductive healthcare facilities, often using graphic and factually inaccurate anti-abortion propaganda.

Those accessing these services frequently face hostility, abuse, and accusations of murder and infanticide. Abortion is a legal right in Scotland and those accessing the service should not be targeted for choosing to exercise this right. In addition, other (often vulnerable) women – such as those who have been raped or suffered miscarriages – are likewise targeted as protesters do not know why the person is attending the clinic or hospital.

A protest-free buffer zone should be established outside each facility to protect women from harassment and to ensure service users do not have their right to access healthcare impacted by protesters. This measure would not affect the right to oppose abortion laws by protest for those who wish to do so, but would ensure their opposition is not aimed at vulnerable people.

“ Protect women from harassment and ensure service users do not have their right to access healthcare impacted by protesters.



4.

**The next Scottish
Parliament should
prioritise urgent action
on tackling climate
change and transitioning
to a low carbon economy**

As members of the Stop Climate Chaos coalition, we support strong action to tackle the impacts of climate change.

Transformative change is needed to cut emissions and phase out our most polluting activities. Some key policies that would help deliver this include:

- Investment in measures to improve energy performance to at least 'C' standard in all homes by 2030
- Expansion of the concessionary bus fare scheme to encourage more people to use public transport and reduce the reliance on private car use
- Commitment to 100% of fuel from sustainable resources by 2032
- Spend at least 10% of the transport budget on active travel and prioritise sustainable transport options
- Investment in renewable heating such as heat networks and heat pumps, and a timescale for moving away from fossil fuel-driven heating





5.

**The next Scottish
Parliament should
introduce key policies
to support those rough
sleeping and to end
homelessness**

Before the pandemic restrictions our StreetCare Scotland volunteer project helped over 100 people every week in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Stirling.

The project helps anyone who presents to the volunteer team in need of practical help on the streets.

While projects such as StreetCare can provide food, warm clothes, and toiletries to cover immediate needs, they are unable to tackle the causes of homelessness.

To do this, the Scottish Parliament must renew its focus on the causes of homelessness and put support structures in place to tackle the root causes of homelessness and more effectively support people out of homelessness. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in the unemployment rate which will ultimately lead to housing insecurity for many thousands of additional people in Scotland.

Some key policies that would help tackle homelessness in Scotland include:

- End discharge into homelessness from hospital, prison, care, the asylum system, and the armed forces. A positive housing destination should be found for everyone rather than allowing people to become homeless
- Build at least 50,000 affordable new homes in the next five years with the majority in the social-rent sector
- Reduce the amount of time homeless individuals spend in 'temporary accommodation'
- Learn from the proactive response to helping homeless people during the pandemic where great efforts were made to help everyone into safe accommodation



www.humanism.scot

Humanist Society Scotland, Playfair House,
6 Broughton Street Lane, Edinburgh EH1 3LY



**Humanist
Society
Scotland**

Humanist Society Scotland is a Scottish charity, no SC026570, and a Scottish company limited by guarantee, no SC413697.