The Scottish Parliament
Public Petitions Committee

Consideration of Petition 1073: Scottish Prison Population (Catholics)

I have been asked to comment on Public Petition PE1073 which calls on the Scottish Parliament to investigate and establish the reasons for the apparently disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons.

According to the 2001 Census results, 15.88% of people in Scotland reported their religion as Catholic\(^1\). In the year 2007/08 23.7% of the people in prison in Scotland reported their religion as Catholic\(^2\). This is a statistically significant difference, which can be contrasted with figures for other denominations and religions. According to the same sources, other proportions are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>% in prison</th>
<th>% of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of Scotland</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Christian</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are a number of potential explanations for the apparently disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons.

In respect of factors within the criminal justice system, one might wish to consider whether Catholics
- commit a greater percentage of crimes and offences than people of other religions or Christian denominations, or
- are targetted disproportionately by the police, or
- are prosecuted more rigorously, or
- are punished more severely by the courts, or
- are less likely to be given early conditional release.

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\(^1\) Scotland’s Census Results Online: http://www.scrol.gov.uk/scrol/common/home.jsp
One could only begin to answer at least some of these questions after making inquiries of the police, the prosecuting authorities, the judicial authorities and the Parole Board. The reality is that it is highly unlikely that religious affiliation will be a factor in any of these matters. Most of these authorities will be unaware of the religion of the persons they are dealing with. When arresting a person, for example, the police are unlikely to inquire as to his or her religion. If the person is a detained, he or she may be given an opportunity to state religion in case of emergency. The procurator fiscal is unlikely to be aware of the religion of a person when considering whether to pursue a case, as is a jury or a judge. The religion of a person may or may not be included in papers prepared for consideration of early release.

The reasons for the disproportionate number of prisoners who are Catholics are likely to be found elsewhere.

Age is one factor. Prison statistics show that 49% of prisoners are less than 30 years old. According to the 2001 Census, 40% of Catholics are less than 30 years old, compared to 30% of members of the Church of Scotland and 32% of other Christian denominations. At the other end of the age spectrum, 17% of Catholics are over pensionable age, compared to 27% of members of the Church of Scotland and 23% of other Christians. In other words, a greater number of Catholics in Scotland are in the age group which has the greatest number of prisoners.

Another factor is home location. Prison statistics show that 21% of prisoners come from within the Glasgow Community Justice Authority area. The overall rate of imprisonment in Scotland is about 140 per 100,000 of the population. The rate in Glasgow City and in Dundee City is between 301 and 305. In Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire and North Ayrshire it is between 201 and 250. These are areas where there are relatively high Catholic populations.

There are other factors, such as proportionate rates of unemployment and of occupation of local authority housing for Catholics, which need to be analysed.

In conclusion, reasons for the disproportionate numbers of Catholics in prisons in Scotland are likely to be found within the social rather than the criminal justice environment.

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