

Scottish Election Briefing 2026

AN ANALYSIS OF PARTY POLICIES ON KEY
ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE TO CHRISTIANS



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Key resources at the.ci/scottishelection



Party manifestos

Find links to 2026 manifestos of the parties covered in this publication as they become available.



Questions for Candidates

Find out the views of your candidates – see the back page.



Further copies of this Scottish Election Briefing can be ordered from our office on **0191 281 5664** or downloaded at the.ci/scottishelection



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Introduction



HOLYROOD ELECTION 2026

Christian citizens should think carefully and prayerfully about how they vote in the election for the Scottish Parliament on 7 May.

The Christian Institute is a registered charity and we cannot tell you how to vote. What we can do in this briefing is address:

- why you should vote
- biblical priorities
- issues on the horizon
- two key factors in voting
- speaking to candidates
- party policies on key issues
- background information on public policy.

Our analysis of party policies covers issues where important Christian principles are at stake. They tend to be issues where biblical standards, particularly the Ten Commandments, directly apply. In modern Scotland, they can be among the most controversial subjects, yet in our view, the Bible is perfectly clear about them.

We cannot be exhaustive. There will be other areas of concern, such as the environment, where material is available elsewhere or where there is honest disagreement among Christians holding to the Bible as their authority.



WHY SHOULD WE VOTE?

The State is a means of God's common grace. The Bible is very clear that the governing authorities act on God's behalf to restrain evil and promote what is good (Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2). This benefits all people, not just Christians.

As a general rule, Christians follow Jesus' command to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's (Matthew 22:21).¹ Christians are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and also of an earthly nation. The Christian's duty is to obey the governing authorities. The exception is where they forbid what God requires, or require what God forbids (Acts 5:29).

It is our earnest prayer that Christians will have freedom to share the Gospel and live out the Christian life (1 Timothy 2:1-4). In praying "deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13), we are praying against the persecution of the Church as well as against personal temptation.

Romans 13 makes clear that God has ordained the governing authorities in every country, whether they are Christian or not. Thanks to God's common grace, there are many non-Christians who take the morally right view on particular issues. Nobody's thinking is wrong at every point. Politicians who disagreed with Christians about redefining marriage can still be strongly against assisted suicide or liberalising drug

laws. Some atheists will strongly defend the free speech of Christians.

Like the prophet Daniel, God's people must encourage leadership that promotes truth and righteousness. Daniel not only urged King Nebuchadnezzar to renounce his sins and his wickedness; he pleaded with the king to practise righteousness and show kindness to the oppressed (Daniel 4:27).

Unlike Daniel, Christians in Scotland today get to play a part in electing their leaders. In a democracy, everybody has the legal right to vote. Billions of people around the world do not enjoy the same freedoms we have here. We elect Members of the Scottish Parliament and so ultimately the Scottish Government. We help choose 'Caesar'. So voting is a privilege and a serious responsibility.²

The election provides an opportunity for Christians to speak out and play their part by voting. Governments can make it easier or harder to live freely as a Christian or to share the Gospel. Believers have to make a judgement about how their vote can be used to best effect.



BIBLICAL PRIORITIES

When it comes to matters of public policy, Christians have to assess biblical priorities. We can distinguish those political issues on which the Bible is absolutely clear from those on which it is not.

For instance, the Bible is not clear on how to improve access to GPs or the most appropriate level of university tuition fees. To decide on these issues involves a detailed assessment of the facts and the exercise

of judgement based on experience. Many situations we encounter in ordinary life are at this level, and so are many political issues.

But at the other end of the spectrum the Bible is "clear, direct, and decisive" about a whole host of political issues.³ For example, a vote for abortion or euthanasia is a vote to break the Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13). These are the kinds of issues we mainly focus on in this briefing – straightforward matters of right and wrong.

Making a Christian judgement on political issues often requires the wise assessment of several biblical principles. This can result in Christians arriving at different conclusions. For example, we know for certain that the State has a right to levy taxes (Romans 13:7). But Christians who hold to biblical truth can legitimately disagree on the level of individual taxes.



ISSUES ON THE HORIZON

The new Parliament elected on 7 May 2026 could vote on laws affecting religious liberty, freedom of speech, the family, transgenderism, abortion, assisted suicide, prostitution and drugs.

More information about legislation and public policy on these and other issues is given on page 25 onwards.

These are all issues of concern to Christians. Some are 'conscience votes', where MSPs are free to vote without a party whip, which underlines the importance of finding out what individual election candidates think.

Biblical Christians believe that the Gospel

is paramount. Salvation is only found in Christ, not in any political programme. Yet followers of Christ are also to care about their world, being salt and light in society. In order for that to happen, there has to be freedom for the Gospel. Religious liberty is a crucial issue.

Christians in this country have enjoyed remarkable freedom for centuries, which was hard-won down the years. Yet this is being increasingly challenged: street preachers have been arrested; Christians have lost their jobs for talking about their faith or for taking an ethical stand; individuals, churches and organisations have been discriminated against for holding to the belief that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Many Christians are also gravely concerned about legislative proposals that intrude into ordinary family life, evangelism and the running of the local church. Christians believe that governing authorities are established by God, but at the same time the Government is not responsible for everything. Indeed, if there is to be freedom, it must not be.

It is important to say that society is more than the State. Society is made up of families and many institutions and organisations between the State and the citizen. Government by itself cannot solve all our problems or even come remotely close.



DEVOLUTION

The Scottish Parliament can make laws in areas such as education, health, family life, crime, local government, agriculture, social

work, economic development and transport. It has powers to set rates and bands of income tax, and powers over certain aspects of welfare.

Westminster retains responsibility for other areas such as defence, equality/discrimination law, employment law and foreign affairs. These are 'reserved matters' on which Holyrood cannot legislate.

Though Westminster makes laws on reserved matters, the Scottish Parliament can still have a role on those same issues. Although legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 can only be passed at Westminster, Holyrood can significantly affect the equality agenda in Scotland – for example, it has power to make its own regulations to implement the 'public sector equality duty' contained in the 2010 Act.



CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

In the voting system for elections to the Scottish Parliament, each elector has two votes – one for their constituency and one for their region. A system of proportional representation is used. Overall, the aim of the electoral system is to ensure that the number of seats in Parliament won by each party broadly reflects their percentage of votes in each region.

You have to consider how you will cast your two votes. In the *constituency* list you vote for individual candidates; in the *regional* list you vote for a party.

There are therefore two obvious factors to consider: the individual candidates and the political parties.

Thinking first about the constituency

list, you may decide it is better to vote for an exceptional candidate who shares your Christian views across a range of moral issues, even if they are standing for a party you would not usually support. You may decide the most important consideration is to vote for the candidate who is standing for a party that in your view represents the 'least-worst' option. You may think it is better to vote for a candidate representing a Christian political party who may happen to stand in your area. These are decisions which ultimately only you can make.

Christians should exercise their conscience in these matters. Just because your family or friends vote in a certain way does not mean that you need to do the same. It is your choice.

In terms of the regional list, people's thinking is more in terms of the parties as a whole. That makes finding out the policies, and past record, of the political parties all the more important. Of course, you are free to vote for a candidate from *one party* in the *constituency* list, but vote for a *different party* in the *regional* list. You are also free to vote for individuals standing in a constituency or region who have no party affiliation.

It is highly unlikely that you will find a party or a candidate you feel has all the right views. For many Christians there is a genuine dilemma over how to vote. In making your decision, you may wish to consider how the parties fared in previous elections in your constituency and your region.⁴

Type in your postcode here to find out which constituency you live in: whocanivotefor.co.uk



SPEAKING TO CANDIDATES

Candidates or their canvassers may come to your door, phone you or stop you in the street to ask how you intend to vote. This presents an ideal opportunity to find out where the candidate stands on key moral issues. His or her opinions on these issues can be quite different from the position of their party.

Perhaps more than at any other time, the candidates will be open to listening to your views. Should they be elected, they will be representing you at Holyrood.

We have suggested some *Questions for Candidates* on the back page. Think through two or three issues and have the questions ready in case canvassers contact you. Limit yourself to the two or three issues with which you are most concerned. Be prepared to give a reason for your view. This briefing will help you get to grips with the issues you are interested in.

If you speak to the candidates themselves, ask if they are willing to raise your concerns at the Scottish Parliament if elected. If they say they will, you can hold them to this promise should they be elected.

If you speak to someone canvassing on behalf of the candidate, ask for your concerns to be passed on. The very act of asking these questions is a Christian witness.



CONTACTING YOUR CANDIDATES

You can contact your candidates by letter or email, or on social media, to raise your concerns. This way you can be sure that they have all been made aware of the issues important to you. For contact details, go to: whocanivotefor.co.uk or check their election literature. If you do contact one, keep things short, but do raise specific points. Make sure you tell them you live in their constituency. You could swap notes with other Christian friends who have had contact with a candidate.

There are many ways of being a Christian citizen, but elections provide a good opportunity for Christians to be salt and light in our society. We must pray for wisdom and speak out for the truth.

i **For contact information about candidates and parties, visit:**
whocanivotefor.co.uk



THE POLICIES OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Christian Institute seeks to promote the Christian faith in the public square in matters of religious liberty, education, marriage and the family, medical ethics and public morality.

Within these broad areas, this briefing highlights some of the policies of the parties represented at Holyrood before dissolution. We also include some of the known policies of the Scottish Family Party, which is standing at least four candidates in all eight regions.* Resource constraints do not permit us to cover the policies of the other parties fielding candidates.

*The Alliance to Liberate Scotland meets this threshold but does not have party policies for this briefing to consider, as its representatives would have free votes on all matters except independence.

The parties set out their policies in their manifestos, official policy documents, or resolutions determined by their party conferences. Our election website will link to the 2026 manifestos of the parties covered in this publication as they become available: the.ci/scottishelection

Obviously the Scottish Government's actions are there for all to see. Since the opposition parties have not been in a position to implement their ideas, we can only note what they have said and the way they have voted.

Christians must weigh the evidence and exercise their Christian conscience, remembering that: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

i **For party manifestos (as available) and other election information, visit:** the.ci/scottishelection



The SNP has been in Government in Scotland since 2007. From August 2021 to April 2024, it had a power-sharing agreement with the Scottish Greens. The party had 60 MSPs in the Scottish Parliament at dissolution for the election. The party's leader, **John Swinney**, has been First Minister since 2024. His predecessor, Humza Yousaf, replaced Nicola Sturgeon in 2023. The SNP has nine MPs at Westminster.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

'Conversion therapy' – The Scottish Government held a consultation from January to April 2024 on 'Ending Conversion Practices in Scotland'. The proposals risked restricting biblically faithful preaching, prayer, pastoral care and parenting. The Government dropped plans to legislate by this election, but has reiterated its promise to publish a fully 'trans inclusive' Bill in the first year of the next parliament if a proposed Westminster law does not cover Scotland satisfactorily.⁵

Hate crime – The Scottish Government's Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 extended the law on 'hate crime', including on grounds of religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity. New 'stirring up hatred' offences were criticised for endangering free speech.⁶ The Government agreed to amend the Bill during its passage, including a requirement for stirring up hatred to be intentional for an offence to be committed.⁷ The legislation was implemented in April 2024 but remains controversial.⁸

Sectarianism Bill – The SNP's anti-sectarianism Bill in 2011 initially gave rise to serious free speech concerns, but was amended during its passage to include protections. It was later repealed by MSPs, against the wishes of the SNP.

Equality Act 2010 – The SNP offered general support for the legislation, which would have narrowed the employment freedom of churches and religious organisations.⁹

Human rights – The party's 2024 general election manifesto pledged to oppose any attempts to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights or amend the Human Rights Act 1998.¹⁰ The party's 2026 manifesto pledges to "introduce the Human Rights Bill in the next parliament and incorporate a range of conventions into Scots law. Our aim will be to build on earlier rights incorporation efforts in Scotland."¹¹

EDUCATION

Religious education – As part of the Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence,

paganism was introduced into Religious Education classes for the first time in 2012.¹² In 2025, the Scottish Government introduced legislation that removes the right of withdrawal from RE and allows children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance.

Sex education – In February 2026, the Scottish Government updated its Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education guidance. It recognises parents and carers as children's primary educators and encourages transparency, but gives undue weight to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹³ Traditional marriage is not mentioned.¹⁴

LGBT education – In August 2021, the Scottish Government published "Supporting transgender pupils in school" guidance, in consultation with LGBT Youth Scotland. It said there was no justification in law for limiting the use of toilets and changing rooms on the basis of biological sex. After 2025 court rulings, the guidance was revised to say facilities have to be made available on the basis of biological sex.¹⁴ The 2026 manifesto says the party is "committed to protecting and continuing the national approach to LGBTQI+ Inclusive Education across all primary and secondary schools".¹⁶

Home education – Guidance published by the SNP Government in 2025 upheld the right of parents to home-educate but also stated that: "A child's rights based approach should be adopted in relation to home education."¹⁷

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – In 2022, the Scottish



◀ Former First Ministers Nicola Sturgeon (2014-2023) and Humza Yousaf (2023-2024)

Government brought forward legislation allowing those over the age of 16 to change legal sex by self-declaration without a medical diagnosis. It passed the Scottish Parliament but the Westminster Government used a constitutional power to prevent it becoming law, due to concerns over its impact on equality legislation reserved to Westminster. The Scottish Government remained committed to the policy.¹⁸ However, in April 2025, For Women Scotland won a Supreme Court case against the Scottish Government, confirming that "sex" in the Equality Act refers to biological sex. The Government said it accepted the ruling and no longer had plans to bring back self-ID legal sex changes.¹⁹ It is facing a legal challenge for continuing to house prisoners identifying as transgender in prisons for the opposite sex.²⁰

The 2026 manifesto states: "We are committed to upholding and protecting the human rights of trans people as far as possible within our powers and we will do all we can to ensure that trans people's identities are recognised and respected."²¹

Same-sex marriage – A Government Bill to introduce same-sex marriage was passed in the Scottish Parliament in 2014. SNP MSPs were given a free vote on the Bill; 56 SNP MSPs voted for the Bill and seven against.

The Government refused to accept there was any need for amendments to protect religious liberty and freedom of speech.²²

Divorce – In December 2025, the Scottish Government published plans to extend the DIY divorce process to cases where there are children under 16 if the spouses have agreed arrangements for their upbringing.²³

Marriage allowance – The SNP is against marriage tax breaks.²⁴

Sunday trading – In 2016, SNP MPs voted against the Westminster Government’s plans to relax Sunday trading.²⁵ The party supports Sunday trading in principle, but did not want Scottish workers to be adversely affected by the legislation for England and Wales.²⁶

Smacking – The SNP strongly supported legislation that criminalised parents for reasonable chastisement.²⁷ It came into force in November 2020.²⁸

Named Person – In 2014, the SNP Government passed an Act to give every child in Scotland a ‘named person’ – a state employee – to oversee their ‘wellbeing’. The Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that the scheme breached the right to a private and family life. The SNP repealed the statutory scheme in 2019, after being unable to make it lawful and workable.²⁹

LGBT rights – The SNP has said that in an independent Scotland, it would embed LGBT rights in a written constitution.³⁰

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – The SNP gave its MSPs a free vote on Liam McArthur’s assisted suicide

Bill for Scotland. At Stage 1, 41 SNP MSPs voted for, 19 against, with one abstention. At Stage 3, 37 of the then 60 SNP MSPs voted for, with 22 against.

Organ donation – The SNP Government legislated for an opt-out organ donation system in the Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Act 2019.³¹

Abortion – In 2024, the Scottish Government set up a group to advise on changes to the law. All members were pro-abortion. The group’s recommendations include decriminalising abortion up to birth, and there would be no prohibition on sex-selective abortion. In March 2026, the Scottish Government launched a stakeholder consultation on the group’s recommendations, promising a full public consultation if ministers decide that abortion law should be changed.

The Scottish Government supported a backbench Bill to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland but gave its MSPs a free vote – one voted against.

In 2020, the Scottish Government introduced early home abortions during the coronavirus pandemic, making the move permanent in 2022.³²

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – The SNP describes prostitution as “a form of gendered violence” and has said it is in favour of criminalising the purchase but not the sale of sex.³³ It did not support independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to this effect in February 2026, which subsequently fell; six SNP MSPs voted for, 53 against. **The Government has established an independent commission to consider the**

Pornography – In February 2026, the Government launched a consultation on its plans to outlaw the non-consensual creation of deepfake intimate images.³⁵ As part of its Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010, the SNP introduced an offence of possessing extreme pornography.

Online Safety Act 2023 – The SNP’s 2024 general election manifesto supported “full enforcement” of the Online Safety Act and “prompt strengthening of these laws when required” to “[p]rotect people, particularly children”.³⁶

Drugs – In July 2023, the Scottish Government published a drugs policy that argued for the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use.³⁷ The party wants drugs policy to be devolved to Scotland. In January 2025, the Scottish Government opened a ‘drugs consumption room’, called The Thistle, in Glasgow. A strategy plan published in March 2026 focuses on early prevention and ‘harm reduction’, including supporting more drug consumption rooms “where appropriate”. It also commits to maintaining a target of

1,000 residential rehabilitation placements per year.³⁸ The SNP Government introduced new limits to tackle drug-driving in October 2019.³⁹

Alcohol – The SNP Government passed the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012. The Act allows for a minimum price per unit of alcohol and a 50p threshold was implemented in May 2018.⁴⁰ This was increased to 65p in 2024.

Gambling – In 2024, the SNP’s general election manifesto said the UK Government should treat problem gambling as a public health matter, tackle the impacts of advertising and implement a gambling levy.⁴¹



Scottish Conservatives

scottishconservatives.com



The Scottish Conservatives had 28 MSPs at dissolution for the election, including leader **Russell Findlay**. The Conservative Party has 116 MPs in the House of Commons, including its leader, Kemi Badenoch. Five of the MPs represent Scottish constituencies. The Conservatives were in Government at Westminster from 2010 to 2024, including in coalition with the Liberal Democrats from 2010 to 2015.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

'Conversion therapy' – The 2024 general election manifesto said attempted 'conversion therapy' is "abhorrent", but noted that legislation in the area "is a very complex issue" and that existing law gives "robust protections". It said it was right to "take more time before reaching a final judgement on additional legislation in this area".⁴²

Hate crime – The Scottish Conservatives have called the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act "an attack on free speech" and "unworkable". They say they would repeal the Act and have promised to "replace it with a law that defends free speech in Scotland".⁴³

Non-crime hate incidents – The party's 2026 manifesto says it will "require that Police Scotland stop recording non-crime hate incidents".⁴⁴

Sectarianism Bill – The Scottish Conservatives voted against the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 and

supported its repeal in 2018.⁴⁵

Equality law – Conservative MPs and Peers were whipped to support an amendment maintaining existing employment exemptions for churches, but the party gave its general support to the Bill as a whole.⁴⁶ The Scottish Conservatives have said they will ban "roles in the public sector that are exclusively focused on 'equality', 'diversity' or 'inclusion'".⁴⁷

Human rights – Kemi Badenoch has said that the Conservatives would leave the European Convention on Human Rights and repeal the Human Rights Act.⁴⁸

EDUCATION

Religious education – The Scottish Conservatives opposed 2026 legislation removing the right of withdrawal from RE and allowing children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance.⁴⁹

Sex education – In its 2026 manifesto the

party said it would “establish parent panels in every local authority that would allow parents to oversee the content children are taught on socially contentious issues such as sex education or other issues of personal morality”. It also said it would stop schools from sending “inappropriate” surveys to children on sexually.⁵⁰

LGBT education – The party has opposed the influence of transgender ideology, specifically of LGBT Youth Scotland, in primary schools.⁵¹

Its 2026 manifesto says it “would scrap the Scottish Government guidance which encourages the teaching of gender ideology in schools”.⁵²

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – The Scottish Conservatives opposed the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which sought to allow over-16s to change legal sex by self-declaration, and have said they will oppose any attempt to bring it back.⁵³ They welcomed the Sandyford gender clinic pausing prescribing puberty blockers and said they would “ensure that the Cass Review is implemented in Scotland in full”.⁵⁴ Following the UK Supreme Court ruling on the meaning of ‘sex’ in the Equality Act, Russell Findlay called on the Scottish Government to drop the gender self-ID policy “for good”.⁵⁵

Same-sex marriage – At Holyrood, Scottish Conservative MSPs had a free vote on redefining marriage. Seven voted in favour of the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill and eight voted against. The Westminster coalition Government passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 for England and Wales, giving its MPs a free vote.⁵⁶

Divorce – In 2020, the Westminster Government passed the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act, which introduced ‘no-fault’ divorce in England and Wales.

Marriage tax breaks – The Westminster coalition Government introduced a tax break for married couples from April 2015, now worth around £250 a year. The Scottish Conservatives have said they would use combined household rather than individual income to determine eligibility for Child Benefit, with a gradual reduction starting at £120,000.⁵⁷

Smacking – Each Conservative MSP voted against legislation that criminalised parents for reasonable chastisement at least once. Just before the law came into effect at the end of 2020, a party spokesman said the previous law was “entirely sufficient” to tackle abuse and that parents risk being criminalised.⁵⁸

Named Person – The Scottish Conservatives opposed the now-repealed Named Person provisions.⁵⁹ Conservative MSPs abstained on the legislation as a whole, saying that they did not want to oppose the other things in the Bill.⁶⁰

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – Conservative MSPs were given a free vote on Liam McArthur’s assisted suicide Bill for Scotland. At Stage 1, eleven of the then 30 Conservative MSPs voted for, with 19 against. At Stage 3, six of the then 28 Conservative MSPs voted for, with 22 against.

Organ donation – The party welcomed the introduction of an opt-out organ donation

system in Scotland. The party also pushed for a “consistent marketing campaign” to ensure “maximum understanding of the idea of expressed consent”.⁶¹

Abortion – Conservative MSPs had a free vote on a backbench Bill to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland. All Conservative MSPs who voted – 26 out of a total of 31 – voted for the Bill.

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – The party supported independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to criminalise the purchase of sex but decriminalise its sale.⁶²

Drugs – The Scottish Conservatives initially

supported the trial of drug consumption rooms in Scotland.⁶³ The party says in its 2026 manifesto that it would shut down “this failed experiment”.⁶⁴ In October 2025, the party supported its MSP Douglas Ross’s Member’s Bill to give those with drug and alcohol addiction a legal right to treatment. It was rejected by the Scottish Parliament.⁶⁵

Alcohol – The party supported the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012, which allows for a minimum price per unit of alcohol.⁶⁶ The party opposed the increase from 50p to 65p per unit in 2024, with its spokesman arguing that the policy had not been as effective as claimed.⁶⁷ The 2026 manifesto said it “would scrap Minimum Unit Pricing and instead increase support for alcohol addiction services”.⁶⁸



The Scottish Labour Party had 21 MSPs at dissolution for the election, including its leader **Anas Sarwar**. Labour currently has 404 MPs at Westminster, including Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, with 37 MPs representing Scottish constituencies.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

'Conversion therapy' – Anas Sarwar has backed a ban in principle, but expressed concerns about the possibility of parents being criminalised.⁶⁹ The party's 2026 manifesto said it would: "Work to deliver a conversion practices ban on a four nation basis to prevent the creation of any possible loopholes across the UK and protect LGBT+ people from harmful conversion practices."⁷⁰

Hate crime – Scottish Labour supported the overall principles of the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill but raised free speech concerns about the 'stirring up hatred' offences as originally drafted.⁷¹ The party welcomed the additional safeguards introduced and backed the final legislation.⁷² After the legislation caused controversy when implemented in 2024, Anas Sarwar said he would not repeal it, but would amend it to include 'sex' as a protected characteristic 'to target misogyny and protect the voicing of gender critical views'.⁷³

Sectarianism Bill – In 2017, Labour MSP and spokesman James Kelly introduced a Bill to repeal the Offensive Behaviour at Football

and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. Labour MSPs voted for the Bill.

Equality Act 2010 – The 2024 Scottish Labour manifesto said the party was proud of the Equality Act 2010 introduced under Gordon Brown.⁷⁴ It consolidated all discrimination laws into a single Act. The Bill as introduced would have narrowed the employment freedom of churches and religious organisations. The House of Lords voted three times against the plans and the UK Labour Government gave way.

Human rights – The Scottish Labour Party said in 2019 that it maintained a "firm commitment to the Human Rights Act".⁷⁵ The UK Labour Government has ruled out withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights, but said it plans to tighten the interpretation of some of its provisions.⁷⁶

EDUCATION

Religious education – Scottish Labour opposed legislation removing the right of withdrawal from RE and allowing children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance. Ahead of

the final vote, a spokesman called the Bill “rushed” and “confused”.⁷⁷

LGBT education – In its 2021 manifesto, Scottish Labour said it supported the aims of the Time for Inclusive Education campaign to “develop LGBT+ inclusive education in the curriculum”.⁷⁸

Home education – In its 2024 manifesto, Scottish Labour said “monitoring of home-schooling provision is patchy across Scotland” and proposed creating “a national attendance register”.⁷⁹

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – Scottish Labour MSPs were whipped to support legislation allowing over-16s to change legal sex by self-declaration without a medical diagnosis. In the final vote, 18 Scottish Labour MSPs voted for, including Anas Sarwar, with two voting against and two not voting.⁸⁰ However, Sarwar later expressed backing for both the Supreme Court ruling on the definition of ‘sex’ and nurse Sandy Peggie. He has said he would consider new legislation on gender recognition reform if it was brought forward.⁸¹ He has also said that, if First Minister, he would make all women’s spaces, services and sports single sex, based on biology.⁸²

Following the Cass Review, Labour’s health spokesperson supported the Sandyford Clinic’s decision to pause prescriptions to under-18s, calling on the Scottish Government to implement the recommendations from the Review.⁸³ The 2025 Scottish Labour conference rejected a motion supported by Anas Sarwar on providing single-sex spaces in schools and giving children questioning their gender

support instead of puberty blockers.⁸⁴

Same-sex marriage – Scottish Labour supported the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2014. Labour MSPs were given a free vote, and 31 voted to redefine marriage in Scotland, while three voted against.

Smacking – Scottish Labour supported legislation that criminalised parents for reasonable chastisement.⁸⁵

Named Person – Scottish Labour MSPs voted in favour of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, containing the statutory Named Person provisions. The party was supportive of “the principle of the named person scheme”, but criticised the implementation.⁸⁶

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – Labour MSPs were given a free vote on Liam McArthur’s assisted suicide Bill for Scotland. At Stage 1, seven of the then 22 Labour MSPs voted for, with 15 against. At Stage 3, three of the then 20 Labour MSPs voted for, with 17 against.

Organ donation – Scottish Labour supported legislation for an opt-out organ donation system.

Abortion – The 2023 Scottish Labour Party conference passed a motion supporting the full decriminalisation of abortion.⁸⁷ Scottish Labour supported a backbench Bill to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland, with all the then 22 Labour MSPs voting for it at Stage 3.

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – Scottish Labour supported the general principles of independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to criminalise the purchase of sex but decriminalise its sale.⁸⁸ In the vote, 17 Scottish Labour MSPs voted for it, with none against it. Anas Sarwar raised concerns about sex trafficking during the Bill’s passage through Parliament.⁸⁹

Drugs – Scottish Labour has said it is committed to a ‘harm-reduction’ approach, supporting the consumption room in Glasgow, drug-testing facilities and greater access to medication to reverse overdoses.⁹⁰ The 2026 manifesto committed to: “Reviewing the impact of the Thistle safe consumption pilot, including the consequences for the surrounding area and ensuring any provision is evidence based.”⁹¹ The party also wants to improve access to residential rehabilitation.⁹² Anas Sarwar has stated he does not support the decriminalisation of drugs, but people should not be prosecuted for personal use of “low level” cannabis.⁹³

Alcohol – Labour abstained on the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012, which allows for a minimum price per unit of alcohol. The Scottish Labour Party supported the increase from 50p to 65p in 2024 but said that minimum unit pricing was not enough to prevent deaths to alcohol.⁹⁴ It advocated for a public health levy to help the funding of drug and alcohol partnerships to tackle the problem.⁹⁵

Gambling – Scottish Labour’s 2024 general election manifesto expressed a commitment to “reducing gambling-related harm”, including by reforming gambling regulation to strengthen protections and working “with the industry on how to ensure responsible gambling”.⁹⁶ The UK Labour Government has since limited online slots stakes, applied a £100 million statutory levy to the gambling industry and increased duties on online betting companies.



Scottish Greens

greens.scot



The Scottish Greens had seven MSPs at dissolution for the election, including co-leaders **Ross Greer** and **Gillian Mackay**. From August 2021 to April 2024, the Scottish Greens had a power-sharing agreement with the SNP, with then co-leaders Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater holding ministerial positions.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

'Conversion therapy' – The Scottish Greens 2026 manifesto promised to: "Introduce a comprehensive ban on conversion therapy covering all settings, such as religious, informal, community, family-based and therapeutic, with clear protections for affirming healthcare, and inclusive of trans, non-binary, and asexual identities."⁹⁷

Hate crime – The Scottish Greens supported the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill in Parliament, including criminalising 'stirring up hatred'.⁹⁸ During the progress of the Bill, the party tabled amendments to narrow proposed protections for free speech. All of its then five MSPs voted for the final legislation. The 2026 manifesto promised to review the effectiveness of the Act.⁹⁹

Sectarianism Bill – Both Green MSPs at the time voted against the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 and all of its then five MSPs voted for repeal in 2018.

Human rights – The Scottish Greens wants

to "make sure Scotland's Human Rights Commission is strong and independent, to protect and uphold the European Convention on Human Rights".¹⁰⁰ The 2026 manifesto commits to introducing an extensive Scottish Human Rights Bill.¹⁰¹

EDUCATION

Religious education – The Scottish Greens abstained in the final vote on the 2026 law removing the right of withdrawal from RE and allowing children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance. The party felt children's rights were not sufficiently protected.¹⁰²

LGBT education – Ross Greer has called on the Government to introduce "critically important LGBTI*-inclusive sex and relationships education".¹⁰³ The party wants to ensure that education as a whole is "LGBTI+ inclusive".¹⁰⁴

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – The Scottish Greens supports the self-declaration of legal sex, including an option for those who claim to be neither male nor female.¹⁰⁵ All seven of the party's MSPs voted against a Holyrood motion welcoming the Cass Review, which passed by 113 votes to seven.¹⁰⁶ In response to the Supreme Court ruling defining sex in the Equality Act as biological sex, equalities spokeswoman Maggie Chapman said the judges were spreading “bigotry, prejudice and hatred”.¹⁰⁷ The Scottish Greens expelled members who signed a declaration saying sex is a biological reality and who spoke out about the impact of trans ideology on women.¹⁰⁸

Same-sex marriage – The two Green MSPs at the time voted in favour of introducing same-sex marriage in 2014.

Smacking – Then Green MSP John Finnie introduced a Bill to criminalise parents for reasonable chastisement. It came into force in November 2020. The Scottish Greens strongly supported the Bill, and all its MSPs voted for it.

Named Person – Both Green MSPs at the time voted in favour of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. When the statutory scheme was abandoned in September 2019, education spokesman Ross Greer said that the policy of having named persons was “unquestionably legitimate” but had been ‘bungled’.¹⁰⁹

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – In 2021, then co-leaders

Patrick Harvie and Gillian Mackay signed a cross-party open letter in support of an assisted suicide Bill. Scottish Green MSPs were given a free vote on Liam McArthur’s assisted suicide Bill. All seven voted in favour of the Bill at both Stage 1 and Stage 3.

Abortion – The 2026 manifesto states: “The Scottish Greens believe access to abortion is a fundamental right.”¹¹⁰ The Scottish Greens support the total decriminalisation of abortion and support the provisions allowing DIY abortions at home.¹¹¹ In 2023, Gillian Mackay introduced a Member’s Bill which created 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland.

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – The Scottish Greens advocate the total decriminalisation of prostitution,¹¹² calling for ‘sex work’ to be treated as work.¹¹³ They opposed independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to criminalise the purchase of sex but decriminalise its sale.

Drugs – The Scottish Greens support the legalisation and regulation of drugs, as the expansion of drug consumption rooms.¹¹⁴

Alcohol – In 2010, both Scottish Green MSPs at the time voted in favour of introducing a minimum price per unit of alcohol. All seven MSPs backed the increase from 50p to 65p in 2024.

Gambling – The Scottish Greens have called for an extra levy on casinos and bookies to “compensate for the harm caused by the gambling industry”.¹¹⁵



Scottish Liberal Democrats

scotlibdems.org.uk



The Scottish Liberal Democrats had five MSPs at dissolution for the election, including leader **Alex Cole-Hamilton**. The Liberal Democrats currently have 72 MPs at Westminster, with six representing Scottish constituencies.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

'Conversion therapy' – The Scottish Liberal Democrats promise to ban “all forms of conversion therapies and practices, working in partnership with the UK Government to achieve this”.¹¹⁶

Hate crime – The party supported “the overall aim of updating hate crime law”.¹¹⁷ However, Justice Spokesman Liam McArthur raised free speech concerns, and called for the law to be applied “in ways that fully respect essential freedoms, such as freedom of expression”.¹¹⁸ All five Lib Dem MSPs voted in favour of the amended Bill at Stage 3.

Sectarianism Bill – All five Liberal Democrat MSPs at the time voted against the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act in 2012 and for its repeal in 2018.

Equality Act 2010 – The Lib Dems at Westminster firmly supported the legislation and voted for narrowing employment protections for churches and religious organisations.¹¹⁹

Human Rights – The party says it will: “Champion human rights legislation and resist any attempts to weaken or repeal it.”¹²⁰

EDUCATION

Religious education – The Liberal Democrats supported the 2026 law removing the right of withdrawal from RE, and allowing children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance.¹²¹

LGBT education – The Scottish Lib Dems called for the full implementation of the LGBT+ Inclusive Education Working Group's recommendations. These included the development of new LGBT inclusive teaching resources for all public schools from early years upwards.¹²² The 2026 manifesto expressed the party's “commitment to inclusive education around LGBT+ issues in schools”.¹²³

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – The Scottish Liberal Democrats voted in favour of legislation

allowing those over the age of 16 to change legal sex by self-declaration without a medical diagnosis. In January 2023, Alex Cole-Hamilton stated in Parliament that “anyone who has committed sexually violent crimes and poses a risk to women should not be housed with women in the female prison estate”.¹²⁴

Same-sex marriage – All five Lib Dem MSPs at the time voted to introduce same-sex marriage in 2014.

Cohabitation – The Lib Dems support extending legal rights to cohabiting couples.¹²⁵

Smacking – The Liberal Democrats strongly supported a Bill that criminalises parents for reasonable chastisement and all its MSPs voted for it.¹²⁶

Named Person – All five Lib Dem MSPs at the time voted in favour of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – Lib Dem MSPs were given a free vote on Liam McArthur’s assisted suicide Bill. At both Stage 1 and Stage 3, four voted in favour, including Mr McArthur himself, with one against.

Abortion – The party’s 2026 manifesto promised to: “Treat abortion as a healthcare

issue, and give MSPs the opportunity to vote on decriminalisation.”¹²⁷ All members voted in favour of a backbench Bill to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland. Alex Cole-Hamilton said: “The right to free expression is secondary to your right to access intimate care without harassment.”¹²⁸

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – The Lib Dems have repeatedly called for the decriminalisation of prostitution.¹²⁹ They opposed independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to criminalise the purchase of sex but decriminalise its sale.¹³⁰

Drugs – The Scottish Liberal Democrats propose to decriminalise drug possession.¹³¹ They are supportive of drug consumption rooms.¹³²

Alcohol – The Lib Dems welcomed the increase in the minimum unit price of alcohol from 50p to 65p in 2024.¹³³

Gambling – The party’s 2025 Autumn Conference called on the UK Government to act on gambling, including by restricting advertising, giving local authorities more power to “refuse venues” and strengthening the independence of the regulator.¹³⁴



Reform UK Scotland

reformuk.scot



Reform UK Scotland had one MSP at dissolution for the election, **Graham Simpson**, who joined from the Scottish Conservatives in August 2025. **Malcolm Offord** has been the Scottish leader since January 2026, while Nigel Farage MP leads the UK party, which has eight MPs at Westminster.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Hate crime – Reform UK Scotland’s 2026 manifesto says it will abolish the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act.¹³⁵

Religious liberty – Reform UK has stated that religious freedom “is a core feature of our culture, but our culture is built upon Christian values. Those will be protected and celebrated”.¹³⁶

Equality Act 2010 – The party has said it will repeal the Equality Act 2010 and replace it with a ‘Workplace Fairness Act’.¹³⁷

Human rights – Reform UK has pledged to leave the European Convention on Human Rights, repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights.¹³⁸

EDUCATION

Religious education – Graham Simpson voted against legislation removing the right of withdrawal from RE and allowing children to override their parents’ decision to

withdraw them from Religious Observance. Reform UK has stated it would restore Christianity to schools and the curriculum.¹³⁹

LGBT education – Reform’s education and equalities spokesperson Suella Braverman criticised children being taught “more about gender ideology than biological fact” in some classrooms. She also said “social and gender transition will be absolutely banned in all schools”.¹⁴⁰ Reform UK’s 2024 general election manifesto promised to ban transgender ideology in all schools, forbidding transitioning or changing pronouns and requiring transparency with parents about their children. Schools would be required to have single-sex facilities.¹⁴¹

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism – While a Conservative MSP, Graham Simpson voted against the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill and for the implementation of the Cass Review in Scotland.

Marriage – In its 2024 manifesto, Reform UK stated it would introduce a 25% transferable

marriage tax allowance to support marriage.¹⁴²

Smacking – Graham Simpson voted against the Bill to criminalise parents for reasonable chastisement in 2019.

MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide – Simpson voted against the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 in May 2025 and Stage 3 in March 2026. At Westminster, three Reform UK MPs backed Kim Leadbeater’s assisted suicide Bill in principle, with two opposing. In the final Commons vote, two supported it and three opposed.

Abortion – Simpson voted for a backbench Bill in 2024 to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland. Suella Braverman said a Reform Government would “immediately” reverse Westminster’s decriminalisation of abortion up to birth.¹⁴³

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution – In 2026, Graham Simpson supported independent MSP Ash Regan’s Member’s Bill to criminalise the purchase of sex but decriminalise its sale.

Drugs – Reform UK Scotland has spoken out against The Thistle drug consumption room, citing effects on local residents.¹⁴⁴ In 2021, Nigel Farage said he hates drugs but thinks “the war on drugs has been lost and it may be better if we regulate it in some way”.¹⁴⁵ Reform’s 2024 manifesto said: “Drug dealing and trafficking will get mandatory life imprisonment. A new offence of Substantial Possession of Drugs will meet heavy fines.”¹⁴⁶

Gambling – Nigel Farage has said he ‘loves a bet’ and described himself as a “gambler, but not a problem one”.¹⁴⁷ He opposes increasing taxes on betting and online gambling.¹⁴⁸



Scottish Family Party

scottishfamily.org



The Scottish Family Party had no MSPs at dissolution for the election. Its leader is **Richard Lucas**.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The Scottish Family Party opposes all **hate speech** legislation and any law to ban **conversion therapy**.¹⁴⁹ It says: “The Equality Act’s section on ‘harassment’ should be repealed”.¹⁵⁰ The party supports leaving the European Convention on **Human Rights**.¹⁵¹

EDUCATION

The party opposes ‘harm reduction’ approaches to sex and drugs education.¹⁵² It supports parents’ rights to withdraw children from content they deem inappropriate.¹⁵³ It opposes the inclusion of **LGBT content** across the curriculum.¹⁵⁴

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

The Scottish Family Party says **marriage** should be incentivised through the tax and benefits system.¹⁵⁵ The party opposes making **divorce** easier.¹⁵⁶ It believes same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry but could instead be given rights through civil partnerships.¹⁵⁷ The party would repeal the

2004 **Gender Recognition Act** and restore the defence of **reasonable punishment** for parents accused of smacking.¹⁵⁸

MEDICAL ETHICS

The party is in favour of banning **abortion** except where the mother’s life is in danger. If this is not politically achievable, it proposes “intermediate steps”, such as reducing the 24-week limit and preventing abortion on grounds of disability after 24 weeks.¹⁵⁹ The party describes **buffer zones** as an “ideological attack on freedom of expression”.¹⁶⁰ It opposes **assisted suicide** and euthanasia.¹⁶¹

PUBLIC MORALITY

The party opposes **drug** consumption rooms and any liberalisation of drug laws.¹⁶² It supports the restriction and reduction of **pornography**.¹⁶³ The party would ‘consider targeted measures to restrict and regulate the advertising and provision of **gambling** services’.¹⁶⁴ The party supports criminalising both buying and selling sex, while helping people to leave **prostitution**.¹⁶⁵

More information about legislation and public policy



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



‘Conversion therapy’

Efforts to legislate on so-called conversion therapy, also known as ‘conversion practices’, risk restricting the freedom of parents and churches to uphold biblical teaching on gender and sexual ethics. Genuinely abusive and coercive practices are already illegal.

Conversion therapy is usually defined as attempts to “change or suppress” a person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity.¹⁶⁶ Encouraging celibacy outside marriage has been described as a conversion practice.¹⁶⁷ Activists believe that even “gentle, non-coercive prayer” should be covered by a ban.¹⁶⁸

In Victoria, Australia, legislation on conversion therapy specifically states that the ban includes “carrying out a religious practice”, such as “a prayer based practice”. According to official guidance, prayers likely to be illegal include asking “for a person to not act on their attractions”, talking “about a person’s brokenness or need to repent” and asking “for long-term celibacy”. The guidance adds that telling people “their gender identity is not real” can be considered an illegal practice. The guidance lists ‘ways to continue practising your faith without causing harm’. These include reassuring LGBT people that “everyone has a different path” and that they are “perfect as they are”.¹⁶⁹

The Scottish Government consulted in 2024 on its plans for a new law on conversion practices.¹⁷⁰ The proposals were criticised by senior lawyers as ‘legally incoherent’, “impossible to grasp” and “fundamentally illiberal in intent”.¹⁷¹ The consultation closed in April 2024. An analysis of the consultation published in October 2025 showed a majority of the 5,811 responses analysed were opposed to the plans.¹⁷² The Scottish Government says it remains “committed to ending conversion practices in Scotland” and will “continue to engage with the UK Government for a Bill” that would include Scotland. It adds that “if this approach cannot be agreed, then we commit to publishing our own Bill in Year 1 of the next Parliamentary session”.¹⁷³

Successive Westminster governments have promised to ban ‘conversion therapy’ without ever being clear about what the proposed ban would cover. Draft legislation for pre-legislative scrutiny has been repeatedly promised but never published.

Free speech and hate crime

Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021

The most serious forms of hate crime are ‘incitement to hatred’ offences. Before the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, these only covered race in Scotland.

After a review and consultation, the Scottish Government brought forward the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill in April 2020. Part 2 of the Bill created incitement to hatred offences on various protected characteristics: race, sexual orientation, transgender identity, religion, disability, age and variations in sex characteristics (known as ‘intersex’). The original Bill covered abusive behaviour deemed ‘likely’ to stir up hatred. It included free speech clauses on religion and sexual orientation, but not transgender identity.

Significant and sustained objections to the Bill as drafted led to a series of concessions during the parliamentary process. On most protected characteristics, including the contentious issues of religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity, *intent* to stir up hatred has to be shown for an offence to be committed. A free speech clause was added that covered transgender identity and strengthened protection for religious debate. Additional amendments to further strengthen the free speech safeguards and create an exception for conversations in the home were rejected. The final Bill was passed by 82 votes to 32 in March 2021, coming into force in April 2024. There were over 7,000 hate crime reports to Police Scotland in the first week of implementation.¹⁷⁴



Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications Act 2012 ('Sectarianism Bill')

In June 2011, the Scottish Government brought forward a Bill aimed at tackling sectarian violence in Scotland, particularly in relation to football matches. The Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill sought to outlaw various types of threatening behaviour, but it also sought to criminalise communications intended to stir up religious hatred. This raised significant religious liberty and free speech concerns. The Christian Institute lobbied for the inclusion of a free speech clause in the offence.

The Scottish Government introduced a free speech clause through an amendment. This ensured that evangelism, discussions about faith, and criticism of other religions, would not be caught within the remit of the Bill. In December 2011, the Bill was passed into law by 64 votes to 57 – all the

opposition parties opposed the legislation.

After implementation, the Act remained controversial. It was criticised by sheriffs and a large proportion of cases brought under it led to acquittals. In 2017, Labour MSP James Kelly introduced a Member's Bill to repeal the 2012 Act. This was passed by 62 votes to 60 in March 2018 – all the opposition parties supported repeal.

Equality Act 2010

The Equality Bill debated by the Westminster Parliament in 2009-10 sought to consolidate all discrimination laws into a single Act. Yet the Labour Government's Bill as introduced would have curtailed the employment freedom of churches and religious organisations. The Government was defeated on these points three times in the House of Lords, preventing any narrowing.

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Transgenderism

The UK's Gender Recognition Act 2004 allows an adult who has been diagnosed with "gender dysphoria"¹⁷⁵ by two doctors and has lived for two years in the opposite sex to change legal sex, including on their birth certificate.

There has been pressure to liberalise the 2004 Act, so people can change their legal sex without any need for a medical diagnosis (gender 'self-ID' or 'self-declaration'). There have also been calls for the minimum age to be reduced from 18 to 16, and for legal recognition for those who say they are neither male nor female ('non-binary').

In 2017 the Scottish Government consulted on a proposal to allow self-ID. A further consultation on a draft Bill was held in 2019-20.¹⁷⁶ The Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill completed its passage through the Scottish Parliament in December 2022. In addition to allowing change of legal sex by self-declaration, it reduced the minimum age from 18 to 16. But citing various concerns, including the impact on reserved equality legislation, the Westminster Government exercised its power under Section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 to prevent the proposals becoming law.¹⁷⁷ This is the only time Section 35 has been used. In December 2023, following a legal challenge by the Scottish Government, Scotland's Outer House of the Court of Session ruled that the UK Government had acted lawfully.¹⁷⁸

Cass Review – In 2020, NHS England commissioned an independent review of its Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) for children and adolescents. The review, led by Dr Hilary Cass, resulted in GIDS closing and being replaced by services claimed to



EDUCATION

Religious education

The Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill removes the right of withdrawal from RE and allows children to override their parents' decision to withdraw them from Religious Observance. It was introduced despite a lack of evidence that the right of withdrawal was widely used, and it misunderstands the parent-child relationship as protected by the UNCRC and other human rights instruments. Establishing in law a mechanism to generate or exacerbate conflict between children and their parents, it requires schools to interpose themselves into that conflict. This will put teachers in a difficult position and undermine the relationship between home, school and child. It also undermines the family unit and assumes that parents are likely to act against a child's interests and without their knowledge.

The Bill was passed at Stage 3 in February 2026 by 66 votes to 51, with seven abstentions.

take a more holistic approach.¹⁷⁹

The final Cass Report was published in April 2024. It concluded that giving gender-confused children puberty blockers was based on “remarkably weak evidence”.¹⁸⁰ Dr Cass urged the NHS to review its use of cross-sex hormones and ensure that gender-confused children receive a holistic assessment of all their needs.¹⁸¹ The report left open the possibility of drugs for some “for whom a medical pathway is clinically indicated” but said: “For the majority of young people, a medical pathway may not be the best way” to manage their gender-related distress.¹⁸² Dr Cass recommended a cautious approach to social transition, including clinical involvement from properly trained staff.¹⁸³

As a result, NHS Scotland’s only specialist gender service for under-18s at the Sandyford Clinic in Glasgow paused prescribing puberty blockers.¹⁸⁴

In May 2024, MSPs passed a motion welcoming the Cass Review by 113 votes to seven.

At the Scottish Government’s request, a multidisciplinary team overseen by Scotland’s Chief Medical Officer reviewed the Cass findings to consider their implications for NHS Scotland.¹⁸⁵ It concluded that many of Dr Cass’s recommendations for children’s gender services in England should also be adopted in Scotland, including formally banning puberty-blocking drugs for gender-confused children. In September 2024, the Scottish Government accepted the findings.¹⁸⁶ Services for gender-confused young people are to be moved into regional paediatric and adolescent settings, rather than the centralised Sandyford clinic.¹⁸⁷

For Women Scotland case – The Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 set targets for increasing the proportion of women on public boards. Scottish Government guidance on the Act said “woman” meant the same as under the Equality Act 2010 and included a person with a gender recognition certificate stating their gender was female. For Women Scotland challenged the lawfulness of the guidance.



The Court of Session's Outer and Inner Houses both found in favour of the Scottish Government. In April 2024, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously on appeal that the terms "man", "woman" and "sex" in the Equality Act refer to biological sex.

Same-sex marriage

The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced marriage for same-sex couples in Scotland. The first ceremonies took place on 31 December 2014.

The Bill was published at the end of June 2013 with few protections for those who disagree with the redefinition of marriage.

The final stage of the Bill, Stage 3, took place on 4 February 2014. Various amendments were lodged aiming to protect the civil liberties of people who believe in traditional marriage, but all were voted down. The final vote was 105 in favour and 18 against. All five party leaders at the time voted to redefine marriage.

Marriage tax breaks

In April 2014, Westminster MPs voted 279 to 214 in favour of a tax break for married couples and civil partners throughout the UK. The transferable tax allowance is worth up to £252 per year.¹⁸⁸

Parental smacking

Parents throughout the UK were able to use a loving smack under the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' or 'reasonable punishment'. John Finnie MSP brought forward the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill, a Member's Bill, in September 2018. This abolished the defence. It was passed by 84 votes to 29 in October 2019. All parental smacking in Scotland was criminalised when the Act came into force on 7 November 2020.

Named Person

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill was passed on 19 February 2014. Part 4 of the Act introduced the Named Person scheme, under which every child in Scotland was to be assigned a state-employed official responsible for monitoring their "wellbeing". The named person was to be a health visitor or senior teacher and the proposal covered children from birth to the age of 18. Their functions cut across the proper role of parents and were not subject to parental consent.

The Christian Institute and others launched a judicial review, arguing that the scheme was a disproportionate and unjustified interference with family life and religious freedom. The case was dismissed twice in the Scottish courts in 2015, but in July 2016, UK Supreme Court judges unanimously struck down the central provisions of the scheme. The Court stated that the data sharing provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act were in breach of the right to a private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It also ruled that it had to be made clear that any advice offered by a named person is entirely optional.

The Scottish Government's attempt to make the original Act compliant with the Supreme Court ruling failed. In September 2019, then Education Secretary John Swinney said the Scottish Government would repeal the relevant parts of the Act, bringing an official end to the statutory scheme. The formal repeal was carried out by the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024.



MEDICAL ETHICS

Assisted suicide/euthanasia

Euthanasia by acts of commission, such as by administering a lethal injection, is illegal in the UK, as is assisting someone to commit suicide. Pro-euthanasia campaigners have made repeated attempts to change the law. In 2010 and 2015, attempts to introduce assisted suicide in Scotland were decisively rejected at Stage 1 in free votes.

In March 2024, Liberal Democrat MSP Liam McArthur introduced the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill. As originally drafted, it sought to allow over-16s in Scotland who were deemed to be terminally ill to receive help from medics to kill themselves. MSPs voted by 70 to 56 to advance the Bill at Stage 1 in May 2025.

Several MSPs said they only voted in favour in order to give the Bill extra time for debate.

At Stage 3 in March 2026, it was rejected by 69 votes to 57, with twelve MSPs who had voted for the Bill at Stage 1 reversing their position.

A similar Bill at Westminster was allowed to progress by MPs in November 2024 and narrowly passed in June 2025. It has been unable to complete its passage through the House of Lords due to the number of amendments Peers felt were needed.

Abortion

Abortion law was devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 2016.

The present law allows abortion up to 24 weeks' gestation, but permits abortion up to birth where the child may have 'a serious handicap'. What constitutes a serious

handicap has not been defined. The diagnosis of a comparatively trivial deformity, such as a cleft palate, has been used as grounds for an abortion.¹⁸⁹ In 2023 in Great Britain, almost 99 per cent of the 296,213 legal abortions were carried out for 'social reasons'.¹⁹⁰

From October 2018, the Scottish Government began permitting pregnant women to take the second of two pills for a chemical abortion at home. The first was still administered in a clinical setting. This change was unsuccessfully challenged in the courts.

In March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, temporary provision was made to allow women to take both abortion pills at home during the first trimester after a phone or video consultation with a doctor. This was said to be a temporary, emergency measure. It was made permanent in England, Wales and Scotland in 2022, despite concerns about the policy and examples of women taking the pills well after the first trimester.¹⁹¹ Carla Foster procured an illegal at-home abortion while 32-34 weeks pregnant, and was initially imprisoned before being given a suspended sentence on appeal.¹⁹² Her case became a *cause célèbre* for those seeking to liberalise abortion law.

Green MSP Gillian Mackay introduced the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill in October 2023. The legislation was approved at Stage 1 by 123 votes to one and at Stage 3 by 118 to one. It received Royal Assent in July 2024, coming into force in September that year. It creates 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland, preventing any pro-life presence.

In 2024, the Scottish Government established an Abortion Law Review Expert Group to consider the current law on abortion and provide ministers with recommendations on whether or not it should be changed. The Group did not

include any pro-life representatives. In November 2025, the Group published its report. It recommended abortion on demand up to 24 weeks with no requirement for medical approval, and allowing abortion after 24 weeks if two healthcare professionals – not necessarily doctors – deem it “appropriate”. Women would be able to have an abortion up to birth without risk of sanction and there would be no prohibition on sex-selective abortion.¹⁹³ In March 2026, the Scottish Government launched a stakeholder consultation on the Group’s recommendations, promising a full public consultation if ministers decide that abortion law should be amended.

Organ donation

On 11 June 2019, the Scottish Parliament passed the Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Act 2019. This creates a presumed consent system for organ donation, also known as an ‘opt-out’ system. It replaced the previous ‘opt-in’ framework and came into force in March 2021. It means that when a competent adult has not recorded a decision, they may be deemed to have authorised donation of their organs and tissue after their death for transplantation. The Scottish Government states: “Under the opt out system, families of potential donors will always be consulted to check what their loved one’s latest views on donation were.”¹⁹⁴

Under the former opt-in system, there was a seven per cent rise in the proportion of the Scottish population on the Organ Donation Register between 2016 and 2020.¹⁹⁵ There was a further four percent rise between 2021 and 2025, though the number opted out of the register rose by 24,800 to 186,300 over the same period.¹⁹⁶

‘Opt-out’ systems can be seen as increasing the power of the State at the expense of individuals and families.

PUBLIC MORALITY

Prostitution

In September 2020, the Scottish Government launched a consultation entitled 'Equally Safe – challenging men's demand for prostitution'. It stated the Government's aims to "challenge men's demand for prostitution, work to reduce the harms associated with prostitution and support women to exit". It described prostitution as "a form of commercial sexual exploitation" and as violence against women.¹⁹⁷

The Government published a prostitution strategy in February 2024. Its key aims were to "improve support for women, including to sustainably exit prostitution, and to challenge and deter men's demand through education, awareness raising, more informed public and private sector service provision and engagement, and where evidenced, through legislation".¹⁹⁸

Ash Regan was the minister responsible for this policy area at the time of the 2020 consultation, but left the Government in 2022. She lodged a draft proposal for a Member's Bill on prostitution in June 2024, before introducing the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill in May 2025. It sought to criminalise the purchase of sex while also decriminalising its sale and retroactively quashing past prostitution convictions. In February 2026, MSPs voted against it by 64 votes to 54 at Stage 1.

Drugs

i *Legislation on 'controlled drugs' is reserved to Westminster.*

The law categorises illegal drugs as either class A, B or C according to their harmfulness. The classification determines the criminal penalties for possession and supply. The most harmful drugs, such as cocaine and heroin,



are class A. Class B includes cannabis and speed (amphetamines) and class C includes sleeping pills. While drug laws are decided at Westminster, policies on how those laws are applied within the Scottish criminal justice system are a devolved matter.

There were 1,017 drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2024, down from a peak of 1,339 in 2020, but reaching a total in a decade of 10,884. Scotland has the highest drug-death rate in Europe.¹⁹⁹

In March 2021, MSPs unanimously agreed a motion that said drug deaths in Scotland in recent years are a “public health emergency”. The motion also supported the use of drug consumption rooms and agreed to “work towards diverting people caught in possession of drugs for personal use into treatment and ceasing imprisonment in these cases”.²⁰⁰

‘Drug consumption rooms’ are settings that allow addicts to bring their own drugs and take them under supervision. The Thistle, a Scottish Government-funded drug consumption facility in Glasgow, has been open seven days a week since January 2025.²⁰¹ Lord Advocate Dorothy Bain KC effectively declared it a ‘prosecution-free drug zone’, though she said Police Scotland would “retain the ability to effectively police the facility”.²⁰² The Thistle is a three-year pilot at a cost of £2.3 million per annum, with the impact on the local area and its users being assessed.²⁰³ During its first full year of operation up to January 2026, it was accessed by 599 registered users, and facilitated “over 8,300 injecting episodes”.²⁰⁴

Alcohol pricing

The Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 was passed at Holyrood by 86 votes to one and received Royal Assent in June 2012. There were 32 abstentions, all

Labour. Labour had tabled an amendment calling for a levy targeted at large retailers “to eliminate the windfall to large retailers arising from the minimum unit price”.²⁰⁵ This was defeated by 82 votes to 37.

The Act allows ministers to set a minimum price per unit of alcohol, which the Government set at 50p from 1 May 2018. The Scottish Government stated at the time that it “will save lives, reduce hospital admissions and, ultimately, have positive impacts across the whole health system in Scotland and for wider society”.²⁰⁶

Arguments for minimum unit pricing (MUP) include that it reduces consumption and therefore alcohol-related harm, and that it is a targeted measure that mainly affects the cheaper drinks more likely to be bought by heavier drinkers. Critics of the policy claim it does not affect heavy and harmful drinkers as they are less sensitive to price, but that it disproportionately affects low-income groups and increases the profits of major retailers at the expense of the majority of moderate drinkers.²⁰⁷

A report published by Public Health Scotland in June 2023 concluded that there was “strong evidence” MUP had reduced alcohol-attributable deaths and hospital admissions. There was “limited evidence” that it was effective in reducing consumption for people with alcohol dependence.²⁰⁸

The legislation implementing MUP included a sunset clause that would have brought it to an end after six years unless the Scottish Parliament voted for it to continue. In April 2024, MSPs voted 88 to 28 in favour of retaining the policy and increasing the MUP to 65p. This came into force on 30 September 2024.

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Scottish Election Briefing 2026

AN ANALYSIS OF PARTY POLICIES ON KEY ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE TO CHRISTIANS

Elections for the Scottish Parliament take place on 7 May 2026.

Christian citizens should think carefully and prayerfully about how they vote. The Christian Institute is a registered charity and we cannot tell you how to vote. What we can do in this briefing is address:

- why you should vote
- biblical priorities
- issues on the horizon
- two key factors in voting
- speaking to candidates
- party policies on key issues
- background information on public policy

Questions for your candidates

Ask your candidates where they stand

- 1. Do you oppose legalising assisted suicide?**
- 2. Do you think schools should teach children that there are more than two genders?**
- 3. Do you oppose further decriminalisation of abortion?**
- 4. Are you concerned that a 'conversion therapy' ban could criminalise the ordinary work of churches?**
- 5. Do you support legalising recreational drug use?**
- 6. Should civil servants be able to participate in LGBT Pride events on work time?**

KEY RESOURCES TO INFORM YOUR VOTE

the.ci/scottishelection



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