

freedom2
choose

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in

Scotland

**ANNUAL REPORT TO
31 DECEMBER 2007**

HISTORY OF FREEDOM TO CHOOSE (SCOTLAND)

We became a constituted organisation on 13 August 2007. Signatories to the Constitution were Martin Carroll, Belinda Cunnison and Michael Davidson.

When we originally signed up to our constitution we probably had around a dozen members. Previous to this date we were a loose collection of individuals, all opposed to the smoking ban but with no real structure. Organising ourselves around a constitution gave us a more definite focus and gave our members a greater sense of belonging as well as enabling us to raise funds for our struggle.

Quite apart from this, Scotland was the first area of these Islands to constitute and has – we like to think – given the lead in the greater UK to go down this road; a road that surely none of us would now deviate from when we look at how it has benefited our organisations.

Background & Petitions Very soon after our first informal meeting in July 2006, we made the acquaintance of the Fife Smoking Action Group who advertised a public meeting in the Dunfermline Press to which local MSPs were invited. Present were also Martin Carroll (our first meeting with him), Bill Gibson and Nick Hogan. The meeting organisers have remained connected with Freedom to Choose, some attending our meetings regularly and joining the organisation.

In January 2007 we held a joint meeting in Glenrothes, to which Christine May (then MSP for Central Fife) was invited. At this meeting we presented a Freedom to Choose petition to Ms May, and the Fife Action Group presented their own petition ... much larger than ours! We have jointly followed the progress of the petitions through the Scottish Parliament ever since.

Regular meetings took place through 2007. Freedom to Choose attracted the attention of the Publican Party, which was seeking candidates to run in the Scottish Parliament on a ticket of allowing licensed premises to have a smoking room. Three of our group stood as candidates, funding themselves. Despite lamentable organisation from the top of the Publican Party, our three candidates polled over 3,000 votes between them, after what turned out to be little over three weeks' campaigning – and who knows how many more, in the 140,000 votes that were discounted!

In the summertime of 2007 we launched a newsletter for distribution in pubs and other sympathetic outlets. This has taken a while to take off – we are after all beginners at this sort of thing – but we now have a number of outlets in Edinburgh, and we hear from our distributors that people are returning and asking for the latest edition, indeed distributors tell us they are regularly printing extra copies. We have also had an extract reproduced in a local magazine.

The latest development in our newsletter project is distribution south of the border as well as in Scotland. Our newsletter has become the main news sheet for Freedom2Choose, and is posted electronically to over 2,000 subscribers. Freedom To Choose (Scotland) welcomes this 'merger' while retaining intellectual ownership of the newsletter.

We were invited to see in the UK smoking ban at Nick Hogan's pub, the Swan Inn in Bolton: a memorable occasion marking the beginning of a stand-off between Nick and Bolton Council that continued until the autumn of 2007, when he relinquished his lease on the Swan Inn. Nick Hogan has consistently challenged the law on the basis of what action it requires of landlords in relation to customers who break the law.

July 2007 also saw the Petitions Committee refer our petitions (and that of the Fife Smoking Action Group) to the Health & Sport Committee. We also ordered and distributed our first promotional items: Freedom to Choose badges, which were purchased with generous help from the Freedom2Choose forum members and our own (still informal) group.

August saw us sign our constitution and receive our first membership subscriptions. Our official membership now numbers 28, ranging from Banffshire to Ayrshire and the Borders, and down to Surrey, London and Leicester.

Through the summer we were looking forward to an international event that took place at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre in September: a conference entitled 'Towards a Smoke-Free Society'. On the day of the Conference we were ready with placards and a press release. That morning, the press had announced results of a study claiming a 17 per cent drop in cardiac admissions in Scottish hospitals since the smoking ban was introduced – a claim that was discredited less than three months later by Scottish NHS figures and a scathing article in the BBC. The demonstration was lively, and two of our party, Nick Hogan and Bill Gibson, attended part of the conference as observers. Several of the (foreign) delegates leaving the conference spoke to our party, and showed a genuine interest in our position. Appreciation is due to Eddie Douthwaite, who organised the event and liaised with the police, with whom we maintained amicable relations throughout.

Our demonstration (including a bus full of Fifers) was televised on the lunchtime news that day, and our press release led to some radio interviews during the week. We were grateful for the appearance of supporters from Newcastle and Ayrshire, and of the tireless Nick Hogan.

The Health Committee hearing of our petitions also took place in September. Contrary to our expectations we were not invited to speak at this hearing. We were told that we would be informed of relevant developments, but no 'post-legislative scrutiny' was expected to take place until nearly the end of the current Parliamentary session. We have been very disappointed with the way the petitions were handled and MSPs' reaction to our follow-up enquiries; but the sterling and indefatigable efforts of many of our members regarding these petitions will always be appreciated.

The remainder of the year to end 2007 was quiet: National Smoking Day was observed on 31 December: a mark of defiance against the ban which the authorities undermined by completely ignoring it. Ah, well.

COMMITTEE

Freedom to Choose Scotland has had the following office bearers: Chairman: Martin Carroll; Secretary: Belinda Cunnison; Treasurer: Sue Taylor, until November 2007, when she was succeeded by Michael Davidson. In addition we have an ad hoc fundraising group, which Ian Robertson has convened.

FINANCES

We finished 2007 with a surplus of £919 and a balance of £810. Thanks are due in no small part to our supporters in England/Wales as well as Scotland for personal donations, as well as the CISWO club in Glenrothes for a memorable fundraising event at the end of September.

THE FUTURE

Freedom to Choose (Scotland) is a signatory to the recent Aldebaran Treaty (as is Freedom2Choose (UK)), signed in the Netherlands to form the International Coalition Against Prohibition. Signatories also included Forces International, Forces Italy, Forces Holland, Forces Germany, Dary (Denmark), The Danish Smokers' Party, The Party Against Nannyism (Holland), Smokers' Interest (Holland), The Association of Dutch Coffee Shops, The Hungarian Association of Smokers' Societies.

In spite of allegations that we are pro-smoking, our stance remains clear: we promote choice, and we believe that pharmaceutical interests rather than public health interests are behind the current anti-smoking drive. Further restrictions on tobacco (and drink) sales in the open market are planned, and the principle of choice will be under attack in the coming months and years. Freedom2Choose at this stage is working to remind people that choice is an essential condition of life.

Pubs and clubs in parts of the UK are waking up to the knowledge that they can work together and that their head offices and trade associations have not helped them in pointing out the inevitable economic carnage that has followed the legislation south of the border.

Our intention is to emerge from this, our first Annual General Meeting, with a strong committee and sense of how to proceed.

Appreciations Graham Barlow for membership card design and production; Anthony Rose for accounting advice; Bill Gibson for his contribution to the development of the International Coalition against Prohibition and for signing it on our behalf; and all our members and supporters for their contribution and interest in the cause of Freedom to Choose.