

**SIC convener Malcolm Bell's response to Napier University student Chloe Irvine:**

“Up-Helly-A is, effectively, a private party (or series of parties) and a relatively modern one at that. The festival as we know it is little more than a century old therefore talk of ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ is, I believe, misplaced. I think it is wrong to vest in it (the festival) more importance than it actually ought to have and both sides of the (gender) debate need to be mindful of that. I recognise that Up-Helly-A is special to many people and that’s positive but let’s keep it in perspective. There are many examples of women’s rights we should, as a community, be concerned about including things like the gender pay gap, domestic abuse and FGM.

“That being said, In the abstract, if you ask me should anyone be stopped from doing something they want to do based purely on their gender then, clearly, the answer is no. So it follows, as a point of principle, that I personally, have no issue with women having the opportunity, along with men, of playing an equal part in all aspects of Up-Helly-A.

“Up-Helly-A is a festival for, run and organised by its community; that community consisting of both men and women. When they (the Up-Helly-A community) want it to change I have no doubt it will change. Those who seek to change it will have to persuade women as much as the men. In my observation of the debate some of the most vociferous supporters of the status quo are women.

“I, personally, play no active role in Up-Helly-A: I don’t and have never taken part in a squad, attend mass meetings nor go to a hall. That is a personal choice on my part and not one based on any principle. Therefore, I don’t consider I have a locus to seek to change something I play no part in. On the other hand, as a politician, I do recognise the pleasure the festival brings to many people (of all ages and genders) and indeed the benefits that flow from largely positive exposure on national and international media and inflows of visitors at what would, otherwise, be a very quiet time of year.

“Thank you again for taking the time to write to me and I hope the above is helpful. I must emphasise that this is my personal opinion which, I am happy for you to use as you wish. It should not, however, be regarded or expressed as Council policy.”