

Ethel Writes
PUBLISHING WOMEN

29 June 2026

James Crawford
Chair, Edinburgh International Book Festival
121 George Street
Edinburgh, Scotland
EH2 4YN

Also by email

Dear Mr Crawford,

We are prompted to write by the interview with your Director published yesterday in the Sunday Times, and especially the paragraphs attached below.

We are the editors of *The Women Who Wouldn't Wheesht*. Our book records and reflects on the experiences of over thirty women, in politics, universities, publishing, the arts and elsewhere, well beyond those of any single group, over a five year period in Scotland, with further contextual material by us and others.

Like other books on your programme, it was conceived and compiled by its editors, a journalist and a researcher and policy analyst respectively, and produced and financed in the conventional way by its publisher. We believe our anthology was one of the first books about Scottish politics since devolution to have been a Sunday Times best seller.

We attach, wearily, the unacknowledged letter we wrote to Ms Niven last year about comments she had made then. We do not appreciate repeatedly hearing our book diminished, and ourselves and our contributors repeatedly framed by direct implication as impossible to platform in polite society.

We further note that the panel event on 16 August is billed as inviting "audience members for a good faith discussion on this contested and challenging topic, with the aim of achieving better understanding and more empathy." It is quite clear what those last two words are intended to imply about those not invited.

We would therefore be grateful if you would pass this letter and our previous one to Ms Niven to whoever is chairing the event on 16 August, and anyone involved in any further publicity for it, as we are concerned that the event may be used to repeat the sort of prejudicial insinuations about books and authors like ours that is now becoming routine from the Festival management. For example, following a question specifically about our book during a BBC Front Row interview last August, Ms Niven said: "We didn't really feel that the books that we had on the table this year were ones that would help us to progress this conversation in a respectful and meaningful way"

We could also cite the experience of Polly Clark, one of only three authors out of 700 who appeared at the 2025 EIBF who have publicly supported the position now upheld by the Supreme Court. She has recorded how a subject access request to the EIBF revealed that

an offer to chair several events in 2024 was withdrawn after an individual working in publishing had demanded her removal, claiming she would make authors “uncomfortable.” She has described this intervention as “False, defamatory, but decisive.”

As regards the composition of your panel, we do not know how the writer of the Sunday Times piece emerged so confused about Ms Monaghan’s and Lady Hale’s roles, but we assume it may reflect briefing provided to him by the EIBF. Ms Monaghan is an excellent lawyer, but as would be known by anyone who has read our book did not represent For Women Scotland (FWS) in any of their cases against the Scottish Government. She represented several lesbian groups in their written intervention in one case at its final Supreme Court stage. She will be appearing on a panel with an author who will have the opportunity to promote a book that appears likely to express a different opinion to that successfully argued by FWS, and Lady Hale who, pace the article, had no involvement with the UK Supreme Court case and has also been critical of the law as determined by it. Your panel is therefore unbalanced.

It also lacks anyone who was involved in arguing before the court the need for sex being clearly recognised in law for all women, regardless of sexual orientation. It is disingenuous to suggest the EIBF “isn’t necessarily platforming one opinion or the other.” The Festival is therefore once more pretending not to take sides and to be the model of reasonableness, while running an unbalanced programme and putting out messages that are damaging to the reputations of those it has chosen to exclude.

As it was decided to deal with this issue as a legal one rather than a literary one, we suggest that shunning the women who have brought a succession of successful legal cases sends a clear and intentional message, and lets down your audience. We would therefore ask that the Board reconsiders their absence from your 16 August event. As Susan Smith of FWS is one of the many contributors to *The Women Who Wouldn’t Wheesht*, this would also mean that a festival ostensibly about books had a presence on stage for books presenting more than one perspective on the topic under discussion.

Alternatively, of course, Joanna Cherry KC is also a contributor to our book, and a recently published author in her own right. We do not know whether either would wish to accept an invitation from you, but we think they should be asked.

We commend to you the leadership shown by the Board of the National Library of Scotland, after our book was targeted by activist staff at the NLS last year. The Board took charge of the situation, commissioned an independent investigation which found that we had been unjustly treated, apologised to us, reversed the decision, and put in place training on freedom of expression for their staff. The exhibition then proceeded, without the adverse effects threatened by the staff.

We would be grateful for an acknowledgment of this letter and confirmation that it and its attachments will be passed to whoever is chairing the 16 August event. We hope we will not need to deal yet again with the EIBF generating comments which are identifiably about ourselves and/or our contributors and reputationally damaging.

Yours sincerely

Susan Dalgety and Lucy Hunter Blackburn

Extract from Sunday Times, 28 June 2026:

A key event will be a discussion panel led by Baroness Hale of Richmond, the retired Supreme Court judge, who defended the landmark 2025 ruling protecting female rights, Karen Monaghan, who represented the campaign group documented in *The Women Who Wouldn't Wheesht*, and Keio Yoshida, a human rights lawyer and author of a new book *Pride and Prejudices: Queer Lives and the Law*.

Niven explains that “it’s not within the book festival’s gift to solve every social issue out there”. But she says: “What we can do though is create the space to have meaningful conversation. And in this case, we felt that it was really important to try and root things in whatever facts you can ascertain about the situation. So we’ve gone down the route of looking at what the current legal status around this issue is.

“I think that is a meaningful contribution for us to be able to make that isn’t necessarily platforming one opinion or the other because I am not certain that that would help us to move the conversation forward. So this feels like a good way for us to provide something meaningful in that space.”

Link to full article:

<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/edinburgh-book-festival-gender-programme-2026-2tfdwsxzk>

Attached:

Letter to Jenny Niven, 4 August 2025, (via email)