

A message from Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society and Simon Calvert of The Christian Institute

Posted: Wed, 23rd May 2012 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

A week ago we launched *Reform Section 5* with a press conference in the House of Commons. The reaction was exactly what we hoped for: within hours everyone was talking about how ridiculous it is to outlaw insults.

The biggest problem we had was finding anyone to disagree with us! Apparently, criminalising insults is pretty hard to defend.

Peter Tatchell authored a comment piece for us in The Times and toured the studios of Radio 2, Radio 4, Radio 5, BBC2 and BBC regional on behalf of the campaign. He was joined at the press launch by Edward Leigh MP, who led last year's Commons bid to take 'insult' out of Section 5. David Davis MP, whose opinion piece in the Daily Mail set out our case so clearly, chaired the event.

We record here our thanks to them all. Their unlikely alliance, like our own, captured the public imagination.

Our goals

Reforming Section 5 will help reclaim good old British freedom of speech from the cold, dead hand of political correctness. Self-censorship due to intimidation is impoverishing our national conversation and participation in the public square.

We do not want more incivility. Most of us could afford to be gentler with friend and foe alike.

We do not want more swearing. If you harass someone by shouting swear words at them in the street you'll probably fall foul of the "abuse" clause of Section 5. Our campaign won't change that.

We do not really want more insults. But "insult" is such a subjective word. And since section 5 does not require proof of actual harm, only "likelihood" that someone, somewhere, might be "distressed", it's become a catch-all. With such a low threshold, it is too easy for police – and thin-skinned activists – to fall back on when there is controversy and one side claims to feel offended. At the same time there are plenty of other, more targeted, offences available to tackle genuine cases like harassment, incitement and breach of the peace.

We wish everyone could conduct their disagreements with respect and civility. But it should be left to peer pressure to reinforce that, not the long arm of the law.

What next?

For now, we wait to hear whether the Home Office will back reform. If they decide to amend Section 5, they'll meet with a chorus of approval. If not, they'll have a fight on their hands. We know most MPs support reform. And we suspect support in the House of Lords is even stronger. So we won't give up. Your freedom to debate and to tell truth to power – and ours – is too important for

that.

Keith Porteous Wood, National Secular Society
Simon Calvert, The Christian Institute

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Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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