

Speech at European Commission – 19 June 2017

Delivered by Keith Porteous Wood, executive director, National Secular Societyⁱ

Annual high-level meeting with philosophical and non-confessional representatives to discuss "The Future of Europe: a value-based and effective Union". How to make Europe more effective, more democratic and more relevant? What are the basic social principles to be promoted? What should Europe do (or not do) in the social realm?

Whatever the political outcome of the Article 50 negotiations, we at the UK's National Secular Society hope to continue contributing to such hugely important debates as this. I want to speak in favour of the values set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, but focus on tensions between the two questions asked above.

A major danger we perceive lies in the electoral power of those opposed – generally on religious grounds – to aspects of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

A disturbing development in the UK this month was that the balance of power could soon be held by Northern Ireland's protestant Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) despite their share of the UK vote being less than 1%. The Party opposes women's rights and the equality of LGBTI+ people, they subscribe to a Creationist worldview and they support the death penalty.

In the longer term, there is much greater and growing problem as those of conservative religious denominations, sects and religions become an ever-greater proportion of the EU electorate.

Much larger families coupled with unprecedented levels of migration from countries where democracy, women's rights and gays – never mind gay rights - have no place, means European values becoming progressively less widely shared across Europe. Polling points to a lack of political secularity amongst many Muslims living in Europe, so assumptions about the place of religion in politics and modern society being settled, may no longer apply.

We have much to celebrate in the greater involvement in recent elections by the young, full of idealism. Nevertheless, the historic pattern of gradual integration of successive generations of those of minority religions has in some cases gone into reverse. Too many of the younger people of minority faith are ever more conservative than their forbears, even to the point of rejecting the Rule of Law.

Certainly in the UK, such attitudes are being embedded in future generations through segregated education in single faith and denominational schools.

Children of the Protestants in Northern Ireland attend sectarian schools protected from meeting, far less socialising with, Catholics and vice versa. After decades of attempts to introduce integrated schools, only 7% of pupils attend them – probably the 7% who have the least need to. ⁱⁱ

Many minority faith communities, or their leaders, isolate themselves from the majority community and reinforce that isolation by sending their children to schools that are largely mono-religious, mono-ethnic and mono-cultural. In them these ultra-conservative values too often grow unchallenged.

These are long term problems which require long term solutions.

One study concluded that the younger pupils were when they started integrated schooling, the greater the community cohesion, even among their parents. This is shown on our website with the text of this intervention. There needs to be many more rigorous and honest studies of the problems of such schools in each member state and how education can be transformed towards all publicly funded schools being integrated schools.

The EU needs to persuade member states to make this change, warning of the existential consequences of not doing so.

We also need to provide platforms for young people to air their grievances and be much more effective in preventing and punishing extremist speech in schools, further education and places of worship.

Above all, political leaders and civil society must work together in building a more assertive European culture that robustly, actively and unashamedly promotes democratic values such as the separation of religion and state, the rule of law, human rights and equal treatment.

ⁱ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2017/06/nss-calls-on-european-leaders-to-robustly-promote-the-democratic-value-of-separation-of-religion-and-state>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/social-cohesion-sharing-crisps-with-someone-different.pdf>