

Celebration As Abolition Of Iniquitous Blasphemy Law Is Approved In Parliament

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The National Secular Society (NSS) welcomes the passing by the House of Lords last night, Wednesday March 5 2008, of an amendment abolishing the blasphemy law by 148 votes to 87.

The fiery debate had a near record turn-out of bishops, who were split between those accepting the inevitability of change and those lamenting the signal abolition would give about the decline in religious influence and the secularisation of society. Some feared that abolition would unleash a tide of blasphemous publications. A URL linking to the debate is given below.

Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS said: "This is the culmination of the Society's 140-year fight to abolish this medieval law under which many innocent victims have suffered. Even in the 20th century, one of my predecessors was jailed for blasphemy, and an old man was sentenced to hard labour, causing his premature death. The laws have been criticised recently as being uncertain, without penalty and widely believed not to be compliant with Human Rights.

"I pay tribute to all those who have suffered under this cruel law, denying freedom of expression, and to those before me who have campaigned for its abolition.

"Our celebrations will be overshadowed by the knowledge that parliaments elsewhere in the world will soon be pressurised into passing a new law even more pernicious than blasphemy. It will outlaw so-called defamation of religion. Pressure to pass this law is coming from a bloc of Islamic countries organised by the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference). Having made their demands at the UN Human Rights Commission, they are now planning to lobby the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Nations respecting Human Rights must speak out against the defamation of religion law as it undermines the freedom of expression on which our democracy, and indeed our civilisation, depends."

For:

Minister (Baroness Andrews) Column 1118

Lord Avebury Column 1123

Bishop of Portsmouth Column I 1132

Yes, but:

Archbishop of York Column 1127

Against:

Baroness O'Cathain Column 1129

The bishops of Durham and Portsmouth voted in favour, with the bishops of Chester, Rochester and Southwell/Nottingham voting against. No votes are recorded for the Archbishop of York or the Bishop of London, who was also seen in the chamber.

We would like to thank those peers who supported us in the lobby, especially Honorary Associates Lord Desai, Baroness Flather, Baroness Massey, Lord McIntosh, Lord Russell-Johnston, and Baroness Turner.

[A one-page report of the debate](#)

[The full debate transcript in PDF form](#)

6 March 2008
