

NSS Freedom of Speech Rally 25 March 2006

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Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, addressed the Freedom of Expression Rally in Trafalgar Square on 25 March 2006 as follows. Other speakers included Dr Evan Harris MP (NSS Honorary Associate) and Maryam Namazie, (awarded Secularist of the Year by the NSS in 2005).

I am so pleased to be addressing you today in this firm defence of free expression. My only regret is that we need to have this demonstration at all.

Unfortunately, freedom of expression is under unprecedented threat. Any broadcaster, commentator, or newspaper editor – whether from the left or the right – will confirm that they are operating under greater restrictions than they were ten or even five years ago. For them, and their proprietors, self-censorship is rife, and is growing. They are worried about powerful, well-financed and litigious religious groups, as well as the criminal law. Just ask yourself why Britain is one of the few European countries to have not even republished one of the Danish cartoons. Until relatively recently, we have taken for granted our freedom to argue, offend and mock.

But now there is a definite chill in the air surrounding free debate. Suddenly there is an insistent demand – especially from some religious groups – that we curtail what we say. We should respect their sensitivities, even if they do not respect ours; we shouldn't offend them however offended we are, and we shouldn't insult them, however insulted we are.

We have heard much in recent years from those intent on closing down freedom of speech, and so have newspaper editors who quake with some of the demands made of them. There have even been calls for this demonstration to be banned. Yet some of the calls are more subtle however. Beware of those who pretend to support freedom of expression, but only if used responsibly in their terms – that is no freedom at all.

But today is perhaps the first time that those who value free expression and want to protect it have gathered together in such a large demonstration to make their feelings known in such a powerful way, and I salute you for coming here today.

I am however surprised – and concerned – that some human rights organisations are notable by their absence here today.

I believe most of the threats to free expression come from an unhealthy and growing alliance between some religious groups and the State.

What do you think have the following in common: Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*; Jerry Springer the Opera being broadcast by the BBC; and the Sikh play *Behzti* being staged in Birmingham? One answer is that all these protests were religiously motivated. The other is that no prosecutions were taken out against those known to have broken the law in connection with the protests. This sends out a powerful and worrying signal: that the authorities do not value freedom of speech and will do nothing to protect it, especially if protests are religiously motivated.

I suspect few of you will know that a conviction for even the most trivial of Public Order Offences – such as “insulting behaviour” can now carry a maximum jail sentence of 7 years. That is if the offence is deemed to be “religiously aggravated”. This draconian gem is Section 39 of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001. It was cleverly rushed through Parliament by the then Home Secretary David Blunkett. It went almost unnoticed in the aftermath of September 11 2001. Convictions have been secured under these provisions; one now criminal wore a tee-shirt with a message deemed to be offensive to Christians.

The Government have gone to immense lengths to curtail freedom of expression in Racial & Religious Hatred legislation, which also comes with a seven year prison tag. This is becoming quite a nasty habit. Despite New Labour's large majority, this legislation was thrown out twice by Parliament because of freedom of speech concerns. Undeterred, the Government brought it back last year for a third time only to have the Lords reject it. They did so by a massive 149 votes, and for the same reason and substituted a much more benign version. Astonishingly, their far less harmful version even survived a Commons onslaught. MPs' concerns were so great that they were able to defeat our intransigent Government's three line whip, albeit by just one vote. So, it is the Lords improved version which has now become the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006.

The lesson we should learn from this is that if we stand united, we can win.

You might ask though, why was the Government so insistent on stamping out the freedom of speech safeguards? Perhaps a clue lies in the fact that just before the election the Home Secretary wrote to selected mosques – on Home Office notepaper – making the party political point that it was the opposition's fault that the legislation had – at that stage - been rejected.

And I would now like to turn to blasphemy. The National Secular Society has been fighting against the Christian blasphemy law for 140 years. This law's history is full of violence and persecution and a number of the prosecutions that have been brought in this country centred around cartoons. Some of my predecessors in the secular movement went to prison for blasphemy. For example, John William Gott was sentenced to nine months hard labour in 1922 for comparing Jesus to a circus clown. The editor of the *Freethinker*, G.W. Foote, was also prosecuted for publishing “blasphemous cartoons”.

But blasphemy is not the dead letter it is made out to be, even though the last successful prosecution was as long ago as 1977. The common law precedents set then made the law harsher than it had been half a century earlier.

A learned Committee of the House of Lords – the Religious Offences Committee - has concluded that the blasphemy law is unworkable, particularly under the recently enacted Human Rights legislation. And the Law Commission has twice recommended the abolition of blasphemy.

Yet I have heard two reports – I hope both wrong – that earlier this week at the IPPR conference in London, the Home Secretary intimated that the Government might consider **extending** the medieval concept of blasphemy to cover all religions. This would be a disaster. It would empower

the censors and the bullies. It would give them at last the weapon they have been striving for to launch their attack on our open culture.

Extension is absurd and unworkable: of the hundreds of religions most consider the others to be blasphemous. Practically everything is blasphemous to some religious believer. Who is going to say whose religion is worthy of protection and whose is not? Or is it to be every conceivable religion?

In some countries, such as Pakistan, blasphemy is a capital offence. I have spoken to someone there who was on death row. He told me that Christians have been convicted and sometimes the charges are trumped up. He even said that lawyers are nervous of acting for defendants and judges are reluctant to hear cases because of intimidation by clerics who fill the court rooms in large numbers. So justice is not just denied but perverted.

Should we be starting down this route with new blasphemy laws?

The chilling effect and self censorship are already a very worrying feature in the UK today. It is not just the law that has caused this. It is fear of these high maximum penalties and an over-wary public perception of the law. Some are intent on fanning a perception that the law is more draconian than it really is.

Free speech is a vital element of democracy and an essential tool to resolve contentious issues peacefully. Driving dissent underground impedes resolution and allows extremism to fester and extremists to thrive.

If criticism of religion is proscribed, that is very close to criticism of religious practices which is very close to criticism of those in the religious sphere. It is important that they are not above criticism.

Those people of goodwill who have gathered here today think it is time to make a stand for the precious freedoms that Europe has fought countless wars to obtain. We must not bow to those who seek to control what we see or think. We will not allow the censors to control our cultural agenda – banning plays, having TV programmes taken off, burning books.

We should be affronted and outraged by the attempts of religious extremists of all stripes to rob us of our artistic heritage, our right to question, mock and make fun of even the most revered ideologies. We must resist.

If we are to live together successfully and harmoniously in all our diversity we must all embrace freedom of expression.

There should be no right not to be offended, certainly in what is perhaps the most religiously diverse country in the world.

The Voltarian principle of hating what you say, but defending your right to say it, is easy to recite, but so much harder to put into practice. There are groups here today that are not natural allies, but they have put Voltaire's noble principle into practice.

We must never reach the stage in this country where people are sent to prison for expressing an opinion that causes no harm to others. Giving offence or causing insult must never be a crime in this country. We see the awful consequences of where such law-making leads in other countries around the globe.

The line in the sand must be drawn, and it must be drawn here, today, by us. And we must keep

the valuable alliance we have built today to fight every further threat to our freedom of expression.
