

Britain's feeble religious right learns no lessons from its debacle at the European Court

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We sincerely hope that the rejection by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights of the supposed "religious discrimination" cases will finally draw a line under the matter.

[Reacting to the decision](#), Michael Powner, head of employment at Charles Russell LLP, said:

"The boundaries have been tested and now firmly rejected. This sends a stark message that religious freedoms have very limited parameters when they potentially or actually infringe the rights of others. When different Convention rights compete in different factual scenarios, the line has to be drawn somewhere. What is now certain is that one set of rights, religious freedom for Christians, does not automatically trump the others."

It a stark message indeed for the proponents of these cases. Are they likely to listen? We think not.

The Christian Institute and Christian Concern (which is also the Christian Legal Centre) have been behind just about all of these cases. These groups are run by hard-line evangelical Christians who think their religious beliefs and their particular interpretation of the Bible must have a special place in society. Ultimately they would like Christianity – their kind of Christianity, of course - to run the country.

One of the main players in this push, and the woman who has almost single-handedly invented this narrative of persecution, is Andrea Minichiello Williams.

In 2008, [Channel Four made a documentary about her](#) and its director David Morrell revealed much about the rather scary Ms Williams and the way she operates.

I have debated often enough on radio and TV with Andrea Minichiello Williams to have seen the zealous glint in her eye. Given that she is a barrister, it has amazed me to see how resistant she is to reasonable argument based on fact. Whenever she feels she is losing a point she starts referring to "our Lord Jesus", as though that finalised any issue.

Most of these cases have been aimed at undermining the protection that gay people have won against discrimination. Ms Minichiello Williams decided that the protection provided by the Equality Act to gay people was "unbiblical" and so she began her campaign to bring it down.

She thought that if she could prove in court that Christians were disadvantaged by the protections offered to gay people, it would destroy the legislation. And so followed a long series of cases, each more unconvincing than the last, but given traction by the propaganda support of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. (Strangely, the *Daily Mail* did not report this ultimate failure.)

Although she seems to have convinced the editors of right-wing newspapers that she had a legitimate gripe, she was unable to convince any court. This week's European Court decision

should have shattered her fantasy for good. But still she is [peddling the same old myths](#). She told the *Daily Telegraph* on Wednesday that the success of the gay marriage bill in the House of Commons, could mean more discrimination for Christians. She said:

"This will be the start of many cases like this. Teachers who refuse to teach same sex marriage will lose their jobs or won't get them. I think there's a terrible chilling impact. People are scared to say what they think for fear of being branded bigoted and phobic. To believe in marriage between a man and a woman has become a view unacceptable in the public aspect."

So, we are on notice. Now that Ms Williams has decided that the Same-Sex Marriage Bill must be overturned, she will begin bringing to court more trumped up discrimination charges. If "Christian teachers" aren't allowed to tell children about the evils of homosexuality and to register their revulsion at the lives of gay people (even if those very gay people are sitting in the class silently fretting) then it is the Christian who is being persecuted.

Meanwhile, the Christian Institute – amid stiff competition from other evangelical groups and individuals – probably takes the prize as the most homophobic organisation in Britain. It has a long and discreditable record of opposing the rights of gay people to live in peace and safety.

It has a strange ability to create a rationale for these attacks on the rights of others.

In the Christian Institute's alternative universe, not permitting Christians to trample on the rights of others means that Christians are themselves being discriminated against. By not being able to refuse goods and services to gay people, Christians are at a disadvantage. In their minds, the persecutors become the persecuted. Their interpretation of "Religious liberty" seems to be that it gives them the freedom to make life intolerable for others.

They funded the case of Lillian Ladele, the registrar who wouldn't carry out civil partnerships. It was another of the cases that ran up against the buffers in Europe this week.

This handful of activists – whose philosophy has been rejected over and over by more sensible and compassionate Christians like Rowan Williams – are supported by a another small coterie of marginal religious figures beloved of the right-wing press. Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury is one, Bishop Nazir-Ali is another. Both have made statements of profound stupidity, the likes of which would have ruined the reputations of other public figures.

Lord Carey, for instance, thinks that there should be separate juries of only Christians to sit in cases where Christians are claiming discrimination.

The utterances and outbursts of these people appall and dismay Christians who are trying to project an image of stability and inclusion for Christianity.

It would be good to think that this rejection by Europe's ultimate legal authority would give them pause for thought in their tactics.

In terms of finance alone, these cases must have cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to haul through the many courts and tribunals that have rejected them.

When Barack Obama was re-elected in America, the religious right – which had poured its resources and reputation into opposing him – pragmatically began a review of its tactics and focus. They began to conclude that the "persecution" route was not fruitful for them.

But our own feeble and unpleasant version of the religious right shows no signs of learning lessons from this week's calamitous debacle. It continues to set its face against an unstoppable change in society, and for this alone it deserves all the failure it will get.

See also: *Catholic Church joins the chorus of "[Europe's intolerance against Christians](#)"*

Terry Sanderson

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