

Religious Hatred Bill Comes A Cropper

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As most of you will know by now, the government suffered a shock defeat when it tried to reverse amendments to its Religious Hatred legislation that had been made in the House of Lords. The Lords amendments had introduced significant safeguards for free speech and dramatically lowered the threshold of prosecution.

The Government lost two votes in a row, the most crucial by only one vote. The Home Secretary, clearly shaken, had no alternative but to announce that he would send the Bill for Royal Assent exactly as it had left the House of Lords.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, who has worked diligently to oppose this legislation since it was first mooted in 2001, said: "This is the best news on freedom of speech for decades. Given we had to have this Bill because it was a Labour manifesto commitment, having the Lords amendments agreed in full was more than freedom of speech campaigners dared hope for.

"We salute the courage of those 27 Labour backbenchers who defied their whip in the cause of freedom of speech. We thank Dr Evan Harris and Bob Marshall Andrews (both NSS Honorary Associates) and Shadow Attorney General Dominic Grieve without whom this historic victory would not have been achieved. We similarly acknowledge the valuable work done by the Christian Institute and Evangelical Alliance with whom we have worked closely on this issue.

"It is troubling that the Government remained so intransigent about this Bill to the very last moment, given the previous history of this idea. This was the Government's third attempt in five years to introduce these measures. After each defeat ministers promised to listen, but completely failed to do so. They ignored opposition to their proposals both inside and outside Parliament, despite the revolt being almost unprecedented in its breadth and strength.

"Home Secretary Charles Clarke and Home Office Minister Paul Goggins remain in denial even after last night's rout. They have told reporters that they blame the trouncing on MPs trying to defeat the Government, rather than these measures."

Messages of congratulation have been pouring in to the NSS which has been at the forefront of the campaign to defeat this measure. "Ever since David Blunkett first tried to get this through in 2001 we have been steadfast in our opinion that this law would be untenable and dangerous," said Keith Porteous Wood. "Fortunately, almost everyone else agreed with us and the opposition grew almost daily. Paul Goggins, the minister who tried to steer this through the Commons, said that the opposition campaign had been 'massive', and indeed it had."

Keith was at the House of Commons until midnight on several nights last week, making last minute efforts to ensure this iniquitous piece of legislation came to grief. "Obviously we would have preferred it not to have been enacted at all, but given that it was a manifesto commitment, there was almost no way to stop it. However, we achieved the next best thing, which was to water it

down to the point where these threats to free speech and civil liberties were minimised.”

But still those who were enthusiastic about the Bill hope that it is not entirely finished. Sion Simon (Lab, Erdington) told the *Birmingham Post* “I think they should bring the Bill back. It was a screw-up rather than an accurate reflection of the views of the majority of MPs. These are laws which are particularly important to potentially vulnerable communities in Birmingham.” Mr Simon, of course, has a large Muslim electorate to please.

Another Birmingham MP, Khalid Mahmood (Lab, Perry Barr) called on ministers to consider reviewing the legislation in the future. “These are laws we were committed to before the last election. But we have some protection now for people who were not protected before. We should consolidate what we have, and make it work. If it doesn’t work in practice, ministers can look at it again in the future.”

Sir Iqbal Sacranie of the Muslim Council of Britain, said: “Unfortunately, the misinformation and mischief making from popular comedians and some influential sections of the media, supported by certain political groups, has led Parliament to continue to sanction a wholly unjustifiable hierarchy of rights among British citizens. Freedom of expression and speech was never threatened under the incitement to racial hatred laws nor was it to be threatened under the proposed law. This situation is now not only unjust but makes the work of all those engaged in promoting a cohesive and harmonious society in Britain all the more difficult. Nevertheless, the MCB will continue to strive for justice and to work for the common good of all sections of society.”

See also: [Christian groups’ double standards](#)
