

Religious Hatred Bill: Secularists And Former Archbishop Unite To Protect Freedom Of Speech

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The National Secular Society supports the free speech amendments to the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill, proposed by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey. Other co-signatories include QC Lord Lester of Herne Hill (Lib Dem) and Lord Hunt of the Wirral (Conservative).

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "The Government will be hard pressed to get this Bill through unless it accepts these amendments. It has already failed three times to bring these measures to the statute book through its obdurate refusal to respond to concerns about freedom of speech. There is a huge breadth of opposition to the Bill in Parliament, by human rights campaigners and those in the literary world. Secularists, church leaders and evangelical groups have formed an unprecedented front to oppose the Bill.

"That the National Secular Society and Evangelical Alliance were working together was referred to twice during the Lords 2nd reading debate on 11 October, when several peers were speaking from briefings prepared by the National Secular Society. The Society has been the focus for opposition to these measures since they were first tabled in 2001.

Mr Porteous Wood added: "Without these amendments, the Bill will further limit freedom of expression, both directly and through self-censorship. Journalists and commentators confirm freedom of expression is already being eroded, especially over discussion of matters involving minority religions.

"The Bill is Draconian. The maximum penalty is seven years in prison, yet prosecution thresholds are very low indeed. The chilling effect on freedom of speech, even if there are no prosecutions, will be huge.

"Without the proposed amendments, the Bill will be counterproductive and will benefit extremists. Rather than differences being resolved by healthy open debate, the Bill will curtail discussion on sensitive religious matters, so differences will simply be pushed underground to fester. It will also heighten community tensions by polarising religious communities against each other in legal disputes. There have been calls for similar legislation in Australia to be repealed because it has brought the previously peaceful relationship between evangelical Christians and Muslim communities to crisis point in litigation going on for years.