

# Social liberalism

Throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s the NSS was on the forefront of many movements for social change. Mass immigration, the black, women's and LGBT liberation movements all undermined the case for regressive religious morality to be enforced by the state.

## Some key milestones from this period

- **1951 Marriage law reform supported:** The NSS supported the Marriage Law Reform Society in an effort to rectify an anomaly in the Marriage Act: it exposed the Pope's "mother or child" edict. Following the death of R. H. Rosetti (President), F. A. Ridley became acting President of the NSS and P. V. Morris its General Secretary.
- **1953 Republicanism reaffirmed:** The NSS reaffirmed its adherence to republicanism and drew attention to the superstitious nature of the Coronation ceremony. Wreaths were laid on the Bradlaugh monument at Northampton during a gathering of secularists and rationalists. There was a large rise in NSS membership in two years. The NSS, Rationalist Press Association and Ethical Societies got together to form a Humanist Council for bringing pressure to bear on the BBC for a fair share of broadcasting. A bill to remove Sunday trading restrictions was defeated.
- **1955 Margaret Knight smashes the barrier against atheists on the BBC:** Broadcasting history was made when Mrs. Margaret Knight, of Aberdeen University, was allowed, in a series of talks on the BBC, to propose a Scientific Humanist, as opposed to a Christian, conception of morality. Her subsequent book took its title from her talks, *Morals without Religion*. There was enormous national publicity and controversy. Some national newspapers condemned Mrs Knight and defended Christian privilege in intemperate terms. She joined the NSS. Colin McCall became NSS General Secretary.
- **1956 NSS protest against religious rates privileges:** Mrs. Knight was the distinguished Guest of Honour at the NSS Annual Dinner. The NSS General Secretary recorded a two-minute talk at the invitation of a TV programme inquiring into the state of religion, but the talk was edited out of the show. Vigorous protests from the NSS ensued. The NSS was also protesting against the exemption of vicarages, presbyteries and manses from rates, and rate relief for the clergy. Margaret Knight appeared on TV to debate three Christian representatives
- **1957 Wolfenden Report causes huge controversy:** The Wolfenden Report, commissioned by the Government, called for homosexual acts to be decriminalised. Its publication caused a huge public reaction, but it took another decade before its recommendations were implemented. The NSS had long condemned the cruel anti-gay laws as one among many religion-based "injustices and abuses" and in its 1967 annual report the NSS said "homosexual toleration" would strengthen over time.
- **1961 Suicide legalised:** The NSS was prominent in campaigning for the passing of The Suicide Act. Until this reform, attempted suicide was treated in law as a misdemeanour. Until 1823 suicide victims were buried at the village crossroads with a stake through their heart. From 1823 to 1882 they were buried in an unconsecrated part of the churchyard at night.
- **1963 David Tribe becomes president of the NSS, teaming up with Bill McIlroy:** David Tribe, originally from Australia, was a very active NSS president from 1963 to 1971. He brought a new and modern approach to campaigning for secularism and was prominent in many of the major reform campaigns of the sixties. He was ably assisted by the redoubtable Bill McIlroy who was General Secretary 1963–77 (with a one-year break). Among Tribe's many contributions was a pamphlet entitled *Broadcasting, Brainwashing Conditioning –*

which continued, and enhanced, the long-running complaint about the disproportionate and deferential presence of religion on the BBC. This continues to the present, with a particular frustration at the continuance of Radio 4's Thought for the Day as a purely religious preserve.

- **1964 NSS organises secular education month:** In November 1964, with the support of playwright Harold Pinter and philosopher Bertrand Russell, the NSS organised Secular Education Month with meetings held in London, Glasgow, Inverness, Leicester, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham and Reading. The NSS has remained steadfast in its opposition to publicly funded 'faith schools' and continues to campaign against compulsory worship and faithbased admissions, instead advocating for secular, inclusive schools that are equally open and welcoming to all children, regardless of their religious and philosophical backgrounds.
- **1965 Challenge to theatre censorship:** The Royal Court Theatre went ahead with performances of a play, *Saved*, by NSS Honorary Associate Edward Bond, despite it being banned by the theatre censor, the Lord Chamberlain. The resultant furore led to the Theatres Act of 1968 which abolished the role of the Lord Chamberlain. The NSS had joined campaigns over several years calling for the abolition of the death penalty, which came about in 1965 with the passage of the Murder (Abolition of the Death Penalty) Act. The Race Relations Act was also passed in this year.
- **1967 Homosexuality decriminalised:** In the face of much religious resistance, and after decades of struggle, the Sexual Offences Act was finally passed in 1967. It decriminalised sex in private between men over the age of 21. The NSS had long objected to the legal persecution of homosexuals. Contraceptives were made available on the NHS.
- **1968 NSS enters right-to-die debate:** An NSS working party produced a report "The Right to Die" aimed at reforming the law on assisted suicide. At that time those convicted of assisting a successful suicide could be charged with murder and jailed for 14 years. The many attempts at reforming the law had been thwarted by mainly religious opposition. NSS annual conference passed a resolution supporting voluntary euthanasia.
- **1969 Rights of 'illegitimate children' recognised:** The Family Law Reform Act allowed people born outside marriage to inherit on the intestacy of either parent. It was not until 1987 that all legal distinctions between children born to married and unmarried parents were removed. The NSS had campaigned for this for many years.
- **1971 Barbara Smoker becomes NSS president:** Barbara Smoker was at the helm of the NSS for 25 years during which she lectured, went on speaking tours, did radio and television interviews and debates. She was in demand to give addresses at secular funerals and eventually officiated at nonreligious funerals, wedding ceremonies, gay and lesbian commitments and baby-namings. She was active in various social campaigns, such as the abolition of the death penalty, nuclear disarmament and voluntary euthanasia. Her range of interests were wide and her writing prolific, and she was active in organisations throughout the secularist and humanist movements. In 1984 Barbara undertook a speaking tour of the United States; she produced a booklet *Eggs Are Not People* which was distributed to all members of parliament to dissuade them from voting for a ban on embryo research. In 1989 she was assaulted by demonstrators when standing beside the route of a huge Muslim march that demanded the death of Salman Rushdie. She was holding a home-made banner proclaiming "Free Speech". In 1990 she undertook a speaking tour of India, visiting again in 1998 to inaugurate a mass atheist rally.
- **1977 Gay News blasphemy case:** When a private prosecution for blasphemous libel was brought by the Christian activist Mrs Mary Whitehouse against the magazine *Gay News*, the NSS joined the campaign to defend the paper. *Gay News* had published a poem about a Roman centurion having sex with the dead body of Christ. Denis Lemon, the editor, was found guilty and given a suspended sentence. In advance of the case, the judge surmised that the fall of the Roman Empire was due to homosexuality. NSS General Secretary Bill

McIlroy became chair of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law to protest against the conviction, gaining endorsement from an impressive array of prominent figures. The Committee was revived in 1989 to defend Salman Rushdie in the Satanic Verses controversy. Jim Herrick was NSS General Secretary for two years from 1977.