

National R.E. Guidelines

The Society produced a detailed response to *A National Framework for Religious Education*, a consultation by the Curriculum and Qualification Authority.

We were deeply disturbed by the initial proposals from the QCA which seem to be an attempt to alienate and undermine the non-religious, discourage the statutory withdrawal of pupils from RE, and to impose what amounts to religious propaganda which will be much easier to enforce by OFSTED inspectors when it becomes governed by national guidelines rather than diverse local frameworks, as at present.

While teaching about religion is mandatory throughout the whole of schooling, "secular philosophies" (the report's authors couldn't even use the words agnostic, atheist, freethinker, non-believer or rationalist) are not mandatory at any stage and not even permissible at the first Key Stage.

Our critique opened by observing that: "As well as religious matters, the guidelines for RE also cover a large part of pupils' exposure to moral education. Pupils withdrawn from RE by their parents under the statutory right may be deprived of an essential part of their education. This is unacceptable and a direct result of the intertwining of statutory RE and wider moral

education.

"A further objection to this is the unspoken and totally misleading implication that morality stems solely from religion, whereas many live highly moral lives without any recourse to religion. This ignores the perspectives of non-religious pupils and is highly damaging to them."

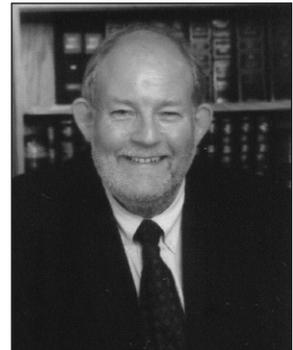
We particularly drew the QCA's attention to "the high proportion of non-religious pupils: 58% of pupils defined themselves as atheist or agnostic in a large study recently and 41% of the population defined itself as not belonging to a religion".

Wider cultural issues

In our rationale we had specifically drawn attention to the guidelines' failure to specifically require discussion of negative cultural attitudes to women often reinforced by religion. This should include religious attitudes to women being thought (or treated as if) inferior to men, to female genital mutilation, to arranged marriages and the concept of menstruating women being "unclean". We also made a similar point about homosexuality.

Complaint to Education Secretary

Honorary Associate Graham Allen MP wrote on our behalf to Education Secretary Charles Clarke and indicated that he had "major concerns about [the QCA



Rt Hon. Charles Clarke

"I thought the views of the NSS on the draft RE framework were very interesting . . . I fully expect that the final version will incorporate some of the views expressed by the NSS"

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"Graham Allen MP (Honorary Associate) wrote to Minister (see Page 1)"

"The Committee recognises that there are no 'secular' schools: all schools must hold a daily act of worship. Nevertheless, some parents are strongly of the opinion that a denominational school would not be appropriate for their children and prefer to place them in a school with no such affiliation."



Paul Holmes M.P. (Honorary Associate, and member of the Education Select Committee)

guidelines], much in line with the NSS's submission" which he attached.

Mr Clarke responded in a constructive manner: "I thought the views of the NSS on the draft RE framework were very interesting. I know that a key issue during the consultation has been to make sure that the framework is as inclusive as it can possibly be. Now that the consultation period has ended, my officials are working very closely

with QCA to refine the draft in the light of comments received. . . . I fully expect that the final version will incorporate some of the views expressed by the NSS."

Source of guidelines

The Guidelines are published by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority and available online at http://www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/downloads/re_framework.pdf The formal consultation period has ended.

School Transport

In the last Bulletin we reported that the Society had been called to give evidence to the Commons' Education and Skills Select Committee (E&SSC).

The Committee has now reported on the School Transport Bill and acknowledged our concerns. The emboldening shown below appeared in the Committee's report, specifically recounting the experiences in detail of "Mr Ian Abbott, a parent from Lancashire, told us that his daughter, an atheist, did not wish to attend the local Christian denominational school, but wished to travel to a school further away with no denominational affiliation." A full account of member Ian Abbott's case was given in the last bulletin.

Mr. Abbott's case is still to be resolved, but his experience suggests that some LEAs have misunderstood the statutory position and may have provided free transport on a discriminatory basis.

This section of the report ended with the words "The Committee recognises that there are no 'secular' schools: all schools must hold a daily act of worship. Nevertheless, some parents are strongly of the opinion that a denominational school would not be appropriate for

their children and prefer to place them in a school with no such affiliation. **A parent who expresses a strong philosophical view that a denominational education would not be appropriate for their child is in a similar legal position to one who expresses a strong preference for denominational education. Guidance issued to LEAs should clarify that different treatment in this case could amount to discrimination.**

"In some respects, the guidance provided to LEAs in the Prospectus may even have added to the existing confusion over the requirement that free school transport should not be provided on a discriminatory basis. In particular, paragraph 22 concludes by stating that "LEAs should ensure that transport arrangements support the denominational or [in Wales] linguistic preference ... parents have expressed". This does not include "philosophical preference", thereby implying that LEAs need not provide equivalent arrangements for parents wishing to send their children to non-denominational schools. **"In order to reduce the potential for discriminatory practices, and to clarify the legal situation under the Human Rights Act, guidance to**

LEAs must make clear that where transport arrangements exist to support parents' denominational preferences, they must also cater for strongly held philosophical preferences."

Joint Human Rights Select Committee (JCHR) up in arms

The duties of this powerful Parliamentary Committee representing both Houses of Parliament include scrutiny of impending legislation. Its scrutiny of the draft School Transport Bill took the form of a letter written on behalf of the Human Rights Committee to Stephen Twigg MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools. The letter raised a number of concerns and the JCHR were clearly dissatisfied with the Minister's response :

The need for guidance to LEAs

"4.20 In our letters to Ministers we pointed out that in the prospectus there is a suggestion that the Department itself is not clear about the Article 14 obligation: it is said that schemes "may improve provision for one or more of: ... pupils travelling to denominational schools". . . .

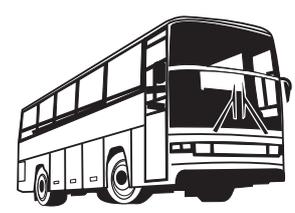
"4.21 However, we are disappointed that it is not anticipated that the guidance given in the revised prospectus will be comprehensive, and that there is no equivalent

undertaking from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools to issue new general guidance to schools expressly addressing the discrimination problem. The Government appears to be maintaining the position taken in the prospectus accompanying the draft Bill that it is for LEAs to decide for themselves whether their schemes are discriminatory.

"4.22 We remain of the view expressed in our letter, that there is a clear need for departmental guidance making the human rights position clear, for at least three main reasons. [Only part of the first of which is reproduced here].

"We were persuaded by the evidence of the National Secular Society to the Education Committee that LEAs are in fact under a misapprehension that they are under an obligation to provide free transport to denominational schools, contributed to by the current statutory framework and evidenced in part by the very significant numbers of authorities which provide such transport. This is ultimately a factual question which we are not in a position to resolve, and will no doubt be the subject of further discussion between the National Secular Society and the Government."

We will of course be writing to the minister.



Joint Parliamentary Human Rights Select Committee: "We were persuaded by the evidence of the National Secular Society to the Education Committee that LEAs are in fact under a misapprehension . . ."

Situations Vacant for Volunteers

Development of Website

As well as being a major source of new members, our website is widely referred to by journalists, broadcasters and members of the public for information on secular topics. The number of surfers on line is continuing to increase: there were nearly 50 on line concurrently one day in September. But we want to build on this success and develop the website further. The webmaster would be delighted to hear from any volunteer with experience of the php system who would be prepared to spend some time assisting with web

maintenance and development. Anyone interested should contact Keith Porteous Wood the Executive Director.

We are also seeking those with accounting, legal, educational and team building skills. We are also hoping to improve our fund raising and helping to build up our membership further. Is that something which appeals to you?

Could you give talks to local school children? If you have skills in such areas please contact the Executive Director at kpw@secularism.org.uk or phone 020 7404 3126.

Brainwashing material?

"Excerpt from CofE instructions to teachers"

THE LAST SUPPER

Imagine you find yourself in a kitchen, a very old fashioned kitchen, no modern cookers or refrigerators, food is hanging in sacks from the ceiling ... There is a fire burning ... There is a large table in the middle ... and an open fire on which are cooking pots ... You gaze around. What sort of kitchen is it? Is it small or large? Can you smell all the food? As you are looking round there is a tap on your shoulder.

"Come on, stop day dreaming, take the food in. The master will be here soon".

"You pick up a big bowl from in front of you full of delicious smelling

"stew...."

"We remain convinced that in the longer term the implications of Article 51 for a secular EU are very damaging.

We simply cannot support a constitution with such weaknesses."

Church of England defends hypnotising to encourage Blind Faith?

An NSS member gave us some material produced by the Church of England for schools in some of its dioceses detailing hypnosis-like techniques to be used in Religious Education lessons in CofE infant schools. Some sample text appears in italics. (Left and Below)

Darken the room, sit pupils round in a circle or in such a way that all have a clear view of the candle. Direct pupils to look at the candle in silence. They should note where their thoughts take them. But they should not deliberately think of something. Afterwards, lighten the room gradually, then put out the candle.

Questions might be: What did the candle make you think of? What did the room feel

like when everyone was concentrating? Did it make anyone remember anything from the Bible or about Jesus? Why is light used as a symbol in many different faiths?

The Chair of the CofE's Board of Education was interviewed on the *Today* programme about our revelations and extraordinarily sought to defend this manipulative practice. The secular perspective was given by Nick Cohen following an article he had written about it in the *New Statesman* after a discussion with Keith Porteous Wood. This prompted considerable publicity. *Kent on Sunday* even devoted its entire front page to the story, which ran on for weeks with an exchange of letters in which former president Barbara Smoker participated.

Europe News

The Society has consistently opposed Article 51 of the European Union Constitution which requires dialogue with religious organisations and we believe this would give them the undue influence to subvert the democratic process by, for example, scuppering legislative proposals before they can be publicly discussed or giving religious groups privileged access to top officials to make their own proposals. The Article also guarantees the status of such organisations, although there is a wide discrepancy of views as to how damaging this latter aspect would be in secular terms.

Since the Paris meeting in December, held to demonstrate opposition to the Article, the draft EU Constitution has been adopted by heads of governments and it contains the offending Article. The option no longer remains therefore to oppose only some of the

Constitution.

After much thought and negotiation we have come to the conclusion that we must oppose the constitution in toto. This is unquestionably a core secular issue - and we remain convinced that in the longer term the implications of Article 51 for a secular EU are very damaging. We simply cannot support a constitution with such weaknesses.

We realise some members will consider Article 51 is a price worth paying to have an agreed Constitution. But only by opposing the Constitution, and explaining why, can the Society draw attention to the dangers of Article 51 and hope that it may be reconsidered at some time in the future. We are not alone. Both our French partners and the International Humanist and Ethical Union have backed outright rejection, and this will be the call made at our demonstration in Brussels next year.

Europe News continued

Our only alternative is to walk away from this process and leave others to continue with the fight. Your Council do not consider this to be at all the appropriate course.

European Humanist Federation AGM

Keith Porteous Wood arranged for the hosting of the European Humanist Federation's 2004 AGM in London in July, and the formal dinner that followed it, which was well received. Vice President Terry Sanderson formally represented the Society at the dinner.

At EHF's AGM the NSS made detailed proposals for more work to be done on Vatican Concordats. These are treaties

drawn up between states and the Vatican generally to give it financial and governmental access privileges, and even make commitments over the form of legislation. Often these agreements are made without prior parliamentary approval and can only be varied with the consent of both parties.

NSS volunteer Muriel Fraser kindly undertook much of the detailed research for the paper that was presented at the AGM. On behalf of the NSS and our sister organisation in Italy UAAR, Keith Porteous Wood made a formal proposal for more work to be done by EHF in this worrying area, which was accepted unanimously. The NSS offered to play a significant part in assisting them with this work.

Media Exposure

The two and a half months since the last bulletin was published has been a time of frenetic media activity. We have appeared (often more than once) in *The Times*, *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Guardian Education* (on academies) *Observer* and *The Herald*. We have had several mentions, including one on the front page of the *Times Educational Supplement* and – as reported elsewhere – a major article in the *New Statesman*. We also appeared in the *Liverpool Echo*, *Derby Evening Telegraph* and *Western Mail*. Terry Sanderson has appeared on *Sky News* and *BBC News 24* and Keith Porteous Wood has appeared on Meridian TV. Both have taken part (at different times) in debates on Radio FiveLive and both have also had long interviews with Mike

Dickin on TalkSport, the most popular commercial radio channel. Mr Dickin is not a fan of religion. Council member Peter Vlachos had a broadcasting baptism of fire on the BBC's Asian Network where he was seeking to dispel misinformation about what is described as the French headscarf ban. It has been in place since 1905 and relates to all forms of overt religious symbols, including Christian ones.

Keith spoke on *Good Morning Wales* and we had the usual crop of regional and local broadcasts. Once more, we thank those members who financed the studio broadcasting facilities. Without them, we would have been unable to have made some of the broadcasts without a great deal of travel and wasted time.

A member's experience in the RAF

"Four months security duties in Northern Ireland will soon show you what's wrong with religion! I had 'Ath' (short for Atheist) stamped on my 'dog tags', and I do remember being in a 'fox-hole', so the old saying about Atheists and fox-holes went straight out the window. No one asked if anyone wanted to go to church, and the regimental chaplain was conspicuous by his absence!"

The Rights of non-believing members of Armed Forces raised with MoD

Keith Porteous Wood had a private meeting with the Director in charge of personnel policy at the Ministry of Defence in July to discuss how

the needs of the non-religious in the armed services could be better served.

MoD official statistics record that

A member's experience in the RAF

"As a serving RAF Officer of 13 years experience I fully endorse any and all pressure that can be applied to the MoD and the individual services to have religion pushed firmly back to where it belongs - in private. I would suggest that any junior airman or airwoman put in such a position would find great difficulty in extricating themselves and find limited support for doing so from their commanders... In the midst of overstretch and budget cuts I find it galling to see how much Chaplains are paid to act as counsellors, a job that could be filled by any sensible person with training, and at my own station money has been diverted to replace the C of E church roof. I must endure the saying of grace at official functions, and, which is worse, must respect the artificially accelerated rank of forces chaplains and padres."

The most encouraging aspect of all of the meeting was the convincing assertion by a top CPS executive that the CPS is an entirely secular organisation, and that for it to be so was essential to its effectiveness.

only 1% of service personnel are not Christian, and most of these are from other faiths. The MoD agreed to review the way this data was collected, as they accepted it was unrealistic. Several members wrote to *Newsline* suggesting that, at least until recently, to classify oneself as atheist was likely to be career-limiting, yet in reality non-believers were in the majority.

The Society had played a part in the

wording the element of new personnel policies relating to the non-religious. The Ministry had been open to our suggestions. Other matters we raised related to funerals, that alternatives should always be available to ritually slaughtered meat and (most importantly) non-religious equivalents of padres.

We will continue to press for improvements.

NSS meets the Director of Public Prosecutions

The Executive Director was intrigued by an assertion made during a television broadcast by the Director of Public Prosecutions that he had consulted extensively with religious and community groups. Not having received a call from the Crown Prosecution Service, Keith contacted the DPP, Ken MacDonald QC, and asked for the non-religious be added to the list of consultees. Mr MacDonald wrote back immediately with an invitation to meet.

The CPS fielded its most senior executives for the round table meeting and at the outset they apologised that the non-religious strand had been overlooked. The meeting was both cordial and constructive.

Our major concerns

We expressed our concern about what seemed to us to be an over-zealous use of the new religiously aggravated charges. Religiously aggravated charges were introduced as part of David Blunkett's Anti-Terrorist Crime and Security Act 2001 – shortly after September 11 and carry draconian potential prison sentences, such as seven years for "religiously aggravated insulting behaviour". They can only be brought with the DPP's specific permission, although the cases to which we drew his attention had preceded the current DPP's appointment.

We presented a dossier from the NSS

supporting our concerns about religiously aggravated charges. While we realised that we could not discuss individual cases in detail, a review of the dossier gave us an opportunity to express the nature of our concerns, using these cases as examples. It led to a helpful discussion on issues of principle, especially after we were able to demonstrate that the concerns had been expressed throughout the spectrum of newspapers, not just sensationalist ones.

The DPP did emphasise that the seven years was just a maximum (and admittedly neither of the cases we cited resulted in a custodial sentence) but the stress on those involved during the period from being charged to acquittal or sentencing must have been horrific. For the case we raised that had resulted in an acquittal this process took around a year.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression issues were among a number of other concerns we raised and we cited examples of intimidation of those that had spoken critically of religion. The CPS opined much more robust exchanges were to be expected now compared with the past. We countered that some sectors of the community seemed able to speak in the most threatening way without any sanction whatsoever. Again we gave specific examples to illustrate our concerns. On the other

hand, the CPS observed that they were glad that what was permissible in the UK – especially terms of hate speech - fell far short of that which is allowed in the USA under the first amendment. They seemed to have in mind verbal attacks such as those the Bible belt evangelists inflict on those with whom they disagree.

In particular we expressed the fear that the CPS would come under increasing pressure to interpret the religiously aggravated insulting behaviour provisions as being to protect doctrines, as opposed to—as they are intended—to protect people.

We also expressed our fear that the law was not being evenly applied and that in the past there appeared to

have been a hierarchy of minorities. The DPP said that he was determined that this should not be the case and asserted that the CPS was entirely independent of political pressure.

The most encouraging aspect of all of the meeting was the convincing assertion by a top CPS executive that the CPS is an entirely secular organisation, and that for it to be so was essential to its effectiveness.

Keith Porteous Wood is indebted to Anna Behan – with her directly relevant legal experience - for her invaluable support at the meeting. Our thanks also go to Barrister Joel Clompus, who specialises in criminal law and drew together much of the preparatory material for the meeting.

Incitement to Religious Hatred Law

The Society has vociferously attacked Home Secretary David Blunkett's renewed proposals to introduce a law against 'incitement to religious hatred'. We described it as: "an invitation to religious fanatics to use the courts to silence critics of their activities".

The route he has reportedly chosen is to attempt to add "religion" to existing race hatred legislation, which is itself hardly used, because securing convictions is notoriously difficult and an acquittal would provide defendants with a huge publicity coup. We emphasise that the Society is not seeking to withhold the protection of the law from those who are threatened in this way, and of course we condemn unreservedly those who incite such hatred. We also acknowledge that fascist groups intent on inciting racial violence now tend to use express their hatred in religious terms in an attempt to evade the incitement to racial hatred legislation. We believe that it should

still be possible to secure convictions under the race legislation for race offences, even if offenders use religious terms as a subterfuge.

Problems such a law would create

We are convinced that the introduction of "incitement to religious hatred" will lead to a severe curtailing of freedom of speech and is tantamount to the reintroduction to the statute book of medieval blasphemy laws, but this time applying to all religions. We fear that, under pressure from religious groups, the application of the law would subtly change so that those who denounce religion, or a particular religion, as untrue and dangerous would become at risk of being jailed.

This issue has been examined in forensic detail by a House of Lords Religious Offences Committee which published a report last year making clear that a law such as the one being proposed by David Blunkett would be almost

A House of Lords Committee which published a report last year making clear that a law such as the one being proposed by David Blunkett would be almost impossible to formulate without severely compromising freedom of expression. . . . Mr Blunkett, on the other hand, seems to know better.



Incitement to Religious hatred Law (continued)

impossible to formulate without severely compromising freedom of expression. The committee examined the matter from all angles and eventually said that it could make no recommendations because it couldn't see a way round the many problems such a law would create. Mr Blunkett, on the other hand, seems to know better.

A similar law was introduced recently in Victoria, Australia. It resulted in a prosecution (still ongoing) that has descended into farce. A fundamentalist Christian group is on trial because it offended the sensibilities of a Muslim group during a sermon critical of Islam. Now the court finds itself in the ridiculous position of having to decide whether what religions regard as sacred texts contain incitements to hatred. Some of the Muslim proponents of the bill now regret its introduction.

The UK law already protects everyone from incitement to violence and against harassment.

The inevitable consequence of this proposed legislation would be to protect religious dogmas and beliefs from insult and mockery. We are on very dangerous territory here, and Mr Blunkett is rushing in once more with legislation that seeks to control thought and opinion. He was successful in 2001 in making religiously aggravated insulting behaviour an offence punishable by up to seven years in jail. This draconian law has already been used in trivial arguments between neighbours.

There is widespread acknowledgement that Mr Blunkett's proposals, the only ones currently being contemplated in this area, are deeply flawed, and we are encouraged by the extraordinary breadth of opposition to them in political circles and the media. Some humanists feel, however, that alternative legislative wording can be found which avoids the threat to freedom of speech. The Society's Council, already deeply worried by erosions to freedom of expression which have occurred in recent years, does not.

The relative position of the non-religious is one of the weakest, if not the weakest. Our perception of the imbalance against the non-religious was further underlined when we discovered that there were over thirty submissions from religious bodies as against just two from non-religious bodies

Consultations

There is not space in the Bulletin to do justice to all our responses to consultations, so we are simply listing some with the broadest of comments and giving, where available a web address for them. Members without access to a personal computer can receive copies by sending a C4 (A4 size) SAE marked with whichever submission is sought to the Office.

Fairness for All: A New Commission for Equality and Human Rights

We felt that such a single commission would be more successful in combating unlawful discrimination and protecting human rights than a series of different ones individually representing race, women etc. A single body would probably serve those suffering multiple

discrimination and also the non-religious better.

We protested however at the proposal that the non-religious be "bundled in" with the religious strand, where we would generally be represented by those most opposed to what we are trying to achieve. Pointing out that religion itself was often a major source of discrimination, we also detailed ways in which women in particular were subjugated and sexual minorities persecuted by religious pressure.

We warned that a hierarchy of minorities, something the Government say they are seeking to avoid, would develop unless all strands are afforded equivalent enforcement bodies, funding and legislation. Needless to say, the relative



position of the non-religious is one of the weakest, if not the weakest. Our perception of the imbalance against the non-religious was further underlined when we discovered that there were over thirty submissions from religious bodies as against just two from non-religious bodies.

This submission <http://www.secularism.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=157>, drawn up by Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood, has been acclaimed by experts in the field, and a worthwhile proportion of the points we made were included in the official summary of responses.

Animal Welfare

We had earlier recommended to the Government and the Government's own advisors, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) that religious/ritual slaughter without prior stunning should be banned on grounds of unnecessary cruelty. Religious slaughter is the only exemption to the prior stunning requirement in the UK and other countries have a complete ban. Meat killed in this way by some other major meat producing countries is accepted for religious purposes.

The FAWC formally recommended that the Government remove the ban. The Government, while accepting that it caused additional suffering, refused on the flimsiest of grounds. It was clearly following its own policy of giving religious bodies everything they want, regardless of the adverse effects on others (or in this case, the gratuitous suffering for defenceless animals).

We made two submissions. The first *Consultation on Government's Draft Response to the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing* demolishing the Government's "rationale" for its intention, later confirmed, not to accept the recommendation to ban all slaughter without prior stunning. <http://www.secularism.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=178&Itemid=31>

The second, Submission to the *Farm Animal Welfare Council* made constructive suggestions as to the best way forward, given that an outright ban had been rejected. We proposed statutory labelling of meat resulting from slaughter without prior stunning. This should extend to meat products and menus in restaurants. <http://www.secularism.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=166> At our suggestion, Nick Cohen the investigative journalist devoted a two page article in the *New Statesman* to this issue. In it he raised some uncomfortable questions and in the passage below, suggested an equally uncomfortable, but convincing answer: "Yet at the beginning of June, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs overruled its own advisers and decided that religious slaughter should not stop, and scarcely anyone outside the National Secular Society noticed. Even animal charities I contacted did not know what Whitehall had done. Like the government, they did not want a fight with the religious."

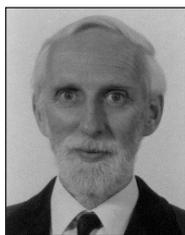
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Keith Charters

NSS Scotland

Following a highly successful initial meeting of Scottish campaigners in Glasgow, at which Keith Charters (above) was confirmed as the founding convener of NSS Scotland, NSS activities north of the Border are continuing apace. Having dealt with the inevitable initial administrative matters, the Steering Group is now getting down to the business of promoting secularism. Initial successes have included letters in the papers, including one calling on the Scottish Executive to oppose the Catholic Church's demand for it to have a veto over the implementation of sexual-health policy in Catholic schools. The Group's first press release called on the Scottish Executive to stand firm against a legal threat by a Scottish Catholic bishop who is, absurdly, insisting on separate entrances, staff rooms and even lavatories for Catholics in some brand new shared-campus schools. The group will be making a concerted effort to win over those Scots – the majority it suspects – who have yet to consider the merits of secularism over the current system of favouritism and privilege – backed up by money – towards religious organisations in Scotland. It is a promising start and the Group is confident of making a real impact. Over the coming months it will be tapping into the wealth of knowledge and experience within NSS membership to address the major secular issues in Scotland.



Denis Cobell

'President's Message'

It's that time again. I mean the NSS AGM is just around the corner; the date is Saturday 27th November.

I am urging members to come along; this is your chance to have your say and meet the NSS staff and Council. This will be your opportunity in 2004 for you to tell us what you think.

We held a successful conference last year, and next year, as well as the AGM, we are planning an event to promote and co-ordinate Active Secularism, as indicated in the June bulletin.

Survey after survey draws attention to our low and declining religiosity. Some bear out our hunch that the UK is the most religiously sceptical country in the world, others make clear that knowledge of the bible or its myths—together with Sunday schools—are fast-disappearing, and many confirm that the sixty year decline in religious observance and church attendance continues unabated.

For most of the population, religion is an irrelevance. Church attendance is confined to rites of passage, and for a few, the occasional festival. Yet faith groups still have an enormous—and it seems a growing—influence with the Government, just one manifestation of which is the exemptions they manage to wrest from legislation to which everyone else is subject.

The NSS is also concerned about the persistent conviction many parents of—even including some that never darken the doors of a church themselves—that their children need to be taught morality from a religious basis. We know there are alternatives and have long sought wider recognition that you can be good without gods.

The NSS does all it can to make such views more widely accepted; but we have a small staff and are currently running at a substantial deficit.

So why not come along on November 27 and give your support and offers of help both financial and through voluntary help in whatever way you find possible?

Denis Cobell

President

New Honorary Associates



Nick Cohen

Nick Cohen, this campaigning journalist and fearless critic of religious excess and hypocrisy and, well known for his *Observer* and *New Statesman* columns, said he was "humbled" by the invitation to join our panel of Honorary Associates. Some of his valiant efforts on behalf of secularism are referred to elsewhere in this Bulletin.

an enthusiastic secularist in the House of Lords and has spoken out loudly against the Government's Faith Liaison Committee and Home Secretary David Blunkett's incitement to religious hatred legislative proposals. He has described himself publicly as an atheist and said he felt "honoured" to be asked to join our list.



Professor Lord Desai

Lord Desai "feels honoured" to become an Honorary Associate.

Professor Lord Desai grew up in Bombay and then left for America. Fed up with the Vietnam-obsessed America, the young Meghnad Desai came to Britain and joined the London School of Economics, with which he is still connected as Professor of Economics. He is also Director of the Centre for the Study of Global Governance. Now he is

Graham Linehan,

We are also delighted that **Graham Linehan**, *Father Ted's* writer and director, has shunned a nomination for the next papacy in favour accepting an NSS Honorary Associateship. Graham's directing and writing CV is stuffed full of award winning big name shows and he writes columns and articles for broadsheets and magazines.

Prison Visitors

Some prisoners, two of whom are members, have asked whether they could receive a secular prison visitor, much as other prisoners receive chaplaincy visits, or representatives from their faith or denomination. After security clearance such visits can take place at more convenient times and places than is the case with the regular visits, and they do not count against prisoners' visitor allocation. Those able to travel to Somerset or Wiltshire are particularly sought. Anyone interested is invited to contact Keith Porteous Wood at the office.

Non-Religious invited to Religious Broadcasting meeting at Department of Culture Media and Sport

Probably because this was a governmental meeting and the new guidelines we worked on now call for the non-religious to be consulted too, the Executive Director was invited to this round table meeting with major broadcasters and religious representatives. It was chaired by the Minister, Lord McIntosh of Haringey. The Anglican bishop with special responsibility for broadcasting, Nigel McCulloch, sat directly opposite the minister and was clearly trying to co-chair the meeting. He is now bishop of Manchester, which doubtless gives him ready access to the BBC's Religious Broadcasting HQ which is based there. For him, there just

wasn't enough religion on the BBC and the public were straining for more. Keith Porteous Wood pointed out (to an array of raised eyebrows) that it was difficult to reconcile what the bishop had just said with the fact that his Church had been in continual decline in the UK for over 60 years and now only a million attended his Church's services on the average Sunday. From the comments he heard afterwards some of the broadcasters found some secular balance to be rather refreshing. The repartee between Keith and the bishop was deemed sufficiently amusing to make *The Times* gossip column.

Members whose NSS subscriptions for 2004 are still unpaid will find a yellow renewal form enclosed with this Bulletin. So, if it has slipped your mind, please return the form to us now with your cheque. Attendance at the AGM is subject to your subscription being up to date.



Newsline equipment and running costs appeal

Name

Address

Postcode

I enclose a donation of £.....

Any surplus can go towards reducing the Society's annual deficit

Please see details overleaf

Volunteer News

We are grateful for the hard work of volunteers in the NSS Office. John Claydon has helped immensely with processing subscription renewals as well as getting the last Bulletin out to you. Fiona Weir also helped with the mailing as well as continuing to pack and post out our merchandise sales and assisting whenever an extra pair of hands is needed. After two years helping with us diligently entering data, Julian Blake has now left us to undertake full time employment; we owe him a great debt.

We are very pleased to welcome Stewart Ware. As well as helping to process membership records, Stewart is also designing new computer programmes to deal with our ever-increasing membership. Peter Hearty continues to send out *Newsline* each week, he works on our accounts and helps with the credit card payments we receive.

All of this work is given free of charge and we are grateful for the generosity of our volunteers. Their work is a vital element in keeping the cogs of the NSS well oiled and turning.

We are very sad to report the sudden and unexpected death of John Archer, who with his wife Lorna, regularly helped with mailings from the office. John enjoyed his volunteering and was always interested in discussing secularism. He died on a sunny day in August while cycling happily with Lorna. Malcolm Rees, NSS Research Officer, conducted his funeral ceremony. The Council of the NSS were grateful for John's enthusiastic work and send their condolences to Lorna.

NSS is also very grateful to the many members who help with its work outside the office too. We would also like to thank profusely

“regulars” Ian Abbott, Renata Anderson, Tim Boyce, Muriel Fraser, Martin Perry, Paul Stevenson, Colin Swinburn and Barry Thorpe. In addition, Peter Bowen-Walker, John Dillon, Cameron Low, Carl Pinel, Simon Wakeling and others who kindly lend their hand as the need arises.

They help to monitor what goes on in Parliament, help with projects and research, scan old books and pamphlets, oversee our investments as well as transcribe radio and TV programmes. These volunteers' work all helps hugely.

Particular thanks are also due to two specialists whose expertise has contributed substantially to our submissions: Jeremy Smith for the OFCOM Submission and Mazin Zeki for several submissions involving human rights and diversity.

Appeal

The Bulletin appeal for funds for equipment (digital camera which is already proving very useful and laptop which is being purchased) raised around £3,500 and Council is most grateful for this.

Unfortunately we have a further pressing need; for an equipment upgrade and running costs for the *Newsline* office. As you can imagine, the computer and telecommunications equipment we need to enable us to bring *Newsline* to you gets a fair old bashing for many hours every day and is rapidly reaching the end of its economic life. The *Newsline* staff read practically every newspaper to make sure they are in a position to make readers as well informed as possible. But all this costs money. We know how popular *Newsline* – your own weekly journal – is with members, and of course *Newsline* is a free service. **We need £3,000** to cover these costs, some of which are ongoing. We are confident that you will want to make a contribution to help secure *Newsline's* continuance. (Any excess will go to reduce the Society's annual deficit.)

Please send your donation using the form overleaf. Alternatively, you can make a donation on the secure website at www.secularism.org.uk/joinform.htm