

Theme: Freedom Of Expression Issue

NSS Stands Up For Free Speech, But The Threat Is Growing

Religious threats to freedom of speech and expression have been much in the news recently. Examples include the Government's misguided incitement to religious hatred measures, the violent protest that led to the cancellation of the play *Behzti* in Birmingham and the orchestrated attempt to ban the BBC broadcasting *Jerry Springer – The Opera*. Religious extremists are trying to force respect for their faith, even on those who hold it in the utmost contempt.

Sikh play at Birmingham

The success of the stone-throwing Sikhs in getting Birmingham Rep to cancel its production of *Behzti* spurred extremist Christians into action. They had got the message loud and clear: threats and menaces work when it comes to silencing those who refuse to toe the religious line.

Jerry Springer – the Opera

Although the burgeoning religious Right in this country tried hard to pressure the BBC into dropping *Jerry Springer – the Opera*, it rapidly became clear that the huge volume of complaints that the Corporation had received had been almost entirely solicited by one organisation: Christian Voice. Contrary to first impressions, there was no grass roots revolt among the populace against the BBC's intention



Birmingham Rep

to show this production in its gloriously profane entirety. Indeed, it was quite the reverse.

With the NSS encouraging it to stand firm, the BBC did, indeed, broadcast the show and was applauded for doing so by those horrified at the prospect of the heirs of Mary Whitehouse scoring a significant victory against free speech.

Even though only 1.7 million people watched the programme (which still represents three times as many as had seen it in a theatre during the whole of its two year run), most people supported its showing. The majority of people in this country are still very much in favour of "using the off switch" if there's something they don't like on TV. Reassuringly, banning things still makes most people uncomfortable.

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Jerry Springer - the Opera

What is very worrying is that the NSS was the only organisation to mount any effective opposition to the would-be censors. Apart from blanket coverage in the UK, our support for the BBC was even reported in the New York Times and the Times of India.

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However, this whole incident did bring to the fore once again one of the NSS's traditional targets: the blasphemy law. Christian Voice, the organisation that irresponsibly published the home addresses and phone numbers of BBC executives, threatened to bring a private prosecution for blasphemy against the BBC and the Cambridge Theatre, where the stage version of *Jerry Springer* has been showing. It is unlikely that this will proceed, but it prompted several new calls from politicians and from the Commission for Racial Equality for the blasphemy law to be scrapped. Our honorary associate, Dr Evan Harris MP, tabled several early day motions about free speech and blasphemy and appeared on the *Today* programme speaking on our behalf on the topic.

We need to be sure though that any offers to scrap the blasphemy law are not a sprat to catch a mackerel, the mackerel being the incitement to religious hatred measures. We would be scrapping a legal dead duck and putting in its place something that is potentially a much greater menace to free expression.

We also worry that although the BBC won this round of the battle,

the furore over *Jerry Springer – the Opera* will cause the Corporation to lose its nerve when it is next offered a religiously controversial programme idea. It has already been cowed into cancelling a cartoon series that lampooned the Pope after pressure from the Catholic Church, which goes to show that it is not impervious to pressure (the head of BBC television, Mark Thompson, is, coincidentally, a pious Catholic).

The long-term damage

The insidious result of all this will be an increase in self-censorship. It is impossible to champion a work of art that never came into being because the artist was afraid of being dragged into court or having to face threats and violence from religious extremists determined to impose their will on the rest of us.

The NSS will continue to protest loudly when further threats are made to free expression by religious bodies. We are not alone in our worries, as the surge in our membership in the past few months indicates. What is very worrying is that the NSS was the *only* organisation to mount any effective opposition to the would-be censors. Apart from blanket coverage in the UK, our support for the BBC was even reported in the *New York Times* and the *Times of India*.

Incitement To Religious Hatred Law



Houses of Parliament

At the end of the two hundred page Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill was devoted to a largely unrelated matter: the criminalisation of inciting hatred in others defined by reference to their religion or belief. Such activities are of course obnoxious but nevertheless the Society vigorously opposes the introduction of this law. It does so, in summary, because: (a) such a law is unnecessary because existing laws, such as incitement to violence, are adequate and (b) that the law would be used to stifle free expression on religious matters (and exacerbate further the growing tide

of self-censorship). Our concerns have been expressed in much more detail at a meeting with senior Home Office officials and in a written submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee, which is available on our website at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/acrobat/nssonincitement051204.pdf>. Members wishing to see this but unable to access it electronically will be sent one by post if they send an SAE to the office marked "Home Affairs Committee Submsn".

Background

This Bill was one of the very first bills to be published in the new

Westminster Parliamentary session which started in November, which suggests it is regarded by the Government as a flagship Bill to be pushed through before the election. It is widely thought that the incitement provisions are an attempt in the run up to the election to win back some support from the Muslim community that was lost over military action in Iraq.

David Blunkett tabled the Bill shortly before resigning as Home Secretary, and his successor seems equally keen to pursue it. Mr Blunkett had tried to introduce virtually identical incitement provisions in emergency anti-terrorism legislation shortly after September 11, 2001. Blunkett was intransigent in the face of almost unprecedented opposition, but was forced to drop the provisions because the alternative would have been to lose the anti-terrorism bill *in toto*. Two of the many objections to the provisions had been that they had been introduced in haste and that they were nothing to do with anti-terrorism. A further attempt was made by a back bench peer to introduce the provisions after ample time for reflection in a bill devoted entirely to this matter, but even this failed to garner support.

These attempts and the latest one have shared the same — we consider, flawed — methodology and we have opposed them all consistently. They propose extending the incitement to racial hatred provisions to include religion. While race is immutable, religion is something to which people subscribe at will, and has its power structures and is very contentious. Treating them as if they were equivalent characteristics with a “one size fits all” approach will simply not work. We are convinced such an approach will leave the way open for religious extremists to silence the more moderate within their religion and critics generally. Shutting down debate will allow extremism to grow unchecked, but exposing it will have the opposite effect.

The House of Lords Religious Offences Select Committee considered two years ago at considerable length whether this was the correct approach, but did not come to a conclusion that it was.

The latest campaign

Mr Blunkett’s previous attempt in 2001, and his latest one, provoked dissent not only from politicians and commentators from across the political spectrum, but also from religionists and secularists alike. So, on this issue we are maximising our effectiveness by working with Christian groups. Some members will feel less comfortable than others with this, but our objective is to bring the maximum pressure to bear on the Government, and this seems the only way of achieving this. Those with whom we are co-operating know where we are coming from and also accept that this is an alliance of convenience. Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP attended the original crisis meeting with the Executive Director and made proposals for a parliamentary campaign that were adopted.

The House of Commons

Evan Harris chaired a packed meeting at the House of Commons co-sponsored by the NSS and the Barnabas Trust, a Christian charity fighting discrimination against Christians, mainly abroad. The full press corps — complete with four television crews — were on hand to record this meeting in Westminster Hall, the oldest part of the Palace of Westminster. The many politicians in the audience included Shadow Home Secretary Rt Hon David Davis MP, who was supportive.

The panel included the Shadow Attorney General, Dominic Grieve MP, as well as NSS Honorary Associates Dr Evan Harris MP (chair), Alice Mahon MP and Joan Smith. Alice Mahon expressed profound concern that the provisions would have a gagging effect and “kill ideas”, and result in self-censorship. Fellow Honorary Associate Joan Smith, describing herself as a child of the Enlightenment, branded the proposals as anti-Enlightenment and feared that writers and intellectuals were at the greatest danger from the proposals. The Executive Director gave several reasons why the law was unnecessary. But most popular of all the speakers was comedian Rowan Atkinson (of “Mr Bean” fame) who spoke passionately about



Dr Evan Harris



Joan Smith

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Rowan Atkinson

the importance of freedom of expression and argued that the hard-won right to give offence was vital to a democratic society and we must fight to retain it.

The Government held a meeting shortly after ours at which Home Office Minister Fiona Mactaggart sought to persuade MPs that the enormous opposition to the incitement provisions had been based on a misunderstanding of the Government's intentions. MPs to whom we spoke, though, felt that what the Government said its intentions were did not correspond with the wording in the Bill, and in any case a major by-product would be substantially increased self-censorship.

The Government's motives in introducing this legislation are widely thought to be linked to panic over the collapse of the Muslim vote. The *Daily Mail*, (not often referred to positively in the Bulletin) drew attention to a long article by Government minister Mike O'Brien in *Muslim Weekly* which appeared to suggest that several legislative changes were being speedily announced as a direct result of pressure from the Muslim community.

The NSS campaign has been broadened out to include the House of Lords, as — realistically — this is where any victory would be scored, as it was in similar circumstances in 2001. Evan Harris and Brian Sedgemore made significant contributions to the debate as did other Honorary Associates. Brian inadvertently told fellow MPs he was a vice president — rather than an Honorary Associate — of the NSS. Clearly Messrs Herrick and Sanderson need to watch their step. Evan Harris took the opportunity to table an amendment to remove the blasphemy law but this only garnered 80 votes, including some from the Conservative benches, and was heavily defeated.

The House of Lords

As anticipated the challenge to the measures was defeated in the

Commons (on 7 February). At a meeting of peers on this topic, comedian Rowan Atkinson, Keith Porteous Wood and Honorary Associate Lord Desai left peers in no doubt of the potential restrictions to freedom of speech many feel will follow from this legislation. Arguments continue to rage about the capacity of the legislation itself to stifle freedom of expression, but there can be little doubt about its capacity to further increase self-censorship, given the legislation prescribes up to seven years in jail for those prosecuted. Keith's speech, which also called for the abolition of the blasphemy law, is available on <http://www.secularism.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=215>

Those without access to the electronic versions can obtain them by sending a SAE to the office marked "HofL Speech".

Honorary Associates Lady Turner of Camden and Lord Peston were also at the meeting, lending moral support, as was Dr Evan Harris from the Commons. The audience for this speech, given in one of the Lords' most imposing rooms, the Moses Room, would mostly have been to those of a religious persuasion. Unusually, the religious vote is split on this issue. As is increasingly the case, some want to stick together—in some kind of compact of the mutually incompatible—with their minority religious brethren. This seems to be happening with those in favour of the new law. Others however are more persuaded by concerns that they too could fall victim to the law if it is passed.

We suspect that some of the religious groups will have been impressed by the quality of strategic planning and support, and indeed leadership, they have witnessed from the secular campaigners, most particularly Dr Harris and Keith Porteous Wood. We also acknowledge the co-ordinating role of the Barnabas Trust, referred to above.

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High Profile For NSS

The NSS recognises the importance of getting our message out to the world at large, and we place a great emphasis on our relationship with the media. This has paid dividends in the past few months, with an extraordinary amount of exposure.

Terry Sanderson, our media officer, says: “The media is our most potent weapon in the present climate of governmental favour being shown to religion. Only by creating a fuss and ensuring that there is another point of view expressed can we raise awareness of just how deeply the ‘faith communities’ have penetrated into the corridors of government in this country. Polls show that belief is declining in Britain and that it is the most irreligious country in the world, but our national institutions and shared heritage are being handed over to religious interests who represent the most conservative elements in our society. The personal religious obsessions of the Prime Minister are being translated into policy that affects us all. It is clear that these policies and the increasing religious influence in Government do not have popular support, but there seems almost no way to stop them. Our only means of challenge is through the press and broadcasting, and we intend to increase that agitation.”

Recent successes

Indeed, the NSS’s profile has been raised significantly over the past few months as the media increasingly seek us out for informed and lively comment. The controversies surrounding the play *Behzti* and the TV programme *Jerry Springer – the Opera* provided the NSS with unprecedented public exposure, resulting in a huge surge in membership and average daily visits to the website exceeding 1,000 for the first time, in January.

As with the issue of faith schools, it is clear that threats to free

expression are sure to galvanise secularists everywhere. The present threats from religious sources to our much-cherished tradition of being able to be vigorously critical of religious belief and practice has created a lot of anger and resentment. It also brought the NSS to the attention of many who had not heard of us, but have decided the situation is now so bad that they need to join.

Our spokespeople have been extremely busy, trying not to let any opportunity pass to get our message over. We have appeared repeatedly in just about every newspaper in the country — as well as a good few abroad. We have given literally dozens of interviews to radio and TV stations — some as far away as Columbia in South America and what we had to say obviously hit the spot with many people.

As well as the “big issues” that flare up, we have also been keeping our profile going with day-to-day comment and assistance for journalists. Vice President Terry Sanderson had a full-page article in the *Guardian’s* Education Supplement putting forward an alternative structure for religious education in schools. President Denis Cobell was invited to do an alternative Christmas message on BBC London. Keith Porteous Wood has made several high profile radio and television appearances, and some of our honorary associates — especially Dr Evan Harris MP — have spoken on our behalf on the *Today* programme (Martin Rowson spoke for us about advent calendars on *Today* as well).

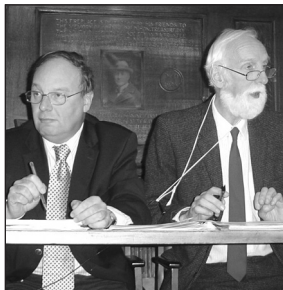
Our opposition to the incitement to religious hatred law gave us another high profile, as did the publication of the religious education guidelines. Terry Sanderson has taken part in literally dozens of radio programmes in the past three months, including Radio 4’s *Sunday Programme* and *Beyond Belief*.



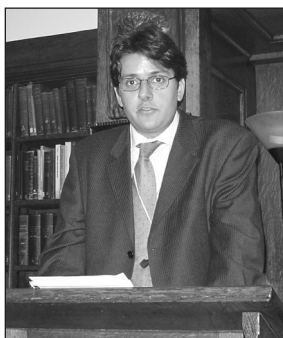
Terry Sanderson

The personal religious obsessions of the Prime Minister are being translated into policy that affects us all. It is clear that these policies and the increasing religious influence in Government do not have popular support, but there seems almost no way to stop them. Our only means of challenge is through the press and broadcasting, and we intend to increase that agitation.”

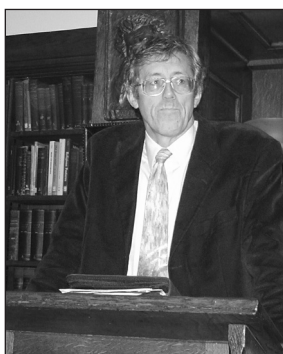
Members were clearly pleased with the work done and the publicity detailed in the Report, which was adopted unanimously.



Keith Porteous Wood and Denis Cobell



Afonso Reis e Souza



Ian Andrews

One important part of this would be for members to remember the Society in their wills, which he urged them to do. In the shorter term, he hoped that they would complete monthly standing order forms, and he thanked those that had already done so for their generosity.

AGM

Blood sports may be being banned, but fiery debate is still legal. No one will have left November's packed AGM without feeling that they had taken part in, or at least witnessed, some impassioned debate.

Annual Report

The 2003/2004 Annual Report was presented by the President, Denis Cobell, who also chaired the meeting. As well as highlighting the achievements, he emphasised that despite the population abandoning churches in droves, religious threats to secularism — and to freedom of expression — had grown alarmingly in the last year. He concluded that the need to fight for secularism was as great, if not greater, than it had ever been.

Members were clearly pleased with the work done and the publicity detailed in the Report, which was adopted unanimously. Denis thanked the volunteers and staff, especially the Executive Director, who was applauded, as was Vice President Terry Sanderson for his publicity work and for compiling the weekly newsletter *Newsline*.

Denis drew attention to a recent copy of the *Guardian* with banner headlines on its front page about the Home Office's proposals on blasphemy law. The story had been picked up by the paper's Home Affairs Editor from a *Newsline* report of a meeting that Council member Anna Behan and the Executive Director had with the Home Office.

Financial matters

The Financial Statements were presented by Afonso Reis e Souza, who has been Acting Treasurer for

most of 2004. He indicated that major changes to the Society's asset base had been handled with some success and that higher levels of activity had been achieved without any significant increase in expenditure. Nevertheless, funding remained a problem and there was a pressing need for more income. He was working with his colleagues to tackle the long term problem by building the Society's endowment funds so they would produce more income to help finance future operations. One important part of this would be for members to remember the Society in their wills, which he urged them to do. In the shorter term, he hoped that they would complete monthly standing order forms, and he thanked those that had already done so for their generosity.

The other key area of income is of course subscriptions, and the Council proposed that these be raised by 50 per cent. Opponents, who included former president Barbara Smoker, expressed the view that the increases might deter new members or renewals and that the rises had been too great and too often. The Executive Director agreed that there had been substantial increases but that seven years ago the annual rate had only been £5, which it had been since at least 1979. However, he defended the increase as being necessary to finance current expenditure levels and drew comparisons with other national organisations whose rates were higher. He doubted that it would deter a significant level of new members or renewals, especially as there was a non-earners rate. He invited members to accept that the

level of increase proposed by Council was about right, given that some detractors had argued that the increase was too high while others had felt it was not high enough.

There was an overwhelming vote for the increase, with only three opposing votes.

(Members will be reassured to learn that the level of membership applications since the increase are at a rate unprecedented in living memory.)

Elections

The President was re-elected unanimously as were vice presidents Jim Herrick and Terry Sanderson.

Afonso Reis e Sousa was unanimously elected as Treasurer. He comes with a background in business and banking, and his appointment was proposed by the outgoing Treasurer. Ian Andrews had stepped down as Treasurer, but not from Council, because of growing work commitments in the North West. He was thanked for his work as Treasurer.

The above officers are elected for one year, as provided for in the Articles of Association. They lay down a procedure for the retirement of other Council members which normally results in them serving for three years before being required to retire although, having done so, they are immediately eligible to offer themselves for re-election. Under this procedure Norman Bacrac, Surendra Lal and Malcolm Trahearn retired and were re-elected overwhelmingly, nem con and unanimously, respectively.

Having stepped down as Treasurer, Ian Andrews sought election again as an ordinary member of Council. Two new members offered themselves for election: Keith Charters who

convenes the NSS Scotland campaigners and A E L Davis. All comfortably cleared the 50% hurdle with votes against of 4, 14 and 18 respectively.

The President congratulated the successful candidates.

The real fire came at the end over a member's motion concerning the French ban on the wearing of religious clothing in state institutions. It was proposed by Nikolai Segura and seconded by Katya Whitton. The proposers held that it was a basic human right to allow people to dress as they wished, and it was discriminatory to prohibit the wearing of a scarf or head covering, if it were done for religious purposes - but not if it was not. The opposers argued that the ban was a historic one arising directly from the secular principles of the French state, which we should support, and that it only applied in certain state institutions and was aimed at everyone being treated equally, regardless of religion (or none). The opposers were led by Council member Dan Bye (speaking in a personal capacity), who said he sympathised with the concerns of the proposers but felt the wording of the motion was "wrong headed", and Martin Perry who wound up for the opposers. Between them, they seemed to move the swinging voters into the anti camp.

The motion was defeated by 11 votes to 63.

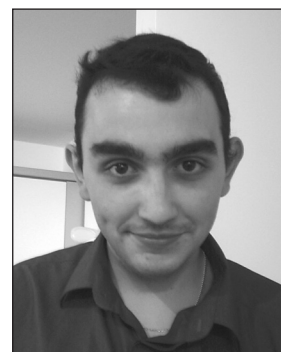
The Council would like to thank everyone who attended. Copies of the draft formal minutes, subject to approval by the 2005 AGM, are available on request to members at research@secularism.org.uk or on receipt of an SAE marked "2004 AGM minutes". All key points however have been included in the above account.



Keith Charters



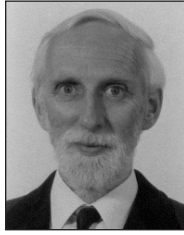
A E L Davis



Nikolai Segura



Katya Whitton



Denis Cobell

'President's Message'

THE DAY GOD LAUGHED

According to one of those funny pieces in *The Guardian* under the heading 'face to faith', Woody Allen is quoted thus: "How do you make God laugh? Tell him your future plans". The basis of this quip is presumably an omniscient god who can see the banana skin before you slip on it. On this basis he also not only knew about the tsunami, but actually planned it. For old theological hands the problem of suffering poses no problems; poor old Job was set upon by God, and then later he made his own son suffer at the crucifixion. The Archbishop of Canterbury in his characteristic Stanley Unwin style made it all as clear as mud to the average pew-person. Most of us who will have put our hands in our pockets to help the victims in Asia know that it was Human hands which helped.

The principles of the NSS affirm that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge: and we do our bit towards improving it. We are also the only national organisation that asserts supernaturalism is based on ignorance, and assail it as an historic enemy of progress. We do not believe in supernatural forces causing earthquakes beneath the oceans: there are natural explanations. If there are folk who want to look to faith for understanding these calamities: there are a multitude of groups and sects on offer. But we are vigorous in opposing the forces of supernaturalism and obscurantism. Those who join us are joining to dispose of nonsensical ideas; science offers advances which may prevent tragedies such as this, or at least warn of the onslaught. *The Guardian* writer concluded: "God smiles back at us..." What a horrid chap!

Denis Cobell
President

NSS Souvenirs - Buy Now While Stocks Last

Our Heroes of Atheism mugs have been a great success and are now reaching the end of their run. If you would like to grab a practical and decorative souvenir of your favourite non-believers from history, why not buy a set of five before they disappear? They're dishwasher proof, white with blue printing.

Each mug is printed with a specially drawn portrait of

1. Charles Darwin
2. Charles Bradlaugh
3. David Hume
4. Carl Sagan
5. Bertrand Russell

The full set of five costs only

£25.00, including postage and packing.

We also have a matching tea towel to go with your mugs (although it can be purchased separately, of course), pure cotton, printed with the six Heroes of Atheism portraits (the above plus Richard Dawkins). These cost £4.95 including postage. We also have Heroes of Atheism notelets/greeting cards, printed as above and costing £4.95 including postage for a pack of ten with matching envelopes.

Send a cheque or postal order with a list of what you'd like to NSS Merchandise, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL or order online at www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm



Education Page

The *Guardian* commissioned Keith Porteous Wood to write an open letter for publication in the paper to Ruth Kelly immediately following her appointment as Secretary of State for Education, just before Christmas. This is what he wrote:

Dear Ruth,

Congratulations on your appointment.

Now just 1 in 14 of the population attend church on an average Sunday. This sits unhappily with the wholesale expansion of publicly funded church schools and — in some cases — creationist academies. Of course many of these do well, but do much less so in the value added tables. Religious pupils often have privileged access to 'their' schools, and equal access to others, but the non-religious have no privileged access at all. Far worse is that burgeoning faith schools in multicultural cities such as Leicester are creating educational apartheid, with horrific implications for future race relations.

The State should provide objective education rather than proselytising, as the recent RE guidelines tend to do. While Christianity is a compulsory element of RE throughout school life, non-religious world views and moral philosophy are optional and are given only a perfunctory mention. This ill serves the two-thirds of your pupils who define themselves as non-religious and whose philosophical position ought to be respected. It is outrageous that pupils who are old enough to marry or die for their country cannot withdraw themselves from RE.

You have repeatedly been described as "a devout Catholic" and of course everyone's beliefs (or lack of them) should be their own business. Nevertheless, we are anxious that you, as a leading public servant, ensure that what is in pupils' best interests prevails over any religious dogma. This particularly applies to the teenage pregnancy unit and sex education. On teenage pregnancies, there is nothing wrong with advocating abstinence, but if that becomes the sole policy, then we can expect the UK's already unacceptable figures to deteriorate further. I hope you will reflect on why the teenage birth rate in the US Bible belt's abstinent Texas is more than double that of socially liberal Massachusetts.

I look forward to meeting you to discuss these points.

Keith Porteous Wood

Executive Director, National Secular Society



Ruth Kelly

NSS Wrote To Education Secretary

Nevertheless, we are anxious that you, as a leading public servant, ensure that what is in pupils' best interests prevails over any religious dogma.

The Men from the Ministry...

Keith Porteous Wood visited one of the Directors of the Department for Education and Skills and his advisors in the first of what are to become regular six-monthly meetings. The most important issue we raised was our call for subsidised school transport to be made as available for the children of non-religious parents to avoid a local religious school as religious parents enjoy when they want their children to be sent to a school of their own religion/religious denomination.

The NSS had already demonstrated on the record in Parliament that practically all Local Education

Authorities have discriminatory policies in this respect and held that it is therefore the DfES who are obligated to issue clear instructions to require them to change. The Commons Education and Skills Select Committee had agreed with us and also the powerful Joint Parliamentary Human Rights Commission went on record in a report as saying they endorsed our requests and even expressed frustration at the Government's refusal to co-operate.

The Director acknowledged all of this, but it cut no ice whatsoever. It was up to us, he said, to clarify the law by bringing a case ourselves against an LEA.



Lorraine Barrett AM

“...there seems to be an increasing emphasis placed on the rights of religious groups and their needs, and I have to ask myself “why?”

Lorraine Barrett AM

I was delighted to receive an invitation from your Council to become an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society, the first Member of the National Assembly for Wales to be so invited.

Since my election to the Welsh Assembly, the Presiding Officer has dubbed me its “unofficial humanist”; when I told him of the invitation from NSS, he said he could now call me the “official humanist”! As a youngster I attended the local Methodist chapel in the Rhondda but in my early teens I realised that it meant nothing to me and I really couldn’t believe there was a man with a long white beard up there somewhere in the clouds, as we were told as children!

I have been involved in politics and public service for over 28 years and have worked closely with churches on a community basis, and have no problem with that. In fact, I helped out at a local church Christmas lunch on the 25th and thoroughly enjoyed myself. I’m quite proud of the fact that, as the Mayor of Penarth in 1993, I was the first one not to have a religious civic service, but held a Civic Celebration with poems and music and performances from the Cardiff Gilbert & Sullivan society and a wonderful Russian Tenor. The Methodist Minister was quite happy to take on the role of MC and seemed to enjoy himself at a rather different Sunday afternoon event in his church hall!

Over the years, I have found myself “coming out” more and more, with regard to my secularism and humanism, partly because there seems to be an increasing emphasis placed on the rights of religious groups and their needs, and I have to ask myself “why?”

In the October NSS Bulletin, there was mention of Ofsted and QCA in relation to the National Framework for RE, but in Wales we have our own Schools Inspectorate called Estyn and our own Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACCAC). Whilst the Welsh Assembly Government has taken the lead on many issues such as a free part-time nursery place for three year olds, abolished testing for seven-year olds and is piloting free school breakfast in primary schools, I think we will have a long wait for Wales to be the first to abolish daily collective worship in our schools. I think children would be better off using the time for exercise rather than prayer. Why should assemblies be based on religion? Prayers and religious education should be for the family or church to deal with.

My two children, now aged 25 and 30, were kept out of school assemblies and RE lessons, but they shouldn’t have been made to feel different. School assemblies should be a time to share thoughts or celebrate achievements etc. It can also be a time to reflect on wider issues affecting people in local communities or across the world and as I write this, our televisions and newspapers are full of the horrific disaster that occurred on December 26th in South East Asia. I think everyone is just numbed at the extent of the devastation and loss of life with much more suffering to come as disease takes its toll in the aftermath. It certainly puts all our lives into perspective and reinforces my belief that there really cannot be a god.

Lorraine Barrett

National Assembly for Wales
representing
Cardiff South & Penarth

A Round Up Of Some Of Our Other Activities

- Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood and Honorary Associate Dr A.C. Grayling attended a conference entitled "Religion and the State" organised by the Franco-British Council. It examined "common and divergent issues in Britain and France". Despite being attended overwhelmingly by religious representatives – including the Government's "faith czar", John Battle, Keith and Anthony were able to hold up the secularist side very effectively.
- Three debates on the value of religion in society, one at the Oxford Union and the other at Durham University, saw Keith Porteous Wood in fine form. In Durham (where the proposition was Religion is the Problem not the Answer), he was supported by Honorary Associate Jonathan Meades and New Humanist editor, Frank Jordans. At Oxford (proposition: Religion is no Longer Needed) it was another honorary associate, Dr Evan Harris, and Frank Jordans again. Meanwhile, NSS President Denis Cobell was at Exeter University Debating Society proposing the motion: "This House would make the UK a Secular State". The secular case for the social origin of morality clearly won the day.
- NSS honorary associate Evan Harris MP (with input from Keith Porteous Wood) tabled two Early Day Motions supporting the BBC in its decision to broadcast *Jerry Springer – the Opera*. He also tabled an EDM calling for the repeal of the blasphemy law.
- NSS vice president Terry Sanderson had a full-page article in the Guardian Education supplement detailing an alternative approach to religious education in our schools. If you have a computer, you can see the article here: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/gweekly/story/0,5500,1340807,00.html> If you would like a printed copy, please send a sae to Guardian article, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL.
- NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood had a round table meeting with the Department of Resources, Infrastructure and Governance. The NSS's major question related to school transport where two Parliamentary Select Committees — Education and Skills and Human Rights (a committee of both Houses) — had backed the NSS's call for the DfES to issue instructions to local authorities to treat non-believers even-handedly with believers on the question of school transport.
- The NSS has been encouraging the BBC to repeat Jonathan Miller's excellent series "A Brief History of Disbelief" in BBC2. The highly-praised series was shown on the BBC's digital channel BBC4, but the Corporation insists that it "has no plans at present" to repeat the series on a mainstream channel. If you feel strongly about this, please write to the head of BBC2, Roly Keating, at Television Centre, London W12
- The NSS launched a campaign to raise awareness among parents that they have the right to take their children out of RE classes and daily worship in schools. This followed the publication of the Religious Education Guidelines which the NSS condemned as "a charter for indoctrination."
- In a response to a consultation by Ofcom, the media regulator, the NSS said US-style televangelists should be kept off British TV. Alarmed at the prospect of Ofcom allowing religious TV channels to appeal directly for money, the NSS has pointed to the many US experiences of fraud carried out by high profile televangelists. The NSS also called on Ofcom to restrict claims made by so-called psychics, mediums and others claiming supernatural powers. The NSS has suggested that when people claiming paranormal abilities appear on television, a warning should be shown on-screen that their claims are unproven and that trickery and deception may be involved.
- *In the run-up to the general election, all three main political parties have announced that they intend to encourage more "faith schools". The Labour Party has been accused by NSS Honorary Associate Nick Cohen of selling free speech down the river by introducing the incitement to religious hatred proposals in an effort to regain Muslim votes lost over the war in Iraq.*
- *New statistics issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) show that 65% of 12–19 year olds in this country don't have a religious affiliation. This is a rise of ten percentage points since 1995. The figures are the results of the Young People's Social Attitudes Survey 2003.*



Stewart Ware

A Call For Volunteers

The work we do bringing you this weekly *Newsline* or the Bulletin, the updating of the website, the letter writing to politicians and members of other organisations and the selling of merchandise, is all fairly visible.

But the less glamorous work of keeping our records and affairs in order is hidden from view, and is vitally important. Much of it is done by volunteers, and without their effort your Society would not be able to function. We trust you will join us in thanking them for their efforts in the year just past.

Wherever possible we use volunteers from around the country, but some of the work can only be done in our office in central London. One of the volunteers has filled a staff vacancy at the office and another volunteer has been forced by personal circumstances to reduce the number of hours he can offer. This has created a couple of volunteer vacancies for people who would be willing to spend a few hours each week or fortnight to come into our office to do some of the tasks that cannot be done away from the office. We are looking for those who are comfortable with using Microsoft Office, particularly Word and Excel. You don't need to be an expert but just be able to use the most common functions. Some of the jobs entail speaking to members or prospective members. We are also looking for volunteers to join our regular band of envelope-

stuffers who come in four or five times a year for one day when we do a bulk mailing.

Volunteers often enjoy meeting others of like mind, finding more about how the Society works, and feeling they have done their bit to help fight the best of causes. If this appeals to you, you have a weekday free each week or two and you are within easy travelling distance of our office close to Holborn tube station, please call 020 7404 3126 or email enquiries@secularism.org.uk. We look forward to hearing from you. We are happy to reimburse reasonable travelling expenses.

Tell us about yourself

If you are prepared to devote a few hours a month to help us, please contact our new Administrator, Stewart Ware, who will be delighted to hear from you, either by email at research@secularism.org.uk, or by telephone.

If you have special skills that you think may be helpful to the Society, say in education, foreign languages, research, the law, or of institutions with whom we deal: please mention them. The range of occupations of our members is astonishing, so if you have not told us what your own skills and specialties are, please let us know. Sometimes we have quite specialised needs: the latest is some specialised technical advice on telephone systems and cabling. Is there anyone out there?

For Your Diary

3 April 2005 (Sunday - Afternoon) Demonstration in **Brussels** with our European colleagues against provisional European Constitution (Article 52 of which bestows unacceptable religious privileges) Keith Porteous Wood will be one of the speakers. A (long) day trip by Eurostar direct train or by plane. More details from office or *Newsline*.

4-8 July 2005 (Monday to Friday) **Paris**. International conference, mainly International Humanist and Ethical Union "Separation of Religion and State" See <http://www.ihcu.org/modules/news/>

[article.php?storyid=111](#) or contact the office for further information.

At the Conference, Keith Porteous Wood will chair a session "Separation of Religion and State and the European Union" and Terry Sanderson will chair a workshop "Separation and the media: how to use the media and not be used by them?" Both are on Wednesday 6 July in the UNESCO building near the Eiffel Tower.

26 November 2005 (Saturday afternoon) **AGM** Conway Hall, London WC1