

School Transport

Following the publicity generated by the NSS over the case of Ian Abbott, the atheist father whose daughter Laura didn't want to go to a faith school, but who was denied subsidised transport to reach the nearest community school, we were invited to give evidence to the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee.

Prior to the meeting, the Committee members (which included one of our Honorary Associates, Paul Holmes, MP) were circulated with our written evidence setting out the case for the children of non-religious families to be eligible for equivalent school transport concessions, such as free or highly subsidised fares, that are routinely offered to, for example,



Laura Abbott

Roman Catholic children so that they can travel to a school that matches their parents' beliefs.

We pointed out to the Committee just how expensive these schemes were. There are 150 local authorities. The 10 of these spending most on school transport were doing so to the tune of £100 million per annum (yes, that's one hundred million pounds). Without regard for these fantastic sums of money, a Roman Catholic witness at the Committee said: "Children's journeys can be up to 30 miles from school. That is fine, that is alright where you have either free or subsidised transport, denominational transport."

Keith Porteous Wood responded: "The [annual] costs of these subsidies are somewhere in the order of £600-£800 a child... giving one family £1,200, £1,800, nearly £2,500 perhaps, of subsidy [depending on the number of children in the family]. I have to say I think that is unreasonable."

Unsurprisingly, some local authorities have already reduced school transport subsidies substantially or abolished them completely.

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**NSS 2004 AGM
will be on Saturday
afternoon, 27th
November in London**



Paul Holmes MP

**PLEASE SEE
VITAL APPEAL
ON BACK
COVER**

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When Keith told a BBC journalist about the suggestion that atheists might need to join the Society to secure free transport, the journalist quipped: "Does that mean that agnostics will be charged half price?"



Keith Porteous Wood

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Our fight with Lancashire CC, and some success

Ian Abbott, who is an NSS member and valued volunteer, from Lancashire, was also present at the meeting. Ian demonstrated to the Committee that this is not just a hypothetical injustice. He told the Committee that he did not want his daughter Laura – who is also an atheist – to attend the local school because it was "faith-based". Laura wanted to travel to a community school which was more distant. Ian told the Committee that he had naturally assumed that there would be a "level playing field" and that he would be able to claim subsidies for her transport in the same way that Catholics did for travel to distant Catholic schools. But he was astonished to find his application refused.

Despite a valiant fight over several years, Ian had been unable to make progress with Lancashire County Council, so the NSS brought in the lawyers.

Human Rights Act to the rescue?

Our solicitors (advised by leading human rights barristers from Matrix Chambers) have confirmed that the Human Rights Act (HRA) now requires local education authorities (LEAs) to be even-handed in the way they administer denominational transport – so that the "philosophical convictions" or beliefs of non-religious parents should be shown equal regard to the religious convictions of other parents.

Lancashire have belatedly refunded some fare costs to Ian after

receiving advice that they must "demonstrate even-handedness in taking [non religious parents'] philosophical convictions into account in the light of the Human Rights Act."

Paul Holmes had already raised the Human Rights implications of the Abbott case at earlier meetings of the Committee. This had caused the chairman of the Committee, Barry Sheerman, MP, to question why everyone (except the children of less well off families) should not be charged for transport on the same basis.

Our opponents are regrouping

We produced written evidence to show that the discrimination against non-believers in this area is practised by almost every authority. Just a very few authorities, all in London, have non-specific policies, but none are explicitly non-discriminatory.

Paul Holmes confronted the representatives from the Anglican and Catholic Churches that were also giving evidence by asking how they felt about the inequity caused by the privileges they enjoy by virtue of the current policies. They insisted that: "It is not a privileged position, it is a position of service because it derives precisely from the dual system in which we are in partnership with the state..."

While there was clear support from several members of the Committee for charging everyone equally, regardless of religion, there were also predictable calls from others for the *status quo* to remain. Helen Jones, MP, for instance, came up with the makings of a legal argument which might come back to



haunt us should this issue come to court. She challenged Keith: "The case is based on Mr Abbott's desire to have a secular education for his daughter, which I understand, but we do not have secular schools in this country, we do not have any secular schools, so how in law do you think a parent's desire for a secular education can be defined, bearing in mind we have a state church and all schools have a daily act of worship from which parents can withdraw, whatever school they are in. I am trying to tease out the legal implications." Keith retorted that if non-believers were to receive state-funded schooling, the ethos of community schools was much more suitable than that of religious schools.

Ms Jones also emphasised that the Lancashire case had never been to court and that a payment made to Ian Abbott (the amount of which our lawyers consider inadequate, and is still in dispute) could not be regarded as a settlement out of court. We understand Ms Jones has repeated her argument elsewhere, so we can expect to hear more of it.

It was also suggested by the Department at an earlier meeting of the Committee that parents simply declaring they are non-believers might not be legally sufficient to prove that this amounted to a "philosophical belief"; "When the Human Rights Act talks about religious and 'philosophical beliefs', we think there has to be something other than somebody saying, 'I'm not religious'. Normally, in order to gain admission to a denominational school someone would have to show proof of attending church and that sort of thing. Our preliminary view is that if someone says they are an

atheist you would expect to see that they are a humanist or some evidence that they adhere to a particular philosophical body, something that was generally accepted as being a philosophical belief, rather than just a general belief that they were not of any particular religious persuasion. But it is very difficult because we have not had a test case. When we have, we will know exactly where the legal boundaries are."

Keith was rubbing his hands in anticipation of the flood of new members that would join the NSS were proof of membership to be necessary to secure the same privileges that religious people have, but he told the Committee that such a requirement was unreasonable, noting that the law does not require parents wishing to withdraw their children from RE or Collective Worship to give any reason for doing so.

The bottom line

Keith's conversations with the Department at senior level reveal a clear awareness of the NSS's position on school transport. It was not limited to our direct approaches to the Department but extended to a detailed knowledge of our campaigns throughout the country, including those pointing out the unfairness of children from non-RC backgrounds being denied the transport subsidies offered to neighbouring RC children to attend the same RC school. The Department is clearly worried about the cost implications of our position and seems set to challenge it regardless of equity or our Human Rights advice.

A more detailed account of the Society's oral evidence is available from our website <http://www.secularism.org.uk/content/view/190/29/>

A copy is also available to members without computer access by sending an SAE to the office in an envelope marked "Education Select Committee".

A transcript of the whole session and some of our written evidence is available from the Select Committee's web page: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmmeduski/uc509-iii/uc50901.htm>



Dr Sheikh

'I kept reading the account of [Sir Thomas] More's trial over again and again to make sure I would not make the same mistakes.'

Dr Sheikh in Exile

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood was invited by IHEU to meet Dr. Younis Sheikh in IHEU's London office in May.

As noted in the last Bulletin, Dr. Sheikh has been released from prison. He is now starting a new life "somewhere in Europe". He had spent three years on death row in atrocious conditions of imprisonment in Pakistan after being convicted on false blasphemy charges. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (www.iheu.org), of which the NSS is a member, led a world-wide campaign involving Humanists and Human Rights activists. It necessitated delicate negotiations with governments, which made a contribution towards Dr. Sheikh's release from prison.

Since his arrival in Europe, Dr. Sheikh has been working closely with IHEU, and has represented IHEU at the UN's Human Rights Commission at Geneva. Dr. Sheikh's high-profile participation in the Geneva events has led to prominent coverage for the issue of blasphemy both in Pakistani media, as well as putting the issue firmly back in the centre stage of international human rights matters.

Dr. Sheikh had courageously argued his own case at the final trial just before his release because his lawyers were being intimidated by the Islamic terrorist mullahs.

He pointed out that the NSS was doing a valuable service by taking an uncompromising stance over the soft attitude being taken by several western governments towards Islam. "If you ignore Islam's threat to modern liberal values, you will become its victim, just as I have been."

Of the meeting Keith wrote: "Dr Sheikh seemed to have recovered remarkably from his ordeal. Yet, behind that unassuming smile lies a man whose immense courage and resilience is an example to us all. In the same tone that others might employ to describe some minor irritation, he recalled a number of horrific incidents in prison. A convict with multiple life sentences – and therefore with nothing to lose – threatened to kill him. Dr Sheikh's food was poisoned in prison, causing near-fatal asphyxia and his water was drugged.

He was not even allowed free access to law books, so he had to look to other sources. Unforgettably, Dr Sheikh observed that the only precedent he could find of someone being permitted to defend themselves in court over a charge of blasphemy carrying a death sentence was that of Sir Thomas More. Dr Sheikh told me: 'I kept reading the account of More's trial over again and again to make sure I would not make the same mistakes.'"

New Honorary Associate - Christopher Hitchens



Christopher Hitchens

The NSS is pleased to announce that Christopher Hitchens, the radical columnist and pundit, has become one of its honorary associates. Christopher Hitchens is a prolific journalist, and often writes about the failings of religion. One of his most controversial attacks was on Mother Theresa in his book "The Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice". You can read some of the hundreds of columns he has written at this website <http://users.rcn.com/peterk.enteract/>

Christopher Hitchens sticks uncompromisingly to his principles of

rationalism and fair play in his writing, which is something even his most ardent critics find difficult to argue with. Writing in the "Intellectual Conservative" magazine, right-winger George Shadrourai said of Christopher: "Hitchens is a paid provocateur who has trouble, from time to time, governing his tongue and his pen. He is nevertheless a man of great rhetorical skill and intellectual insight."

We are proud to welcome Christopher Hitchens to our distinguished hall of honorary associates and urge him to keep up the good work.

EU Constitution

The heads of member governments have agreed on the new draft EU constitution, but it is still subject to ratification by all 25 states.

Members will remember that, jointly with our French counterparts, Libre Pensée, the NSS organised a Europe-wide meeting in Paris to co-ordinate action against the embodiment of religious privilege into the draft EU Constitution.

While there are no references to God or Christianity in the preamble, the even more threatening Article 51 remains intact. It requires the EU to respect the status of religious organisations and to consult them. Our concern is that these “consultations” will assist religious organisations to obstruct progressive legislation and even encourage the introduction of religiously based regulations. We fear that the “respecting of status” could be used to block moves, for example, to:

- Remove privileges such as the levying of Church taxes, as in Germany
- Remove swingeing Vatican privileges granted under concordats entered into without the consent, or sometimes even knowledge of, the relevant democratic legislature
- Disestablish state churches

Although some countries oppose Article 51, it remains in the draft constitution. The UK government refused to veto Article 51 on the basis that it believes ‘dialogue is healthy’. It also maintains that the Article is even-

handed between religious and non-religious organisations. (The Article includes a reciprocal obligation in respect of “non-confessional organisations”, but in comparison, their wealth and privileges and potential leverage from consultations are minimal, so the equivalence is really only a semantic one.)

We first drew attention last summer to concerns that the debate about God or Christianity in the preamble was a smokescreen to divert attention from debate over the much more important Article 51.

A feature in the (Roman Catholic) *Tablet* magazine in January confirmed our fear in its opening sentence: “Catholic Church leaders in Europe are relieved that the draft European constitution provides for regular dialogue between EU institutions and religious bodies, although they are continuing to press for a specific reference to Christianity in the preamble.”

Nevertheless, since the Paris meeting, the Society has signed another high-level petition seeking to have Article 51 expunged.

We now need to be planning the next stage of resistance. When in Paris recently, Council member Liz Thompson represented the Society at a meeting there with Libre Pensée, to consider options. What is likely to emerge is a public (outdoor) demonstration near the European Union HQ in Brussels with our equivalent organisations from around Europe.

No date has yet been fixed for the demonstration, but could take place before the next Bulletin is issued. The event will be publicised in Newsline, but if you do not receive this, please register your interest with the office either by telephone, fax or post (marked “Brussels event”) and you will be notified individually.

Heartfelt Thanks

There have been a number of appeals in *Newsline* for additional funds to help us continue our work. We would like to put on record our thanks to those who have donated - some with exceptional generosity. — Two of the donations were four figure amounts and three were 3 figure

amounts, but all donors selflessly asked to remain anonymous. If only such generosity were sufficient to eliminate our deficit - so all further contributions would be very welcome. Several donors specifically mentioned our campaigning efforts and were also complimentary about *Newsline*.

NSS Challenges the Government's Determination to Increase Religious Influence in Policy Making

Home office Report: "Most faiths have views on reparation and redemption [our emphasis]; faith perspectives may therefore provide insights on how to create a community-based sentencing regime that is rehabilitative as well as challenging."

A question posed later was "Can there be a role for religious groups in advising the Criminal Justice System on sentencing?"

Our widely-publicised opposition to the Government's 'Religious Working Party' resulted in the NSS Executive Director being invited to the Home Office last year to meet the minister in charge, Fiona Mactaggart.

The meeting resulted in some useful contacts and Ms Mactaggart's Department has since assisted us in ensuring that our comments reach the appropriate quarter.

Following our discussions, the NSS was invited to review just one of the chapters of the Working Party's final report before it was published, and propose any changes that we thought might be necessary. We proposed that the document make plain that government departments should consult non-religious groups as well as religious groups on issues that were relevant to them. These suggestions were substantially included in the one chapter on which we were invited to comment.

Feast for religion, famine for secularists

However, we were extremely disappointed when the full report – entitled *Working Together* – was published in March. Beside the repeated directions in the remaining chapters to government departments to consult religious groups, the insertions we had negotiated became passing mentions. They amounted to a couple of pages of tokenistic references in the 120 page report.

The general tone of the report can be judged from this extract from the Summary of Recommendations:

- Recognise that capacity is a key issue and consider allocating

resources [*i.e. provide money*] to allow faith community bodies, which may lack infrastructure or resources, to participate fully in consultations.

- Allow enough time for faith communities to take the initiative and make positive suggestions in response to policy proposals.
- Clarify the status of the consultation and consider meeting faith bodies to explain what is expected of them.
- Involve the experts and tap into their knowledge and expertise. Discuss plans for engaging with faith communities with the Home Office Faith Communities Unit.
- Pursue "faith literacy" and participate in internal faith awareness training.
- Include a wide range of faiths and beliefs and be aware of the size of different faiths.

Also recommended are "regional structures to recognise that faith-based bodies are a distinctive part of civil society and of the Voluntary and Community Sector, and can make a significant contribution to social cohesion, and to be willing to open dialogue with them."

A recommendation at national level was: "A broader engagement by Government with faith communities, and where appropriate with groups representing non-religious belief systems, to be undertaken as needed."

In the four page summary of recommendations, only one related solely to the non-religious, and with a rather less fervent tone: "When consulting faith communities,

departments to consider giving an opportunity to comment to organisations representing those with non-religious beliefs, such as humanists and secularists."

Oh and, to be fair, we think part of another recommendation may have been a back handed compliment to us:

- ...be ready in case there is bad publicity.

In his foreword to the report, Home Secretary David Blunkett opined that: "There has never been a more pressing need for productive and respectful engagement between public authorities and faith communities."

Is it to be an eye for an eye, and a hand?

Even worse was the subject matter over which consultation was contemplated.

It was decided by Home Office Ministers that the interaction between faith communities and the Criminal Justice System would be a suitable subject for a pilot scheme. It would look at two elements, the latter of which is reproduced:

- . . .what do faiths have to contribute to the sentencing regimes contained in the new Criminal Justice Act? These provide for greater opportunities to undertake reparative activities and for victims to confront offenders, within the requirements of a community sentence and during the licence period of a custodial sentence. Most faiths have views on reparation and *redemption* [our emphasis]; faith perspectives may therefore provide insights on how to create a community-based sentencing regime that is rehabilitative as well as challenging.

A question posed later was " Can there be a role for religious groups in advising the Criminal Justice System on sentencing?"

Our emphasis on the need for a secular approach has tended to focus on the conduct of the governmental and democratic process. We have now widened this to include specifically something even more fundamental: the administration of justice.

Council member Anna Behan challenges Judicial Studies Board

On that same tack, Council member Anna Behan, a non-practising solicitor, has identified serious shortcomings in a recent major official publication for the use of judges aimed at improving equality. Its Religion and Belief chapter deals almost exclusively with religious diversity and religious discrimination; and gives the impression that the rights of the non-religious do not count , nor do they matter in court.

Anna formulated the Society's official complaint, which included the passage "we find it hard to believe that a genuine attempt to educate and assist the implementation of equal treatment could omit a significant strand of public opinion (according to the 2001 census 15.5% have no religious belief . . .). We are left with the impression that the Bench Book is not in fact about equality but about particular minorities.

"We are immensely concerned that the interests of our members and the large number of others of similar outlook have been so comprehensively overlooked in a document which may be relied upon as an authoritative source for equality issues."

Conference

The burgeoning influence of religion in our public life – from the huge increase in the number of faith schools to the consulting of religious bodies on policy making – needs to be resisted. We need more activists around the country, and with this in mind, the NSS is organising an activist conference to help and encourage activists to mount effective campaigns in their own areas on local and regional issues. The conference will be in London in June 2005, and we hope that it will be practically based, with help and suggestions on how to engage and use local media and how to spot the potential for campaigns. Those who have already been active will be invited to share their experiences and skills.





Anna Behan

Commission for Equality and Human Rights

The Government held its launch for the White Paper on the establishment of a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) at the DTI on 12th May. The CEHR will replace existing equality commissions and will be responsible for challenging discrimination across society and for promoting human rights. It is envisaged that dual responsibility for equality and human rights will mean the CEHR can deliver greater support and advice to individuals, businesses and communities as well as crackdown on discrimination, while at the same time promoting common human rights values. Women's groups welcomed in particular the inclusion of a public sector duty to promote equality between men and women.

Council member Anna Behan was present as Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt and Constitutional Affairs Secretary Lord Falconer led the launch. Patricia Hewitt outlined three important reasons for the creation of a single Commission. The first was the need to see people as a whole in order to appreciate multiple identities, the second to create a human rights culture and move away from a perception that these are issues only for minorities, and finally the third was to deal with conflicting rights and how these may best be respected both for the whole of society and for the individual. She also stated that while there were no imminent plans for a Single Equality Act to streamline existing legislation, this policy was "under review".

Anna Behan comments:

"Whilst we welcome the broad aim of the CEHR, it is less clear that secularists have anything to celebrate from the White Paper. Patricia Hewitt raised the important issue of conflicting rights, and said that she would regard it as a failure of the CEHR if a pecking order of rights emerged. However, the NSS has given previous warnings of this danger, and is not alone in its fears that this is precisely what will happen. The new Commission

is to oversee existing legislation such as the **Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003**, which we regard as already allowing too many exemptions and privileges for religious organisations. The pecking order already exists! It is unfortunate from our point of view that the ECHR will only challenge *illegal* discrimination when so much that the NSS campaigns against is legal but unjustified discrimination.

"We give a cautious welcome to the fact that it is envisaged that the Board of the ECHR will not be made up of separate champions for each of the 'strands' of equality. This appears to give a greater chance for a secularist voice to be heard in its own right and not to be drowned out by the likelihood that our strand might be 'represented' by a religious spokesperson.

"One area of great challenge, however, is the contrast between the public sector, which has a higher duty imposed on it to promote equality and human rights, and the private sector. We are particularly interested in what will happen when private organisations are engaged to carry out public service, as for instance, in the case of faith based welfare. Although the **Human Rights Act 1998** extends its remit to cover bodies whose functions are of a public nature regardless of whether they are public or private, this does not answer all the issues, and Patricia Hewitt admitted that this is an area to be examined in the coming consultations. The NSS is concerned that the higher standards applicable to the public sector are not compromised by exemptions granted to religious bodies which might be permitted to take on these functions."

*The White Paper can be read at www.dti.gov.uk/access/equalitywhitepaper.pdf, (and obtainable by telephone from 0870 1502 500). The deadline for responses to the consultation is **6 August 2004** and members are encouraged to respond.*



NSS Strategy

With a number of new members on the Council of Management, it was decided to have a "brainstorming" meeting earlier this year to consider strategy and new initiatives. Perhaps the most interesting new direction is the proposal for an NSS Scottish Office, which is reported below.

On a less happy note, the Society's longer-term finances were considered and this emerged as a key, and worrying, issue. The Society needs a substantially greater income and, if our long-term future is to be assured, a very substantial endowment, the income from which would fund the inevitable deficit from future operations. Several members of the Council agreed to form a working party to examine ways of tackling these problems. Suggestions from members would be very welcome.

A long-standing question is whether the Society should seek charitable status; this had been suggested as one way of increasing the NSS's income. It was hoped that this would assist income

generation both through the tax privileges enjoyed by charities and that some donors might feel better disposed to assist if the Society were a charity. However a number of complications and difficulties were pointed out and Council member Anna Behan and the Executive Director were asked to look more closely at the legal and practical issues and report back with recommendations. Their task was greatly assisted by the input of volunteer, and barrister, Joel Clompus, who did most of the leg-work.

The conclusions they reached, after careful study of charity law was that:

1. It was very doubtful that the NSS, as it currently operates, would qualify for charity status
2. Even if it were to qualify, it would substantially inhibit vigorous campaigning

Once the Society became a charity its funds could only ever be used for charitable purposes – the process is irreversible.

It is not generally realised that several large campaigning organisations such as Amnesty International are not charities either, for similar reasons. A major stumbling block to Amnesty obtaining charity status is because it campaigns to change the law – albeit in Iran for example, rather than the UK.

NSS Scottish Office Pilot Project

We've received excellent media coverage in Scotland over recent months, enabling the Society to get its message across more effectively than ever before.

Council wants to build on this success, but recognises that Scotland's separate legal and education systems mean there are often different angles on issues in Scotland compared with other parts of the UK, particularly in light of devolution. It has therefore considered a proposal for a pilot NSS Scottish Office that would serve as a focus for activism north of the border. Council believes that this is a workable proposal that, if successful, will further the interests of the NSS nationally as well as in Scotland.

The pilot NSS Scottish Office would not be a physical office (which is not practical on cost grounds), rather a focus for activists/volunteers in Scotland. It would link into NSS headquarters in London, which would continue to administer all membership details and

financial matters. It would also continue to be the prime mover on issues that were not exclusively Scottish.

To ensure that the Scottish Office group is given an opportunity to influence NSS policy, is kept up-to-date with NSS policy and to enable Council to participate in directing its activities, it is intended that a member of the Scottish Office group will be co-opted onto Council. Keith Charters, based in Glasgow, has volunteered to take on this role.

We are breaking new ground with this pilot project and we hope it will work, but if it becomes necessary to revert to the status quo we will continue to address issues concerning Scotland with Scottish members very much in mind, just as we have done in the past.

Council believes this proposal is advantageous to our secular cause, but is keen to hear your views – by email (to research@secularism.org.uk), or by post.

The aims of the NSS Scottish Office would be to provide:

- greater focus on the Scottish angle on secular issues; and
- contacts in Scotland for the Scottish media;
- a focal point for activists in Scotland.

A caucus will be held for activists and potential volunteers in Glasgow on Saturday 10 July 2004 in the afternoon with Keith Charters and Keith Porteous Wood. Members intending to attend should email enquires@secularism.org.uk or telephone 020 7404 3126 to register their interest and to obtain details of the venue.



Denis Cobell

'President's Message'

Following the recent death of Peter Ustinov, some earlier conversations with him on the radio were repeated.

In one he pointedly said he thought humans were divided by their convictions and united by their doubts. A clear exposition of the secular-humanist position. He also recalled how, as a boy, he stood before a picture in a church hall featuring a boy-scout holding one of Christ's hands; the other hand was directed towards a map of the world on the wall, with those "pink countries" outlining the British Empire - so widely distributed it earned the title: "the empire on which the sun never set"! It is from many countries of that former empire that students now come to our universities and colleges, bringing their various religions with them.

The division these religious convictions create was demonstrated when I spoke recently at the LSE in London. The subject was *Islam or Secularism - which way forward?* It was clear that when faith is held with such conviction, as it is by some of these students, there is division; there is absolutely no scope for doubt. This enforces the need for a secular state; after all, there can never be agreement between those who hold differing beliefs and lack toleration, wishing to impose their view on all - infidels of whatever complexion. We can only live peaceably together if our governments are beholden to no specific faith; secularism is not utopian, but surely preferable to irrationality and the hate it generates.

Denis Cobell

President

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?

Do you have contributing experience or 'inside' knowledge of radio and television?

If you have skills in such areas please contact the Executive Director at kpw@secularism.org.uk or phone 020 7404 3126.

Volunteers

In the London Office

We are delighted to announce that Stewart Ware responded to a volunteer appeal in *Newsline* to help with the administration of the NSS in the London office, adding to Julian Blake's excellent work in maintaining membership records. John Claydon organises the mailings and has been another much valued hand to the pump dealing with the time-consuming task of annual membership renewals. Stewart is also putting his IT expertise to good use by suggesting improvements to our office systems that have grown in a rather ad hoc way over the years. Peter Hearty continues to distribute *Newsline* and helps administer our credit card receipts as well as updating our ledger. Fiona Weir looks after merchandise and helps with our bulk mailings alongside John and Lorna Archer.

NSS wants to put on record its gratitude to these volunteers who take on so much of the administration of the Society thereby freeing the time of the Executive Director and Terry Sanderson

for campaigning work.

Away from the office

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, Keith Charters, Muriel Fraser, Alan Lord, Paul Stevenson, Colin Swinburn, Barry Thorpe. In addition John Dillon, Cameron Low, Carl Pinel, Simon Wakeling and others 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 all help hugely.

As recorded elsewhere, Joel Clompus has made an invaluable contribution using his legal skills. Will Wyatt, a former senior executive at the BBC, provided invaluable help with the preparation of our submission on the BBC Charter renewal.

Some Other NSS Campaigns in Brief

- The NSS was at the forefront of criticism of new guidelines issued for the teaching of Religious Education in schools. Once again the Executive Director and vice president gave TV and radio interviews, with Terry Sanderson appearing on BBC television news throughout the day when the proposals were announced.
 - We were in great demand from the media during the debate on the banning of religious symbols in French schools. The Executive Director and vice President Terry Sanderson, our media officer, appeared on many radio and TV programmes commenting on this difficult issue as did Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP on several occasions.
 - The recommendations from a Muslim think tank that there should be more state-funded Muslim schools gave the NSS more opportunity for broadcast and print exposure. Keith had a particularly good run on Talksport radio, where – after he had given a ten minute interview – listeners called in a supported his position overwhelmingly. The issue prompted an enormous reaction against faith schools generally, with our honorary associates Richard Dawkins, A.C. Grayling, Joan Smith and Polly Toynbee leading the charge with excellent supportive articles. We are most grateful to them all.
 - Our school transport campaign reported at the beginning of this Bulletin brought major articles in the *Observer* and the *Guardian*, which the NSS was instrumental in setting up. At our suggestion the topic was the subject of a lengthy piece on BBC Radio 4's *Learning Curve*. Honorary Associate Paul Holmes MP spoke and even the Roman Catholic opponent ended up agreeing that the discrimination was unfair and should be stopped. There was much other TV, radio and newspaper publicity too including in the *Times Educational Supplement* and London *Evening Standard*, which all combined to pressurise Lancashire out of its intransigence.
 - Our opposition to the religious exemptions to the new Employment Discrimination Regulations are continuing. We are lodging a detailed official complaint, drawn up by Council member Anna Behan, with the European Commission requesting that they bring the British government to task for granting exemptions far in excess of those permitted in the original directive.
 - The launch of the “Working Together” document (also reported elsewhere) brought interest from various media sources, and Terry Sanderson spoke in a one-hour programme on the influence of religion in politics (with Joel Edwards the Evangelical Alliance) on Radio Five live. As with so many of these phone-in programmes, our non-religious viewpoint was overwhelmingly supported by listeners.
 - We submitted guidelines to the Ministry of Defence for the treatment of the non-religious in the armed forces, which was used as the basis of the relevant section a manual they are compiling for wide circulation.
 - When the BBC ran an opinion poll showing Britain to be the most irreligious country of the ten surveyed, we were invited on to several programmes to comment.
 - We responded to a consultation on the BBC's charter review, recommending that an independent complaints procedure should be established by the BBC, so that cases such as our complaint over our exclusion from *Thought for the Day* could be independently assessed. This brought some publicity in trade papers.
 - We received a large amount of publicity in the Scottish media when we attacked the Roman Catholic Archbishop Mario Conti after he tried to bully the BBC into cancelling a cartoon that satirised the Vatican.
 - We complained to the Scottish First Minister about the establishment of a new department at Aberdeen University to study the “connection between spirituality and health”. We warned that the new department's utterances could be mistaken for peer-reviewed scientific studies rather than what they would be, opinions of a self-selected group of believers. This was pseudo-science and public money should not be spent on it. This also resulted in a number of media opportunities, including an extended interview for Terry Sanderson on Radio 4.
- When the Chief Inspector of Schools recommended that collective worship in schools be relegated from a daily event to a weekly - or even monthly - one, our opinion was sought by several newspapers and radio stations. Naturally we argued that the requirement for collective worship should be scrapped completely. When this issue arose in Wales, too, the NSS was interviewed by Radio Wales and quoted in Welsh newspapers. Our opposition to the similar requirements in Scottish schools resulted in radio interviews and was the subject of a highly supportive article in the Herald followed by an editorial in the Sunday Herald, which concluded: *“Overall, it appears the National Secular Society (NSS) was not far off when it warned last week that the Executive was ‘running scared’.* ‘This report is simply facing facts,’ said Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director. ‘Religion is not a major part of the lives of children in Scotland and they shouldn't be forced to observe it.’”
- In all three countries the state-enforced indoctrination continues despite clear signals from the population that it is not comfortable with this.*

Dates for your Diary

**Thursday 23rd
September 2004**

The 75th Anniversary of the opening of Conway Hall. Conway Hall is the headquarters of the South Place Ethical Society and is the venue for NSS annual general meetings. It has played an integral part in the modern secularist movement. There will be a celebration in the afternoon and evening with leading freethinkers and humanists speaking, and refreshments available. Admission is by invitation only. You can obtain an invitation by telephoning 0207 242 8034 or by writing to SPES Admin. Secretary, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, email admin@ethicalsoc.org.uk (SPES members will receive an invitation automatically).

**Saturday 27th
November 2004**

The National Secular Society AGM will be held, as usual, in the Library at Conway Hall. More details in the next bulletin.

Appeal for Vital Equipment

This is the age of communication, with images coming at us from all directions demanding our attention. The NSS has to compete in this environment on a very limited budget.

One area that we need to improve is that of visual imagery. Our publications and communications would be vastly improved by the inclusion of more good-quality photographic images to illustrate the stories. With this in mind, the NSS would like to buy a good quality digital camera that would permit us to produce our own images, and to keep a record of the events that are important to our history and archives.

We need to maximise staffs effectiveness to be able to work – there is so much to do and so little time to do it - even when they're on the move. So, we want to buy a laptop (i.e. portable) computer. Those wasted hours on trains or time away from the office could then be put to make better use for the Society.

With these needs in mind, we are launching a members' appeal to help us purchase these items, which could cost several thousand pounds including software and technical

support. If you would like to contribute to making the NSS more visible in the throng of interests vying for media attention, then send a cheque or postal order to NSS Appeal, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. You could also make a credit card donation on our secure server at www.secularism.org.uk/join.htm

We assume you will agree that in the event of contributions exceeding the costs incurred, any surplus can go to the benefit of general funds.

You Made a Difference

Members will be pleased to know that one of our previous appeals, for our own broadcasting equipment, has proved its worth many times over. The equipment has resulted in literally dozens of radio interviews that might otherwise not have been possible. Its presence has also saved NSS spokespeople hundreds of hours that would otherwise have been spent travelling to remote studios. We would like to express once more our gratitude to those who contributed.

We hope that our new appeal will be equally successful. We look forward to hearing from you.

Gifts, Souvenirs and a Stimulating Film Selection for You to Buy

The NSS is pleased to offer members a selection of gifts and merchandise, including a range of engrossing films on DVD. All are **£11.95** including post and packing.

DVD1 **The Crime of Father Amaro**

DVD2 **The Magdalene Sisters**

DVD3 **Monty Python's Life of Brian**

Code DVD4 **Inherit the Wind** £11.95

Please support the Society by

sending your DVD orders to NSS Merchandise Offers, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL making cheques and postal orders out to NSS and stating clearly which items you would like.

Also Mugs, Notelets and Teatowels – please contact the office for details. You can order these attractive items by post or by using our secure online credit card server www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm