

Religious Hatred Bill

As soon as the election was over, the Government carried out its manifesto commitment to reintroduce a bill to outlaw incitement to religious hatred. This was almost exactly the same measure that had been rejected three times before by Parliament – namely, an extension of the incitement to racial hatred law to cover religion.

The publication of the Religious and Racial Hatred Bill provoked a huge backlash - as there had been for all the other attempts to get these measures through. The Bill survived its second reading in the House of Commons, but not without ministers being subjected to the most severe mauling from the overwhelming forces of opposition ranged against them.

Government put on back foot at 2nd reading – partly by the NSS

Led by the NSS, a coalition of human rights groups, religious organisations, politicians, writers and artists and other concerned parties began to put pressure on the Home Office to either drop the Bill entirely or amend it so that it would not pose such a dire threat to freedom of expression.

The Society has played a very active part in the events leading up to this. It has been in the forefront of the opposition to the Bill, being the organisation most identified with opposition to it both in the press and in Westminster. Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood had a

comprehensive round table meeting with Paul Goggins, the Home Office minister steering through the Bill, and had spelled out the NSS's many objections, and the dangers that the Bill posed to traditional rights of vigorous debate about religion. He also spoke in detail to the shadow Attorney General and as many MPs as possible. NSS briefings were requested for both Conservative and LibDem front bench spokespersons and Labour back bench rebels.

The day before the Commons debate, NSS honorary associate Dr Evan Harris MP, organised a high-profile meeting at the House of Commons, at which the comedian Rowan Atkinson eloquently made his objections clear once more in front of a barrage of television and press cameras. He was backed up by Booker award-winning novelist Ian McEwan and Nicholas Hytner of the National Theatre, newly appointed Honorary Associate Bob Marshall-Andrews, and Liberty, all of whom feared the censorship that might flow from this Bill.

Keith Porteous Wood was on hand at the House of Commons on the eve of the 2nd reading to brief MPs and during the debate itself to assist them. Our efforts were acknowledged several times during the debate (even by arch-Conservative and upstanding Christian Edward Leigh, who praised the Society's "sincerity" and used the points we had provided him with in his speech).

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NSS discusses Bill with Home Office Minister Paul Goggins MP (above)

AGM
on Saturday
26th November
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BBC Charter Review

We made a major submission to the Green Paper on the BBC's Charter Review, complaining that the plethora of religious broadcasting runs counter to the BBC's obligation to reflect UK society and a range of differing opinions. This objection applies both to the massive amount of specifically religious programming and the stated policy of interspersing more and more religion into programmes on other topics. We also objected to the near invisibility of specifically non-religious approaches to philosophy or ethics both in specialised programmes and in commentaries on news items.

Complaints procedures

Our heaviest criticism was

reserved for the lack of impartiality in the complaints procedures, even when the Governors are purportedly involved. We say "purportedly" because of having been misled by a senior official that a major complaint about the exclusion of non-believers from *Thought for the Day* had been seen by the Governors when it had not. We recommended a demonstrably more independent procedure for serious complaints. We would like to thank member Will Wyatt, a former Chief Executive at the BBC, for his helpful comments and assistance on this Submission. The submission, prepared by Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, is on the website <http://www.secularism.org.uk/39253.html> *

*A copy will be sent to any member without internet access on receipt of an A4 or A5 SAE marked "BBC"

BBC Increases Religious Resources and Insults Atheists

British Brainwashing Corporation?

There has been an on-going push over several years now by various religious bodies to increase the amount of religious programming broadcast by the BBC. The pressure seems to have paid off, with the Corporation organising a "seminar" in May, chaired by Mark Thompson, the BBC's Director-General (and a prominent Catholic).

The Church of England has been lobbying the BBC continuously about its supposed "lack of commitment to religious broadcasting" with questions being raised at one point in the Church's governing body, the General Synod. It seems that no amount of religious broadcasting will ever be enough for these people.

However, the ceaseless carping has created a sense within the BBC that *something must be done*. But as the Corporation's head of religion,

Alan Bookbinder asked: "Where has this sense of crisis come from?" As far as he's concerned, there is no crisis in religious broadcasting, which implies that the so-called crisis is a self-serving invention.

Radio 4 – the religious channel

Those of us who have no interest in theological debate can become very frustrated when we turn on Radio 4 only to find programmes such as *Start the Week*, *Woman's Hour*, *You and Yours* and *Pick of the Week* crammed with material about religion. The *Today* programme, too, regularly sends our members round the twist with its many bishops, rabbis and imams spouting at frequent intervals throughout the programme (not just on *Thought for the Day*). We've even had complaints about the amount of time that the residents of Ambridge (*The Archers*) spend at church – unlike the rest of the country, who much prefer sport, shopping, DIY, or the pub.

NSS members have had occasion to complain recently about several programmes on Radio 4 that were gratuitously insulting about, or misrepresented, the non-religious perspective, and then offered no forum for reply. Mark Tully's *Something Understood* got a lot of people hopping with its contentious dismissal of secularism, with no right of reply. Andrew Marr on *Start the Week* led a discussion of whether there can be morals without religion - with only religious representatives in the debate. The extent of the problem was rather underlined by us even having to complain about Radio Four's *Westminster Hour*. Honorary Associate Evan Harris was equally incensed and joined us in complaining about a piece on this program which misrepresented and belittled secularism in general, and, naming the NSS, purported to sit in judgement on the Society, but gave us no chance to speak for ourselves or comment on their interpretation. Predictably, our complaint was dismissed out of hand. It was seemingly an opinion piece (written by someone heavily involved in a church organisation) but somehow this was not made clear, nor were we given any chance to be involved in a balancing programme. We would have relished the opportunity to say what we thought about some of the religious organisations that are very active in the political arena.

The BBC described its May seminar, which it entitled *Taking Belief Seriously*, as an opportunity to "explore how the BBC could reflect the increasing impact of religion and belief on the modern world, with compelling and popular programmes, to an audience which has in recent years turned away from religious output."

The Chairman, Michael Grade, and Board of Governors were joined at the seminar by the Director-General, Mark Thompson (a prominent Catholic) senior executive and editorial staff, the Central Religious Advisory Council (CRAC) and a panel of invited experts.

As soon as it became aware that the seminar was to be held, the National Secular Society contacted the BBC to request to be included. The request was – predictably – turned down. An executive called Mark Wakefield assured us: "The purpose of tomorrow's seminar is to consider how BBC programming can effectively reflect the impact that belief has - for good or ill - on the world. As such, it is not a seminar about religious broadcasting, but how broadcasting reflects belief. Accordingly, we have invited external speakers who will contribute from a non-religious perspective." There is an account of the seminar here http://www.bbcgovernors.co.uk/docs/reviews/taking_belief_seriously.html

Our Protest

Vice President Terry Sanderson compiled a detailed counter-argument and sent it to Chairman Michael Grade, which called for the following:

Consultation of the non-religious and less deference to religious demands, as noted above. This should be part of a review to reduce the power and lobbying powers of the CRAC, on which (renamed body) non-believers should be proportionately represented.

A substantial reduction in the thousands of hours that are devoted to religion – particularly on radio - and of religious propaganda surreptitiously inserted into other programmes. We particularly object to the disproportionately high amounts of licence-payers' money spent in this area relative to the audience/viewing figures.

The excessive hours devoted to religion to be balanced by many more programmes that represent the views (especially in matters of philosophy and ethics) of the huge proportion of the population that reject the claims of religion, or are indifferent to organised religion.

A copy is posted on the website <http://www.secularism.org.uk/41655.html> *

But, sometimes, the NSS supports the BBC

Paradoxically, the NSS was practically the only organisation supporting the BBC's decision to broadcast Jerry Springer – The Opera, and our support was reported widely throughout the world. The BBC board of governors rejected the thousands of orchestrated complaints it had received, arguing that free expression was more important. The Christian Institute later failed in the High Court in its attempt to submit the BBC to a judicial review over its screening of the opera. The BBC's right to show the programme was also upheld by the media regulator Ofcom, which rejected the many hundreds of complaints it had received about the programme from Christian activists.

**A copy will be sent to any member without internet access on receipt of an A4 or A5 SAE marked "BBC"*

NSS Protests About the EU Constitution



Keith addressing the protestors

The NSS had a modest contingent at a demonstration in Brussels in April protesting at the prospect of religion being privileged by Article 52 of the European Constitution – which gave special rights of consultation to religious organisations that would have resulted in them having disproportionate and privileged input into policy-making.

The demonstration was attended by representatives of secular groups from around Europe, and the Executive Director of the NSS, Keith Porteous Wood, gave a speech at the end of the march.

Since this demonstration, France and Holland have voted in referenda to reject the constitution, effectively killing it off.



Member Renata Anderson marches for the NSS.



A VERY SPECIAL NSS EVENT

The Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year

NSS member Dr Michael Irwin is generously sponsoring the Irwin Prize for "Secularist of the Year", to be hosted by the NSS in London in October.

The £5,000 annual prize will be awarded to the person adjudged to have made the most significant contribution to the promotion of secularism in the preceding year. It will be presented at a glittering lunch at the Montcalm Hotel in London (250 yards north of Marble Arch) on Saturday 8 October – 1pm for 1.30pm.

The event will also feature cutting edge cabaret from stand-up comedian Stewart Lee, who is also co-author of the controversial "Jerry Springer – the Opera" – so expect fireworks.

Places are strictly limited and advance booking is essential. Of course, NSS members get first

priority. The lunch will be in the Montcalm's gourmet restaurant, The Crescent, which is recommended by the Good Food Guide. Three courses (vegetarian option available), including wine and coffee, plus all the entertainment is priced at a very reasonable £35.00.

We think it is going to be very special. To order your ticket (first-come, first-served – it's that tight) please send your cheque for £35.00 per person made out to the NSS to: NSS Irwin Prize, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

And if you would like to make a nomination for someone who you think deserves this prize, please email tas@secularism.org.uk or write to NSS, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ by 23 July. NSS Honorary Associates, Council members or employees are ineligible, however.



Dr Michael Irwin, sponsor of the award



Stewart Lee

Active Secularism Day

The NSS is organising a special day to encourage local activists in the secularist movement – whether already established or wanting to make a start.

The day will be one of practical skill-sharing and will also provide an opportunity for people from around the country to meet and discuss ways to make our campaigns more effective.

There will be sessions exploring how to use the media, how to use the internet effectively, how to organise local meetings and how to run a local

campaign.

The event is being organised by Council members Jennifer Jaynes and Malcolm Trahearn, and is already proving popular. Please book early to avoid disappointment.

Active Secularism will take place on Saturday 10 September 2005, between 11am-4pm. For more information, email tas@secularism.org.uk or write to the office at NSS Active Secularism Day, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.



Jennifer Jaynes



Malcolm Trahearn

Newsline

The summer Bulletin is later than usual this year because of the sheer pressure of activity the Society has been involved in recently. But you can keep up to date with the details of our campaigns by subscribing – if you aren't already getting it - to our much-praised weekly electronic newsletter *Newsline*. Just send a blank email with "Subscribe to *Newsline*" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk

If you don't have access to a computer, you can still get *Newsline* in printed form by sending some A5 stamped and addressed envelopes to *Newsline*, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. We'll let you know when the envelopes are running out and, if you want to continue to receive the magazine, simply send more SAs.

Newsline is compiled and edited by Terry Sanderson.



Robert Marshall-Andrews
QC, MP

The General Election

Honorary Associates Alice Mahon MP, Martin O'Neill MP and Brian Sedgemore MP stood down at the election after many years of valuable work in the Commons. We thank them for their sterling work in Parliament on our behalf. Mr O'Neill, who was Chair of the Commons Trade and Industry Select Committee, has now been enobled as

Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan - we congratulate him. We are pleased to record that Dr Evan Harris MP, Paul Holmes MP (both LibDems) and Joan Ruddock MP (Labour) retained their seats.

We are pleased to welcome two new honorary associates, both distinguished lawyers and parliamentarians, to our panel.

Some Of Our C

- Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood and *New Humanist* editor Frank Jordans were on the debate trail in late January arguing at the Cambridge Union that *This House believes that Religion is no longer needed*. They were up against stiff opposition: Rev Dr David Hilborn of the Evangelical Alliance, Professor Tim Winter of the University's Faculty of Divinity (and a Muslim) and Peter Hitchens, Columnist, *Mail on Sunday*. Part of the debate was later shown on television.
- NSS Honorary Associate Dr Anthony Grayling and Keith Porteous Wood spoke up for the British secular perspective at a two-day seminar in London. The event, hosted by the Franco British Council, was a round-table event with nearly 40 participants, including peers, ambassadors and senior government officials, religious leaders and academics and from both countries.
- The Maggie's Centre cancer charity in Scotland thanked the NSS for publicly defending it after fundamentalist group Christian Voice had threatened demonstrations outside its premises if it accepted money from benefit performances of *Jerry Springer – The Opera*.
- The NSS has kept up a constant opposition voice to the relentless incursion of religion into our education system. The Government is pressing ahead with its controversial programme of Academy schools, and the *Times Education Supplement* revealed that 37% of them are run by religious organisations. Of the 57 academies that are planned or already open, 21 are linked to Christian organisations. The Church of England has set up the innocuous-sounding United Learning Trust to front some of its academies. Surely the self-styled moral guardians of the nation could not be doing this to mislead the uninformed into thinking that it was not a religious outfit? Hindu, Muslim and Sikh organisations are also in talks with the Government to ensure that they get their share of the fantastic amounts of public money they want in order to inculcate their sectarian propaganda into children.
- The NSS complained after it was revealed that a publicly funded school

Associates

Robert Marshall-Andrews QC, is Labour MP for Medway. He has been described variously as “the thorn in Tony Blair’s red rose” (*Law Journal*); “the leader of Labour’s internal opposition” (*Telegraph*); “The opposition’s most talented MP” (*Financial Times*); “defiantly off-message” (*Scottish Herald*); and “One of Labour’s few outspoken rebels” (*Guardian*). He was educated at Mill Hill School and Bristol University, and was a

teacher before joining the bar and becoming a Queen’s Counsel.

Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC is an enthusiastic secularist and happy to take up our issues when he can in the House of Lords. He is an Emeritus Professor of Commercial Law at the London School of Economics, University of London, a Fellow of the British Academy, and president of the London Regional Theatre Council and the Industrial Law Society.



Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC, by kind permission of LSE (Nigel Stead)

Other Activities

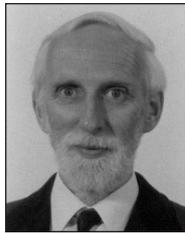
has stated categorically that it will not admit the children of atheists or humanists. After the Coopers’ Company and Coborn School, a voluntary aided school in Upminster Essex, was criticised by the Local Government Ombudsman for the unfair way in which it implements its religious admissions criteria, a spokesman for the school revealed that applications from humanists or atheists would not be entertained.

- The NSS joined secularists around Europe in protesting at a suggestion by Polish MEPs that a new building at the European Parliament should be named after Pope John Paul II.
- The NSS protested when it was revealed that a group of 11 high-profile employers who had launched a new organisation, The Employers Forum on Belief, to help firms “recognise the religious needs of employees” and enable minority religious workers celebrate holy days and to “promote good business practice toward religious belief”. The NSS wrote to the organisers of this initiative to question where the rights of non-believing employees fit into this, for example on time off and

holiday priority. Our protest was the subject of an article in the *Herald* and of a column by Nick Cohen in the *Observer*. The Forum was the original brainchild of BT, the Land Registry, Accenture, Barclays, the Royal Bank of Scotland Group, B&Q, London Underground, Race for Opportunity, Shell, the Co-operative Group and the BBC.

- The NSS wrote in protest to Sir Bob Geldof after it was announced that he had invited the pope to attend the Live8 event, which was aimed at eradicating poverty in Africa. We made the point that the pope, with his obdurate ban on the use of condoms to combat AIDS, was probably the most inappropriate person in the world to invite to such an event. Our criticism was widely reported.
- The NSS website (www.secularism.org.uk) has been redesigned as part of a general “re-branding” of the organisation aimed at giving it a more modern, colourful look. At some points during our high profile campaigns – particularly during the *Jerry Springer – the Opera* debacle – we were averaging well over 1,000 hits per day.

A Personal View from the President



Denis Cobell

'In town, country & continent'

After the death of Pope John Paul II, former President of the NSS Barbara Smoker noticed her local Mayor in Lewisham Steve Bullock, had written: "people of no faith now feel a void in their lives". This phrase was similarly expressed by Tony Blair at the same time; Barbara wrote in no uncertain terms expressing the inaccuracy of the Mayor's remarks, insofar as they concerned non-believers.

The Mayor replied to Barbara: "you have my deepest sympathy for the pain you are clearly suffering". At this point I stepped in and asked what he meant.

He replied to me: "Ms Smoker's letter was one of the most unpleasant missives I have received as Mayor I see my role as to represent everyone in the borough regardless of creed or belief ...". As secularists, we have no complaint that a public figure expresses condolences to those affected, but to include those of no faith is clearly at fault. Secularists would regard much of the late pope's teaching and advice as repugnant.

Moving on - the General Election has returned a Labour Government still intent on passing a bill to outlaw incitement to religious hatred in such a way that as secularists we think will inhibit free speech.

And moving further on - France and the Netherlands have rejected the EU Constitution; some commentators have attributed this in part to the influence of Muslims in these countries. Any secularist who has, as I have, heard speakers at debates appealing for a "Muslim state" will see the danger signs.

Each of these three examples surely endorses our aim of separating church and state.

Denis Cobell

President

The NSS has met senior Home Office Officials twice at Home Office to give our views on the Equality Bill. Representatives of religious organisations have also been present and we have been able to articulate powerful contra arguments to the proposals they have made on the Equality Bill. On the Religious and Racial Hatred Bill, there has been near unanimity - except where we have continued to press for the abolition of the law on blasphemy.

Religious Hatred Bill continued from front page:

Many of our arguments were reiterated by members in the Chamber. Honorary associates Evan Harris (LibDem) and Graham Allen (Labour) also called for the abolition of the blasphemy law in their excellent speeches and Bob Marshall-Andrews was especially scathing of the Government's line.

Conservatives and LibDems united in opposition. Conservative Boris Johnson lambasted the proposals with a passion seldom seen in parliamentary debates, quoting Koranic passages dealing with unbelievers and Christians. Ulster's fiercely protestant Ian Paisley and Catholic convert Ann Widdecombe even did a double act during the debate, described by another member as "a curious love-in—[they] seem to agree on their mutual religious hatred, one for another".

As a concession to this onslaught of criticism, the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, promised that the government would examine amendments in an "open-handed fashion" as the Bill entered its committee stage (when a small group of MPs examine it in detail and put forward

any recommendations for improvement to the House of Commons).

It is well worth reading the debate in the *Commons Hansard* of 21 June 2005 starting at col 668 or <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm050621/debtext/50621-09.htm> although there are likely to have been significant further developments by the time this Bulletin is issued.

The Bill is expected to be given an even rougher ride in the House of Lords, where Keith Porteous Wood has already started to lobby hard.

We found ourselves sharing a platform with some strange bedfellows who were also opposing the Bill for their own motives. It isn't often that the NSS joins hands with the Evangelical Alliance or the Christian Institute, let alone *Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips and Ann Widdecombe - but we considered this proposal so dangerous that we thought it necessary to show a united front with other opponents.

Rest assured, the NSS has not embraced the values of the *Daily Mail* or the evangelical movement. This was temporary measure and it will not be long before our paths diverge once more.



NSS Makes Waves in the Media

The NSS's profile in the media continues to grow. Over the past few months we have had many opportunities to make our voice heard in the public arena, and we haven't allowed a single one of them to pass.

Spokespeople Terry Sanderson and Keith Porteous Wood have, between them, taken part in literally hundreds of broadcasts, both national and local.

Highlights have been Keith on the BBC1 TV's Breakfast programme, Terry on GMTV's news hour, the ITV News, Channel 4 News and on Radio Four's *PM* and *The World at One* programmes – to name but a few. On the latter he was being interviewed about the Religious Hatred Bill up against Home Secretary Charles Clarke.

On a recent Sunday morning, after the government had reintroduced the religious hatred measures, Keith did a marathon twelve consecutive broadcasts with local BBC radio stations up and down the country in the space of two hours. Shortly afterwards, he was interviewed about the Religious Hatred Bill by US public radio for a programme broadcast throughout the United States. All this was made possible by the use of the ISDN studio equipment which members generously enabled us to buy several years ago.

The Society has been quoted internationally in *The New York Times* and extensively in the national press: all the broadsheets both North and South of the border, as well as the *Mail*, *Mirror*, *Sun* and *Morning Star*. We have also had extensive coverage in regional and local papers, including articles in the specialist press which can be highly influential – titles from the *Times Educational Supplement* to *Personnel Today*, from the *New Statesman* to the *Economist* – not to mention *The Church Times*.

Our honorary associates in journalism – including Polly Toynbee, Joan Smith, Nick Cohen and Christopher Hitchens – have all been very outspoken on issues that concern the NSS and its members. Polly Toynbee has devoted several of her influential *Guardian* columns to criticising the religious incitement measures and Nick Cohen has returned to the topic several times in the *Observer* and *New Statesman*. Joan Smith also raises our issues regularly in the *Independent on Sunday*. Dr Evan Harris MP has also been an active and very polished performer representing the NSS on radio and TV on several occasions.

Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson have spoken to hundreds of journalists and researchers who needed background for their articles. Journalists are becoming increasingly aware that they will get professional and informed comment from the NSS. Such are the demands on our time from the media that broadcasting and research have become one of the major activities of the Society. *Newsline* is avidly read by journalists too – indeed it was conceived primarily for them. Given we are an organisation of ideas and these ideas must be brought to the widest possible audience, this is exactly as it should be. We intend to consolidate our place at the centre of national debate as the battle between secularism and religious privilege and power-seeking continues to hot up.

NSS-Scotland helped the *Sunday Herald* with an article about religious discrimination in civil wedding ceremonies.

Keith Charters, convenor of NSS-Scotland was on Radio Scotland, in debate with the press officer of the Roman Catholic Church and a representative of the Muslim Council. He was also quoted in *The Scotsman* in an article about religious reactions to the tsunami.

In an article about the NSS, the Independent on Sunday describes us as "media-savvy", and as the "atheists' bulldog".

Our Work on Equality - Council Member Anna Behan Writes:



Anna Behan

I have taken a particular interest in equality issues since attending the launch of the Government's White Paper **Fairness for All: A new Commission for Equality and Human Rights** and after working as one of the contributors to the NSS Response to that document.

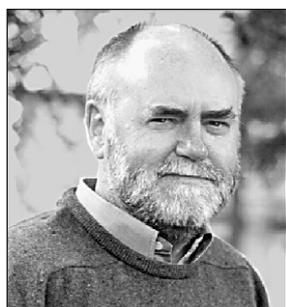
Work is progressing fast on the establishment of the new single Commission for Equality and Human Rights; the second reading of the Equality Bill took place on 15th June. The CEHR Steering Group is the advisory body that has the role of identifying and leading the work needed to establish the CEHR as a fully functioning organisation. A Religion and Belief Reference Group was set up to provide a channel for communication between members of the Steering Group and stakeholders within the Religion and Belief equality strand and meets roughly once a month.

I have been the NSS representative on the Reference Group since its inception in October 2004. This group incorporates both sides of the religion and belief strand in one body (believers and non-believers) and is significant in being a rare mechanism to engage the two distinct arms of this strand. The only representatives of the non-religious on this group are the NSS

and the BHA. I have taken the opportunity of this forum to increase the visibility of atheists too often overlooked by the government, and to ensure that our voice is fed back to the Steering Group as they consider the practical and theoretical issues in establishing the CEHR.

This sort of access to information and input into the debate is something which religious groups have often taken for granted in the past and I am glad that the NSS has been part of this process on the same footing as groups representing religious interests from the beginning. After all, true equality in this strand and the others will not be achieved without role of religion in blocking the uniform application of equality and human rights legislation coming under scrutiny, and the discrimination faced by atheists being tackled.

Recently, the Reference Group has felt that its original role was not broad enough to cover allied issues of interest to all members such as the proposed Incitement to Religious Hatred legislation. It has therefore reformed itself as The Religion and Belief Consultative Group on Equality, Diversity and Human Rights with a wider remit to cover a broader range of issues on government proposals in those areas.



Ivan Middleton

First Legal Humanist Marriage

The first legal marriage conducted by a Humanist celebrant, anywhere in the British Isles, took place in June 2005 in Scotland. In a landmark decision by the Registrar General for Scotland, registered celebrants of the Humanist Society of Scotland are now authorised to conduct legal marriages. Until now, the only people who were able to legally marry a couple were the local

registrars in a civil ceremony and authorised representatives of various religions in a religious ceremony. This is a first not only for Scotland, but probably also Europe, and we congratulate the HSS. Incidentally, the first celebrant - Ivan Middleton - is also a NSS member as is another of the celebrants, Ron McLaren - a member of the NSS~Scotland steering group.

Other Submissions

● Equality Bill

The newly published Equality Bill sets up a new Equality body and outlaws discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief (and non-belief) in the provision of goods and services. As with the equivalent regulations for employment, the problem for secularists is excessive religious exemptions. We have been waging war on these and have compiled a submission for parliamentarians. As the Bill stands, religious schools are even given exemption to harass pupils of a different faith from that of the school. The Bill also gives exemptions to perpetuate the discrimination in the provision of school transport. We are of course fighting such.

● Diversity in the judicial system

The NSS has made a submission in response to the Department of Constitutional Affairs consultation on this. While supporting diversity (under-representation of women is a particular problem) and making positive suggestions as to addressing this we have spoken out against applying lower standards to under-represented groups over appointments and promotion, etc.

● Charities Law

We compiled a submission on the Charities Bill for our supporters in the House of Lords and it was used as a basis for making amendments to the Charities Bill. Two Honorary Associates met the Minister, Baroness Scotland, and gave her the NSS's briefing. The main issue was making sure bodies representing the non-religious were not disadvantaged relative to religious bodies in seeking charity status. This Bill now no longer automatically assumes that religion is for the public benefit; if there is any doubt, religious charities will need to demonstrate this.

● Courts

The Judicial Studies Board publishes a book to guide judges to ensure that everyone is dealt with fairly. While we obviously agree with the overall aim, we believe that the book's approach to religion is largely misguided. The Board takes the view that justice is best served by judges having full awareness of all religions they are likely to encounter

and so provides detailed accounts of ritual and practice for a large number of religions. At the same time, it failed to give any account of non-religious belief. We feel that the way to achieve equality of treatment is largely to ignore religion, an approach which works satisfactorily in France. The Board considered our complaints, drawn up by Council member Dr Anna Behan. As a result of our representations the Board has indicated that it intends to take a number of our comments into account in its work on the first update. This response is a step forward considering that the Book had previously overlooked the non-religious entirely. It has also acknowledged that its whole approach in the areas about which we expressed concern is something which does need to be considered, but this will form part of a longer term project.

● School Funding

The Society has objected to the Department of Education's plans to allow religious bodies not to pay their share of building costs in connection with refurbishments required by the Department. The concession comes as no surprise however as the current 10% contribution has been whittled down from the 50% agreed as part of a church-state settlement in 1944.

● Concordats

The Vatican, nominally a sovereign state albeit within the boundaries of Rome, enters into treaties with other countries in order to further the Vatican's interests. They routinely involve payments by the states to the Catholic Church and dictate how education is provided by the state in ways beneficial to the Church. Because they are technically international treaties, they are entered into outside the democratic process and ratified generally without Parliamentary debate. Recognising the dangers of such arrangements, the NSS has been working to collect information internationally on behalf of the European Humanist Federation, and summarises this information on our website. We are particularly indebted to volunteers Muriel Fraser (for compiling information) and Peter Hearty (from maintaining the website).

'Voluntary aided schools' is a description given to religious schools that are controlled by religious bodies rather than local education authorities, and are allowed to teach whatever religion education they wish. In exchange for this, such schools are normally required to pay only 10% of the building costs as their sole contribution; the running costs being entirely borne from public funds.

A large-scale Mori poll (4,270 respondents) carried out for the Tablet magazine reveals that 36% of people in the 18-34 age group in Britain define themselves as atheist or agnostic. In the population as a whole, 24 per cent say they have no religion. This figure falls to 11% in the over 65s.

The Church of Scotland lost another 17,000 worshippers last year, taking its membership levels to a new low. Last year's drop of more than 3 per cent contributes to an overall fall of nearly 60 per cent since 1960. Membership in 2004 stood at 535,834, compared with 1.34 million in the 1960s. The number of parents who baptise their children has also reached a record low, with only 7,500 babies christened in 2004 - 500 fewer than in the previous year.

Meanwhile, a survey for the Scottish Herald newspaper revealed that 53.4% of the 970 respondents said they were practising members of a religion, while 45.7% said they had no religion. In the national census in 2001, 27.5% of Scots said they had no religion, compared with a UK average of 15.4%.

Volunteers

Our Thanks

The NSS depends a great deal on the efforts of its team of excellent volunteers around the country. Those who do work in the office – such as Peter Hearty (who helps, among many other things, with book keeping and the distribution of *Newsline* each Friday, as well as running the message board for *Newsline* readers who want to continue their conversations on-line) and Fiona Weir (who also runs our merchandise mail order operation) are real stalwarts and we are eternally grateful for their input. Those who help us electronically from around the country in so many ways also receive our thanks.

Volunteers include; Joel Clompus (who has given invaluable legal input and suggestions for our many submissions to government consultations); Barry Thorpe (who monitors parliamentary business for us and helps keep the website updated); Muriel Fraser (who has done a magnificent job in collating information about and raising awareness of the growth of concordats between the Catholic Church and country's and cities throughout Europe); Dr Paul Stevenson and Tim & Debbie Boyce who help with a great deal of research and checking; and Mazin Zeki who has alerted us to, and helped with, several consultations.

We are also particularly grateful to Ian Lowe for generously webhosting our former site without charge, and to Alan Urdaibay for his diligent and thoughtful work as webmaster work over several years. We also thank Sean Clark and his team at Cuttlefish.com for their voluntary work in these areas on the new website.

We wish also to record our thanks to members Marla Madison and Bradley Davis for volunteering their considerable skills in connection with image modernisation work, the fruits of which will become apparent in the coming months.

Appeal for New Volunteers

We are looking for more volunteers who could do clerical or book-keeping work at the Society's offices in central London, especially those with some experience of using PCs. If you have a grasp of the basics, training will be given, and you will be able to help make a contribution to make the organisation run more smoothly and efficiently. We are also looking for volunteer coordinators and people with VB and Access experience. Much vital work is done in the office and further volunteers would be most welcome to join the team.

We would also like to encourage volunteers with special skills to contact us, such as lawyers, fundraisers, educational specialists - wherever they live in the country.

Dates For Your Diary

ACTIVE SECULARISM: Saturday **10 September 2005**, 11am-4pm. (See page 5).

SECULARIST OF THE YEAR: Saturday **8 October 2005**, lunchtime. (See page 5).

AGM: This year's Annual General

Meeting will be held at Conway Hall on Saturday **26 November**. This is an opportunity to question your council about their activities and to participate in the democratic running of the Society. You can also get to meet other members from around the country. We hope we'll see you there.