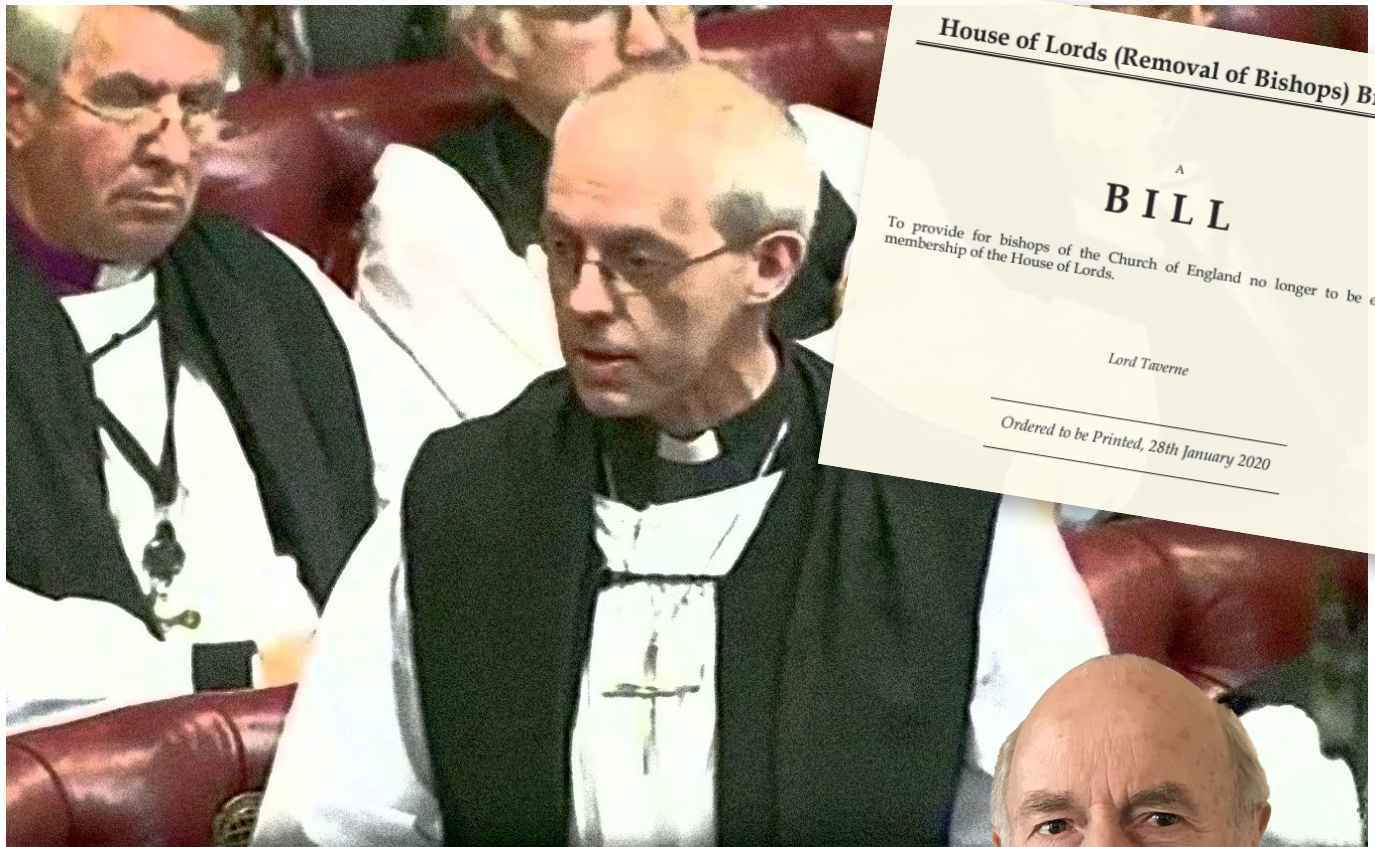


A bill to scrap the bishops' bench



Twenty-six Church of England bishops are entitled to sit in the House of Lords, owing to no more than their status within the established church.

Giving representatives of one religion such a privileged position in parliament is an anti-democratic and medieval practice. But now we're helping to show how it might come to an end.

We're behind a private member's bill which would remove the bishops' automatic right to sit in the Lords.

Our honorary associate Dick Taverne (*pictured*) – a Liberal Democrat peer – introduced the bill in the Lords in January.

[Read more on page 3](#)

Religious privilege undermines our democracy and education system. We're pushing back



With the dust beginning to settle after the December election, 2020 has got off to a hectic start. A new government and fresh intake of MPs bring with them new challenges and new opportunities. We've been engaging parliamentarians from all sides of the political spectrum to see where there is alignment and where more needs to be done to persuade policymakers of the merits of our positive secularist vision for the future.

It has been a pleasure working with our honorary associate peer Dick Taverne to introduce legislation to remove the automatic right of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords. Of all the outward manifestations of religious privilege embedded in the UK's civic life, the bishops' bench is one of the most archaic, unfair and undemocratic. Ending this unjustifiable privilege would be a

tangible step towards a secular state where no one is disadvantaged, nor privileged, because of their beliefs. The bill may be unlikely to succeed in the short term, but it is a statement of intent and a useful way of getting this issue onto the agenda.

"The Church of England's position as the established church holds the door open to other faith groups to enjoy special treatment, which can only be a recipe for increasing unfairness and division."

Bishops in the Lords are of course just one example of the deeply entrenched religious privilege in the UK. The Church of England's position as the established church holds the door open to other faith groups to enjoy special treatment, which can only be a recipe for increasing unfairness and division.

Nowhere is this more so than in our education system. The growth of faith schools at a time when religion

is becoming an increasingly niche interest is forcing tens of thousands of pupils into schools with a religious ethos their families do not share – leading to a farcical marginalisation of the majority. Ongoing state support for faith schools is also squandering the best opportunity there is to foster a fairer and better integrated society – by educating kids together.

Through our No More Faith Schools campaign we're leading the charge for a more secular and inclusive education system. As this edition of the Bulletin highlights, this is often an uphill struggle, but one we're determined to succeed in. To that end we have exciting plans to extend our influence and impact, including a new office and a bigger team. This vital work is all made possible by our members. I therefore thank you for your continued support.

Thousands sent to faith schools against parents' preferences

We exclusively revealed that more than 20,000 children in England were sent to faith schools against their parents' preferences at the start of this academic year.

Our analysis of government data found that:

- More than 12,000 pupils were assigned faith secondary schools despite their parents requesting non-faith schools as their first choice during the application process.
- More than 8,000 pupils were assigned faith primary schools despite their parents requesting non-faith schools as their first choice.

- More than 4,000 of these children were sent to faith schools which they had not included in any of their choices.

This comes after we revealed that almost three in 10 families in England lived in areas where most or all of the local primary schools were faith-based last year.

We're urging ministers to ensure all parents have, as a minimum, suitable access to non-faith schools. We're also making the point that the best way to defend a fair education system for all is to roll back state faith schools altogether. And we're supporting parents locally where necessary.

Successful intervention in ECHR RE case

The European Court of Human Rights said religious education must avoid indoctrinating children into religious practice if it's compulsory after we successfully intervened in a case.

A group of parents and students challenged a practice which required parents to declare their children's religious affiliation to exempt them from religious education.

The ruling reiterates that states must ensure RE curricula are "conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner" and must avoid indoctrinating children into religious practice if it is compulsory.



20,000 sent to faith schools despite requesting secular education

Our findings were covered in Schools Week

Let's get the bishops out of our legislature

One of our main objectives since our founding in 1866 has been to abolish the bishops' bench in the House of Lords.

As it stands 26 Church of England bishops have an automatic right to sit in the Lords as the 'lords spiritual', by virtue of their positions in our established church. The presence of the 'lords spiritual' in our legislature dates back to the 14th century and is an affront to democracy and equality of citizenship.

In January our campaigning in this area took an important step, as our honorary associate Dick Taverne introduced the House of Lords (Removal of Bishops) Bill to parliament. The private member's bill, which we helped to draft, would remove bishops' automatic right to sit in parliament.

'An extraordinary historical anomaly'

As he prepared to introduce the bill, Dick Taverne told us it was "very simple" and called the bishops' bench "an extraordinary historical anomaly".

"The historic division between church and state at the time of the Enlightenment was an extremely important development. By restricting the mix of religion and politics it promoted democracy, freedom and individual rights.

"If you look at the theocracies today which have survived, they're all examples of autocracy and they deny human rights."

He noted that the only other country which retains religious representatives in its legislature is Iran – "not the most obvious example of democracy". He also noted that it's custom in the Lords to defer to bishops whenever they indicate they wish to speak – a privilege not extended to other members of the house.



Church of England bishops opposing assisted dying in the Lords

"The separation of church and state is far from complete in the UK. The continued presence of bishops in the Lords is an anachronism that should be addressed."

Dick Taverne

The bishops' bench and faith schools

And he argued that the bishops' influence "behind the scenes" has a regressive impact on government policy.

"Why does the government promote faith schools? They're contrary to all educational principle. Schools should teach kids to think for themselves. And it's extraordinary that we should divide education and treat children as Catholic children, Protestant children, Muslim children, Jewish children.

"Can you imagine a system whereby we treat children as Conservative children, Labour children, Liberal Democrat children? It's an absurdity."

Uproar in the Lords

When he spoke to us Dick Taverne predicted there would be "outcries of horror almost" in the Lords when peers heard about the bill.

He wasn't wrong. When he stood up to introduce the bill a few days later (pictured), there was an audible gasp in the chamber, with several lords objecting even to the formality of a first reading.



Few private members' bills are greeted with such hostility. And yet the public, at least in principle, overwhelmingly agrees that there shouldn't be religious representatives in parliament.

Help us make the case

Scrapping the bishops' bench would make for a more equitable and democratic parliament. And the bill we're backing shows how that could now become a reality.

You can listen to Dick Taverne – and the other guests who've appeared on our podcast – at secularism.org.uk/podcast.

And you can help us to make the case for abolishing the bishops' bench: go to secularism.org.uk/scrap-bishops-bench/ and follow the link to write to your MP.

62%

of people say no religious clerics should have "an automatic right to seats" in the legislature.

Source: YouGov/ The Times

only

8%

say the bishops should retain their seats.

Source: YouGov/ The Times

just

12%

of Britons say they belong to the Church of England

Source: NatCen British Social Attitudes Survey, conducted 2018

NSS president addresses UN on child abuse

We've continued to work internationally and domestically to protect victims of child abuse within religious institutions.

In September our president Keith Porteous Wood urged the UN Human Rights Council to exert pressure on the Vatican to submit long-overdue reports outlining its response to child sexual abuse.

In oral and written statements to the UNHRC, Keith highlighted the fact the Vatican had failed to submit a series of four combined reports on its compliance with the UN convention on the rights of the child.

The reports, which should be sent to the UN committee on the rights of the child, were due by September 2017.

The Holy See's previous report on the same topic was submitted so late that the UNCRC's efforts to review its implementation of the convention were delayed for 14 years.

Meanwhile we also asked the Foreign Office to step in to apply pressure on the Vatican, which has failed to cooperate with the official child abuse inquiry.

A counsel to the inquiry said the Vatican had refused to supply written evidence or send witnesses about clerical misconduct in advance of hearings in October, despite a request to do so.

"The (Vatican's) next periodic report is already two years overdue. It is urgently needed because issues of huge concern appear still to be outstanding."

Keith Porteous Wood's oral statement to the UNHRC



Keith Porteous Wood at the UNHRC in Geneva

Supporting reproductive rights in Northern Ireland

There was big news in October, as the legalisation of abortion and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, which had passed at Westminster, came into effect.

And in response to a consultation on the implementation of the new abortion law we urged the UK government not to allow religion to restrict women's reproductive rights.

We added that current British law achieved a reasonable balance between the rights of patients to access safe and legal healthcare and the rights of healthcare professionals to avoid providing abortions. We said this should be replicated in Northern Ireland.

Until the new law came into effect abortion was only allowed if a woman's life was at risk or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health.

The consultation will inform a new legal framework which is due to be introduced at the end of March.

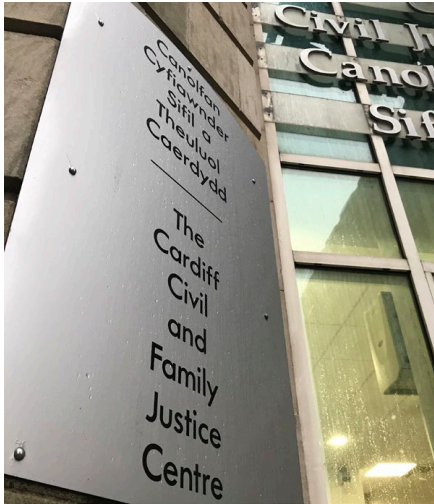


ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

During the general election campaign we lobbied all the major political parties, urging them to adopt 11 secularist pledges.

- Not to open more faith schools.
- End religious discrimination against pupils in school admissions.
- Abolish the collective worship requirement.
- Promote free speech as a positive value.
- End non-stun slaughter.
- Review laws on assisted dying.
- End all forms of non-consensual genital cutting.
- Outlaw caste discrimination.
- End 'the advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose.
- Guarantee secular public services.
- Separate church and state.

Faith school legal challenge



Justice Swift rejected our application for a judicial review in Cardiff

In January we were refused permission to challenge the expansion of faith school places in Wales.

We supported James Brunt, a local parent who attempted to secure a judicial review of a decision by Vale of Glamorgan Council to meet demand for additional school places by expanding his local Church in Wales Primary School.

The school has a strong religious character and teaches Christianity as fact. We argued that the school failed to consider the impact of its decision on families of other faiths and no religion; and used an irrational methodology to predict future demand for Church in Wales school places.

The local authority estimated that over half of additional new places would need to be in Church in Wales schools, based on the fact they currently make up 52% of education provision in the area. That's already disproportionately high for Wales.

However, the court ruled that the approach taken by Vale of Glamorgan was "legally permissible".

The ruling means that even more families will be effectively forced into faith schools with a religious ethos they don't share – undermining both parents' and pupils' rights and freedoms.

New Catholic school given the go-ahead in Peterborough

The local council in Peterborough has approved a plan to open a new discriminatory Catholic school, despite our best efforts to resist it.

The plan to open the school says it will:

- Have an exclusively Catholic ethos which will "permeate all areas of the curriculum and underpin the school's work and objectives";
- Be allowed to select 80% of its pupils on a religious basis in its first year. It could potentially select up to 100% on that basis after that.

The school has been in direct conflict with an alternative bid by a local academy chain to open a school with a community ethos at the same site.

In the months leading up to the council's decision our No More Faith Schools campaign held a local public meeting to rally opposition to the plan and urged local supporters to sign a petition against it.

We also submitted evidence urging the council to favour inclusive, secular



Terri Haynes (left) and Nicola Day, two of the councillors who challenged the decision

alternative proposals to meet demand for local school places.

We're now looking into the possibility of a legal challenge to the council's decision. We also worked alongside three councillors who formally challenged the process behind it, but unfortunately the challenge was unsuccessful.

More from the No More Faith Schools campaign

■ The local council in Inverclyde in western Scotland looks set not to convert a non-denominational school to a Catholic one after we supported local residents opposed to the plan. We're continuing to oppose plans to introduce new admissions protocols in the area which would entrench discrimination by faith.

■ The OneSchool Global Network, which is run by the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, is seeking to make two of its private schools in Northern Ireland into one state-funded one. We're urging the Department of Education not to approve the plan.



"Many local residents will wonder why their taxes are going to fund a school which explicitly promotes religious beliefs and discriminates against their children on a religious basis in its admissions policy."

Our CEO Stephen Evans in the *Peterborough Telegraph*

Evangelising GP faces probe

We convinced the General Medical Council to reconsider a decision not to pursue a case against a doctor who pushes his religious beliefs on patients during appointments.

As we reported in the autumn Bulletin, we raised the case of Dr



Richard Scott with the GMC last year. Dr Scott is a GP from Kent who has admitted he initiates conversations about his religion with patients.

“You may talk about your own personal beliefs only if a patient asks you directly about them, or indicates they would welcome such a discussion. You must not impose your beliefs and values on patients, or cause distress by the inappropriate or insensitive expression of them.”

The GMC guidance affecting the Dr Scott case

The GMC initially decided there wasn't enough evidence to take the case further, but it's now reviewing its decision after we highlighted fresh evidence.

We noted evidence that patients at Dr Scott's surgery had complained about having religion pushed on

them, and that Dr Scott's public comments appeared to show he was flouting GMC rules.

Dr Scott was warned for similar conduct in 2012 and we'll keep pressing the GMC to ensure it upholds consistent standards, regardless of doctors' religious beliefs.

Working to end parliamentary prayers

Our long-standing campaign to end the practice of opening parliamentary sittings with Anglican prayers has gained some traction.

We wrote to the new speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, to urge him to support a review of parliamentary prayers. We said ending the practice would represent a step forward for modernity, equality and freedom of conscience.

“The prayer session serves as an antiquated seat reservation system, unfit for a modern legislature and at odds with an egalitarian society which respects the important principle of freedom of religion or belief.”

Our letter to Commons speaker Lindsay Hoyle

And in January one of our honorary associates, Crispin Blunt MP, raised a point of order in the House of Commons calling for the same thing, after he was effectively forced to attend prayers to reserve a seat. Other MPs have since questioned the practice.

This comes after an early day motion which we backed last year called for an end to parliamentary prayers.

Calling for Thought for the Day reform

We urged the BBC to reform or scrap the Thought for the Day slot on Radio 4's *Today* programme after former presenter John Humphrys criticised it.

Humphrys described Thought for the Day, a three-minute slot reserved for religious figures, as “discriminatory”. He also criticised the fact it is “not sold to us as religious Thought for the Day”.

We told the BBC its current approach was “indefensible and unsustainable” and urged it to review whether it is compatible with its duties on impartiality.

We said if the BBC is committed to keeping Thought for the Day, it should turn it into an ethical current affairs reflection slot and open it up to contributors from all walks of life.



“I am an atheist. And that disqualifies me from presenting ‘Thought for the Day’. That is absurd. In fact it's worse than absurd. It is discriminatory.”

John Humphrys in his new book, *A Day Like Today*

OTHER CAMPAIGNING

- We called on environment secretary Theresa Villiers to clarify the government's position on mandatory labelling of meat from religious non-stun slaughter, after she appeared to backtrack on a previous undertaking to consider introducing it.
- We promoted free speech on religion in response to reviews of the hate crime laws and advertising regulation, and a consultation on countering extremism.

- We wrote to the lord chancellor to reiterate our call for the end of the annual Anglican judges' service at Westminster Abbey.
- We forced the BBC to add a clarification to a video it produced which uncritically promoted the evangelising Operation Christmas Child scheme. We said its coverage breached impartiality rules.

Jewish schools pushing parents to opt children out of sex ed

In December a BBC investigation found that two Jewish schools pressurised parents to opt their children out of education on relationships and sex.

And the government had previously dismissed concerns we'd raised about pressures at one of them – Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls' School in north London (pictured).

We'd written to the Department for Education in July to highlight a meeting which took place in May, which was called to make mothers "aware of extremely disturbing trends in the local community". Mothers were told attendance was "mandatory".

The meeting featured lengthy lectures on the moral failings of mothers who complained or exposed their children to secular influences.

In response the DfE said it was "not in a position to police such meetings" – effectively ignoring the substantial community pressure to conform to strict religious expectations.



There is cause for significant alarm over the lack of sex and relationships education in these schools. One former pupil at Yesodey Hatorah told the BBC she'd learnt nothing about sex – and she had first been told about it weeks before her wedding.

And a parent at Lubavitch Senior Girls' School, the other school which the BBC investigated, spoke of an attempt to hide children from the fact that people with different sexualities exist.

Independent faith schools failing pupils

We've continued to highlight the lengths some independent faith schools will go to in order to shield children from knowledge and indoctrinate them into deeply intolerant worldviews.

In several cases Islamic schools have continued to segregate by sex long after this was ruled illegal in 2017.

Our concerns about a school which refused access to inspectors and stayed open after it had told the government it had closed were reported in iNews.

The local press also reported on failings at schools in Birmingham, Blackburn, Wolverhampton and Rochdale.

RE reform in Wales

We're urging the Welsh government not to remove parents' right to withdraw children from confessional religious education.

It's proposing to remove the right of withdrawal as part of a package of reforms to religious education – which is to be renamed 'Religion, values and ethics'. However, faith schools in Wales will still be allowed to teach denominational RE.

In a meeting with education minister Kirsty Williams, our CEO Stephen Evans praised efforts to shift the subject in more secular and pluralist direction, but warned that removing the right to withdraw in faith schools that teach confessional RE could be incompatible with human rights law.

The Welsh government is also planning to remove the right to withdraw from relationships and sexuality education – a move which we're supporting. All pupils should have the right to access education that will give them clear and accurate information on topics that are so important to their wellbeing.

NSS OUT AND ABOUT

■ Our campaigns officer Megan Manson represented us at feminist group FiLiA's conference in Bradford.

■ Our head of education Alastair Lichten delivered talks on our No More Faith Schools campaign and met with progressive Jewish groups to discuss unregistered schooling.

■ Our staff and council members gave talks to our affiliated groups in areas including Gloucestershire, Windsor and Bromley.



Our CEO Stephen Evans at Windsor Humanists

New honorary associates



"In a society as diverse as ours, it is hugely important that no dominant religious ideology should ever be allowed to ride roughshod over the beliefs of others."

Lorely Burt, Liberal Democrat peer



"I believe we can't have a pluralistic society without freedom of religious practice and freedom of religious criticism, so the NSS campaigns about free speech matter a great deal to me."

Alun Cochrane, stand-up comedian

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ A Church of England multi-academy trust said it would provide an inclusive alternative assembly for pupils withdrawn from Christian collective worship after two parents (Lee and Lizanne Harris, pictured) launched a legal



challenge. Our new honorary associate Lorely Burt (see below) also tabled a bill to end the requirement to hold collective worship in non-faith schools in England and replace it with inclusive assemblies.

■ A high court judge upheld an exclusion zone which prevents protests against LGBT-inclusive education, primarily held by reactionary Muslim groups, taking place outside a school in Birmingham.

■ The Prime Minister's Office announced the appointment of Stephen Cottrell as the archbishop of York. We highlighted the fact he'd blocked a parliamentary amendment that would have made it easier for the Church of England to conduct same-sex marriages. Our response, which also called for the disestablishment of the church, was widely quoted in the press.



Addressing Richard Carlile's legacy

Our council member Bob Forder delivered a fascinating talk on the life and legacy of the 19th century secularist, republican and feminist Richard Carlile at Conway Hall in London prior to our AGM in November.

He covered features of Carlile's life including his role at the Peterloo rally in 1819; his jailing for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*; and his publication of the first book in the English language to explain contraceptive techniques.

Exploring Secularism training day

We're holding the first training day on our *Exploring Secularism* project for RE teachers, subject leaders and other educators with an interest in secularism, belief and society. The free event will feature presentations and workshops covering:

- What educators need to know about secularism
- The relevance of *Exploring Secularism* to the curriculum
- Using *Exploring Secularism* resources
- Who's using *Exploring Secularism* and how they can help.

Date: Saturday 9 May, 11am–3pm

Venue: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

Attendees must book in advance.

Go to secularism.org.uk/events to find out more.



EXPLORING SECULARISM



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