

# Ep 13: Religious appointees | Campaigning roundup

Chris Sloggett spoke to NSS head of education Alastair Lichten about our new report Religious Reps: Unrepresentative, Unnecessary and Unjustified. The report makes the case for ending the requirement on all Scottish local authorities to include religious appointees on their education committees. They discussed the report's findings and recommendations and next steps for the campaign.

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlAluFqleF8>

0:00:02.520,0:00:06.790

(Chris Sloggett: CS) Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast. I'm Chris

0:00:47.470,0:00:50.779

Lichten our education campaigner. Hello. (Alastair Lichten: AL) Hey Chris.

0:00:06.790,0:00:11.230

Sloggett, the communications officer at the NSS. In this episode, we'll discuss the

0:00:50.779,0:00:52.120

(CS): So Alastair, do you mind running

0:00:11.230,0:00:14.289

need to repeal religious appointees' positions on council education

0:00:52.120,0:00:56.620

us through what's the law at the moment and how the situation came about - who

0:00:14.289,0:00:18.029

committees in Scotland and other topics including advice on vaccinating children,

0:00:56.620,0:00:59.640

these religious representatives are?

0:00:18.029,0:00:22.599

faith schools which restrict families' privacy and the government's position on

0:00:59.640,0:01:01.270

(CS): So our report which will be linked in the

0:00:22.599,0:00:33.490

blasphemy laws. Firstly, the NSS has published a major report calling for the

0:01:01.270,0:01:04.839

show notes obviously, goes through the whole legislative history and the

0:00:33.490,0:00:38.890

end of religious appointees on council education committees in Scotland. The

0:01:04.839,0:01:11.710

background of these religious appointees. The current law is based on section 124,

0:00:38.890,0:00:42.760

report's been featured on the front page of the times and several councils are

0:01:11.710,0:01:18.939

subsection 4 of the Local Government Scotland Act of 1973 and that requires

0:00:42.760,0:00:47.470

considering removing the appointees' voting privileges. I'm joined by Alastair

0:01:18.939,0:01:24.399

local authorities in Scotland to include normally free unelected religious

0:01:24.399,0:01:28.499

appointees on their education committees.

These are usually the only unelected  
0:01:28.499,0:01:32.950  
voting members and they can potentially  
influence wide aspects of education  
0:01:32.950,0:01:37.840  
policy. Crucially, while the law requires  
the councillors to appoint these  
0:01:37.840,0:01:43.840  
religious reps, it does seem to be clear  
that the voting privileges extended to them  
0:01:43.840,0:01:48.340  
are a matter for each individual Council to  
decide. (CS): So that's part the reason why  
0:01:48.340,0:01:53.049  
this has come to the public attention now..  
(AL): Yes  
so it's the clarification that that is  
0:01:53.049,0:01:57.639  
the Scottish Government's legal opinion  
and that is the opinion held by  
0:01:57.639,0:02:01.719  
organizations like the National Secular  
society and a significant number of  
0:02:01.719,0:02:06.219  
councils in Scotland. It's fair to say  
that this has been a long-running  
0:02:06.219,0:02:09.790  
concern of the NSS  
and particularly our members and  
0:02:09.790,0:02:13.900  
affiliates in Scotland - a lot of debate  
has been generated at different points  
0:02:13.900,0:02:18.790  
for example by the 2013 and 2016  
petitions to the Scottish Parliament on  
0:02:18.790,0:02:28.120

this matter but what really brought it  
into public attention was Perth and Kinross  
Council in April deciding to remove voting  
privileges from their unelected  
0:02:28.120,0:02:31.659  
religious appointees. Now this followed a  
very close vote to close a  
0:02:31.659,0:02:36.250  
non-denominational school which was  
swung by two of the three religious  
0:02:36.250,0:02:41.290  
appointees. It was opposed by other  
unelected members of the council but of  
0:02:41.290,0:02:44.829  
course they didn't have voting powers and  
so there was this intervention by the  
0:02:44.829,0:02:48.849  
two religious appointees which swung the  
vote and obviously this created, at local  
0:02:48.849,0:02:52.329  
level, particularly being a  
non-denominational school and religious  
0:02:52.329,0:02:56.650  
appointees getting involved, a lot of  
resentment and that led to their  
0:02:56.650,0:03:03.609  
decision then to remove the voting  
privileges. Since then we've seen Edinburgh  
0:03:03.609,0:03:08.170  
City Council bring forward proposals to  
remove their voting privileges from  
0:03:08.170,0:03:12.189  
religious appointees and around eight other  
councils have told us that they may  
0:03:12.189,0:03:17.500

consider this in future. (CS): Okay so, what, So....if you just run, mind running us through what

0:03:17.500,0:03:23.139

our report argues and eh, and why. (AL): Well we start by examining the history of the

0:03:23.139,0:03:28.989

report and why it's there, uh, we look at the positions of all 32 local authorities in

0:03:28.989,0:03:33.940

Scotland and the arguments that have been put forward for religious appointees and

0:03:33.940,0:03:38.049

specifically for them also having voting privileges and we actually make a

0:03:38.049,0:03:43.840

very simple case: Scotland is a democracy and it has spent the last two centuries

0:03:43.840,0:03:48.669

moving away from a sort of a hodgepodge of voluntary and charitable

0:03:48.669,0:03:53.859

and religious schools towards a universal state education system. Now,

0:03:53.859,0:03:57.940

even if we ignore the multiple, overlapping, deeply entrenched

0:03:57.940,0:04:02.409

protections for denominational schools in Scotland, if religiously motivated

0:04:02.409,0:04:06.879

groups want to influence education policy then they have every right to

0:04:06.879,0:04:12.370

lobby and to campaign - their members can

go to public meetings, seek election,

0:04:12.370,0:04:16.959

respond to consultations, volunteer on parent councils - they have all the same

0:04:16.959,0:04:21.360

rights everyone else does so they don't need a special extra seat at the table.

0:04:21.360,0:04:26.050

(CS): Okay so, and in some cases I suppose if you think about what happened in Perth

0:04:26.050,0:04:29.770

and Kinross, for example, the religious groups actually have a

0:04:29.770,0:04:36.759

balance of power. (AL): Yes so at the time of the 2013 consultation, and it's sometimes

0:04:36.759,0:04:41.680

difficult to exactly measure this out, the church in Scotland estimated that they

0:04:41.680,0:04:45.699

held the balance of power in nineteen out of thirty-two local

0:04:45.699,0:04:49.870

authorities. We should also say the influence and the inappropriate

0:04:49.870,0:04:55.960

religious privilege extends far beyond simply voting rights, in fact often these

0:04:55.960,0:04:59.740

religious appointees won't vote but simply by being given that privileged

0:04:59.740,0:05:05.050

seat at the table, by being involved, by having the prestige and a special access

0:05:05.050,0:05:08.560

access to power and influence that comes with it means they get that

0:05:08.560,0:05:14.830

inappropriate say, that you know, extra inside say that, so you or I, if we

0:05:14.830,0:05:18.009

lived in Scotland and were to go along to one of these public meetings and you

0:05:18.009,0:05:21.699

know, put our hands up - we could put our hands up and speak, we could write to the

0:05:21.699,0:05:25.659

council just like anyone else but we wouldn't have that inside track. (CS): Mmm.. so

0:05:25.659,0:05:29.949

yeah, we are arguing that the best solution is for the Scottish government

0:05:29.949,0:05:37.720

to repeal religious appointees' right to sit on on the education committees

0:05:37.720,0:05:41.979

entirely but obviously we do welcome steps to remove their voting privileges

0:05:41.979,0:05:45.310

because you think that's a step in the right direction. (AL): At the, at the very least.

0:05:45.310,0:05:49.690

Obviously we would like them to repeal the right to sit. At the very least, you

0:05:49.690,0:05:53.110

know, letting councils make their own decision - if local authorities had

0:05:53.110,0:05:58.030

some sort of open, transparent selection process and selection of

0:05:58.030,0:06:03.969

appointees - we'd argue against that but that would, you know, at least seem be less incongruous

0:06:03.969,0:06:10.840

than this being forced on them by outdated legislation. (CS): Yep, erm - so, I mean,

0:06:10.840,0:06:14.590

just to think about what our opponents tend to come back with, I mean the

0:06:14.590,0:06:17.229

report deals with quite a few of their arguments - thought to pick out a couple -

0:06:17.229,0:06:22.120

I mean they often, our opponents will often say that the representatives bring

0:06:22.120,0:06:27.460

a particular moral insight - this is, this is one of the reasons why our opponents

0:06:27.460,0:06:29.680

often argue for things like the establishment of the Church of England and

0:06:29.680,0:06:33.070

bishops in the House of Lords as well, so they'll often say 'Well, the religious

0:06:33.070,0:06:38.669

representatives bring a different moral insight which, you know, which is valuable

0:06:38.669,0:06:43.130

(AL): Different perhaps.. You know, In this report we've gone through the

0:06:43.130,0:06:48.380

arguments for religious appointees and I hope that even if someone read the

0:06:48.380,0:06:52.130

report - and it's been sent to all

counselors and MSPs, but even if you read

0:06:52.130,0:06:55.430

the report and you disagree with us, I think you have to say we've been

0:06:55.430,0:07:01.130

fair-minded in addressing what these arguments are. Yes, many religious

0:07:01.130,0:07:05.000

appointees view this as, you know, sort of an act of service - they think they're

0:07:05.000,0:07:08.990

doing a good thing and bringing this moral insight to local authority

0:07:08.990,0:07:12.500

decision-making - you know, they may have an assumption of their moral superiority

0:07:12.500,0:07:17.210

and that's fine if that motivates them to get involved in the same way everyone

0:07:17.210,0:07:22.250

else does but that's not a basis for having that extra privileged special

0:07:22.250,0:07:27.980

inside role. (CS): So, yeah, I suppose it's the sort of assumption enshrined in

0:07:27.980,0:07:33.110

legislation that they do have this moral insight which is at least a questionable

0:07:33.110,0:07:38.360

assertion, let's say. They, I suppose they also argue that this is about

0:07:38.360,0:07:45.170

representing religious people and I suppose, you respond to that as well (AL): Obviously, as we say in the report,

0:07:45.170,0:07:49.070

the way in which these religious appointees and the reserve places

0:07:49.070,0:07:54.410

are structured is completely at odds with the modern religion and belief

0:07:54.410,0:07:59.450

landscape in Scotland. Scotland is, like the rest of Britain, has

0:07:59.450,0:08:03.770

become a majority non-religious country but it has also become incredibly

0:08:03.770,0:08:09.470

religiously diverse. I think about 93 of about 96 of these seats are

0:08:09.470,0:08:16.340

appointed by Christian organisations and, you know, the appointees of religious

0:08:16.340,0:08:21.040

organisations don't represent religious people. Religious people and

0:08:21.040,0:08:25.190

non-religious people are perfectly capable of representing themselves. They

0:08:25.190,0:08:29.210

are perfectly capable of going to council meetings, getting involved and,

0:08:29.210,0:08:32.330

you know, they're perfectly capable of running for office and if they've got

0:08:32.330,0:08:36.710

that moral superiority, which they talk so much about, surely the voters will

0:08:36.710,0:08:42.020

recognize this. (CS): Okay so what do you think

are our chances of making progress on

0:08:42.020,0:08:48.500  
this then? (AL): Well as you know Chris, I'm always an optimist. As you know, I do

0:08:48.500,0:08:52.730  
think this is an issue where we can make progress on simply because , you know, it's

0:08:52.730,0:08:57.980  
such a ridiculous and incongruous situation - the example in

0:08:57.980,0:09:02.600  
Perth and Kinross really brought it to the public attention. So up until now, the

0:09:02.600,0:09:06.890  
Scottish government, they've been very dismissive of calls for change but these

0:09:06.890,0:09:11.360  
are only gonna grow as the campaign gets more attention and, you know, Scotland

0:09:11.360,0:09:15.740  
continues to become more religiously diverse and more non-religious. Our

0:09:15.740,0:09:19.880  
report sets out the way forward - ultimately this will require legislative

0:09:19.880,0:09:24.830  
change at Hollyrood, um, but we can make progress by individual councils removing

0:09:24.830,0:09:29.270  
voting privileges. By the time this episode goes out, we should know what the

0:09:29.270,0:09:34.820  
decision at Edinburgh City Council was and we will continue to receive feedback

0:09:34.820,0:09:38.230  
and to lobby local councils as well as MSPs.

0:09:38.230,0:09:43.820  
In England and Wales we have SACREs, which are Standing Advisory Councils on

0:09:43.820,0:09:49.070  
Religious Education and they fulfil, sort of, quite a similar role - they also have

0:09:49.070,0:09:53.390  
special seats reserved for, for particular religious groups and then for

0:09:53.390,0:09:56.930  
religious groups in general and in England and Wales we've seen how the

0:09:56.930,0:10:01.700  
campaign to open these up to humanist representatives has weakened the

0:10:01.700,0:10:06.530  
argument against SACREs so the fact that all major humanists or atheist

0:10:06.530,0:10:11.600  
groups in Scotland have rejected the idea of non-religious appointees, means

0:10:11.600,0:10:16.130  
that that sort of flawed compromise can't be put forward and that will

0:10:16.130,0:10:19.010  
continue to leave, you know, if you buy into the idea, which we completely reject,

0:10:19.010,0:10:22.339  
of religious groups being represented, of the largest religious

0:10:22.339,0:10:27.860  
group in Scotland - the non-religious, not being represented. If you want to help us

0:10:27.860,0:10:31.310  
make progress then please visit our campaign page, there'll be a link in the

0:10:31.310,0:10:36.410  
description, where you can download the report and sign the petition. Of course, if you

0:10:36.410,0:10:40.430  
live in Scotland, it would be really helpful if you can write to your MSP and councillor

0:10:40.430,0:10:45.940  
and again there will be links to that on the campaign page. (CS): Thank you very much.

0:10:49.390,0:10:52.730  
Now we turn to some other issues we have been campaigning on in the last

0:10:52.730,0:10:55.790  
couple of weeks. Alastair Lichten and I are now joined by

0:10:55.790,0:11:01.160  
Megan Manson our campaigns officer- Hi Megan. (Megan Manson: MM) Hi (CS): So Megan, you can report that

0:11:01.160,0:11:05.660  
we've had a bit of success on vaccinations. (MM): That's right, so at the

0:11:05.660,0:11:10.160  
end of July there were reports in the press that some Muslim parents were

0:11:10.160,0:11:16.040  
refusing to let their children take part in a flu vaccination drive and that was

0:11:16.040,0:11:21.230  
because the vaccine contained pork gelatin. And in response to this, Public

0:11:21.230,0:11:25.580  
Health, England made a statement saying that they encourage parents to seek

0:11:25.580,0:11:31.280  
advice from their faith leaders about

whether to vaccinate their child - and we

0:11:31.280,0:11:35.210  
did a little research and found other documents produced by Public Health

0:11:35.210,0:11:38.810  
England that also advised religious parents consult with faith leaders

0:11:38.810,0:11:42.830  
regarding vaccines. So we wrote to Public Health England questioning this advice

0:11:42.830,0:11:46.670  
and we raised the point that telling parents to consult religious leaders

0:11:46.670,0:11:52.040  
sends a confusing and potentially harmful message and it could undermine

0:11:52.040,0:11:55.580  
Public Health England's mission to protect and improve the nation's health

0:11:55.580,0:12:01.190  
and reduce health inequalities. So, we were therefore happy to receive a response

0:12:01.190,0:12:05.150  
from Public Health England that they'd taken our concerns on board and that

0:12:05.150,0:12:09.980  
they'd changed their booklet on vaccines and pork gelatin to remove the advice

0:12:09.980,0:12:14.690  
about consulting a faith leader and they said they wanted to make it clear that

0:12:14.690,0:12:18.800  
they recommend using scientific evidence to help when deciding whether or not to

0:12:18.800,0:12:23.870  
vaccinate. It's a really welcome outcome

and reflects the fact that religious

0:12:23.870,0:12:28.310

teaching often clashes with best medical practice. (CS): So this seems like a bit of a

0:12:28.310,0:12:33.500

win or at least a welcome reversal in Public Health England's position and

0:12:33.500,0:12:36.560

with the number of children who are going back to school without

0:12:36.560,0:12:41.030

vaccinations at the moment, this seems particularly important that, you know, that PHE's

0:12:41.030,0:12:46.490

mission to get children vaccinated isn't undermined. We've seen vaccinations

0:12:46.490,0:12:50.450

being undermined by religious exemptions in America as well - Alastair, you

0:12:50.450,0:12:51.580

wanted to say something about that..

0:12:51.580,0:12:55.280

(AL): Yeah, you know, we've got , there's a, there are specific outbreaks in areas where

0:12:55.280,0:13:00.110

you have a high proportion of people from Jewish Orthodox

0:13:00.110,0:13:04.970

and islamic backgrounds - religious leaders often opposing vaccinations

0:13:04.970,0:13:10.040

which contain derivatives of pork, of pork gelatin obviously some religious

0:13:10.040,0:13:15.130

leaders, you know, take a much more, much more , sensible view on that. I

0:13:15.130,0:13:20.120

want to say the point that this does tie into education

issues because so much of our

0:13:20.120,0:13:24.709

vaccination program is delivered through schools so we need to consider the

0:13:24.709,0:13:29.000

impact there of unregistered illegal faith schools which are particularly

0:13:29.000,0:13:33.200

concentrated in those communities and I doubt very much they're participating

0:13:33.200,0:13:37.519

in these vaccination programs. (CS): And sorry,

Megan, just turning back to you then,

0:13:37.519,0:13:40.399

we've had some success with getting the health care authorities to

0:13:40.399,0:13:45.500

reconsider their deference to religion before. (MM): Yeah, that's right - last year we

0:13:45.500,0:13:50.779

discovered that the NHS Choices' website was giving advice for people who wanted

0:13:50.779,0:13:55.519

to fast on Ramadan and that in itself isn't an issue at all, but the problem

0:13:55.519,0:13:59.870

was that the advice given was put together by a team of Islamic scholars

0:13:59.870,0:14:04.850

working with medical experts and as a result it drew heavily on Islamic



0:14:04.850,0:14:10.579  
theology rather than pure medical  
opinion - so, for example, it said Muslim

0:14:10.579,0:14:15.050  
experts have differing opinions on  
whether or not someone can use an asthma

0:14:15.050,0:14:19.850  
inhaler during Ramadan and it said that  
people on dialysis should perform a

0:14:19.850,0:14:26.089  
Fidyah, which is a, paying a form of  
compensation for missing the fast and it

0:14:26.089,0:14:30.380  
also said that children are 'required' in  
quotes, to fast

0:14:30.380,0:14:36.199  
once they reach puberty. So we wrote to  
the NHS Choices website asking them to

0:14:36.199,0:14:41.360  
review this advice and to remove the  
references to theological teachings so

0:14:41.360,0:14:45.500  
that it complies with their own policy  
of providing objective, impartial and

0:14:45.500,0:14:49.610  
evidence-based information on health  
care. And following our request for a

0:14:49.610,0:14:55.430  
review, NHS Choices has removed the  
Ramadan advice. So I think this case and

0:14:55.430,0:15:00.079  
the previous case regarding vaccines  
shows that public health authorities

0:15:00.079,0:15:05.120  
are willing to listen and to engage with  
secularist arguments when we make the

0:15:05.120,0:15:10.130  
case that faith and health care can often  
clash. We still have

0:15:10.130,0:15:13.190  
a lot of work to do in removing  
religious interference from health care

0:15:13.190,0:15:16.020  
which is  
why we have a dedicated secular medical

0:15:16.020,0:15:21.180  
forum and it's why health care is a  
prime campaign area for us but little

0:15:21.180,0:15:24.690  
victories like these are encouraging and  
they demonstrate that change is most

0:15:24.690,0:15:28.620  
definitely possible.  
(AL): It sounds like, as with so many aspects

0:15:28.620,0:15:33.600  
of religious privilege, you can have  
people, sort of, acting out of the best of

0:15:33.600,0:15:38.430  
intentions - you can kind of you see the  
thinking behind it but they've just not

0:15:38.430,0:15:42.540  
properly fought through those  
implications and so often we're, you know,

0:15:42.540,0:15:46.170  
the ones who have to point out, actually you  
know, we get what you're doing here, you're

0:15:46.170,0:15:50.280  
probably coming from the right place but you  
haven't actually thought through and

0:15:50.280,0:15:54.570  
these problems come about with this idea  
that you engage people through religion

0:15:54.570,0:15:58.890  
rather than as, you know, people. (MM):  
Yeah, I  
think that's exactly right - that is

0:15:58.890,0:16:01.740  
exactly what's happened here - it's that  
we've been the only ones to say "hang on

0:16:01.740,0:16:04.410  
a second",  
you know, "we understand that what you're

0:16:04.410,0:16:08.940  
doing is out of, you know, it's, it's  
well intended but there are some

0:16:08.940,0:16:13.110  
implications that you might not have  
considered" So yes, that's a

0:16:13.110,0:16:17.490  
really good point. (CS): Yeah so I suppose the  
message is that public health must come

0:16:17.490,0:16:22.200  
before religious concerns - the interests  
of patients and the interests of the

0:16:22.200,0:16:26.790  
wider public have to take precedence  
over religion. Now on a separate note,

0:16:26.790,0:16:29.910  
Alastair you'd like to talk about an  
independent Jewish school with an

0:16:29.910,0:16:35.100  
eye-opening restrictive policy  
towards families. (AL): Yeah, this is a story

0:16:35.100,0:16:39.420  
that we did, we've reported on in  
the last week and did most of the work on

0:16:39.420,0:16:43.650  
last month.

It's a Beis Chinuch, an independent

0:16:43.650,0:16:47.880  
Jewish Orthodox school which close  
readers of our website may remember us

0:16:47.880,0:16:54.390  
criticizing them in the past for an  
extremely restrictive textbook censoring

0:16:54.390,0:16:59.880  
program and, you know, quite restricted  
secular curriculum which breached the

0:16:59.880,0:17:05.490  
independent school standards. So, we wrote  
to the government as I said last month - in

0:17:05.490,0:17:11.280  
this case it was specifically about  
Jewish Orthodox schools both private and,

0:17:11.280,0:17:15.300  
you know, state-funded as well and some  
of the ways in which they are seeking to

0:17:15.340,0:17:21.750  
control the family lives of their pupils and in  
a way which goes far, far beyond you know

0:17:21.750,0:17:27.080  
any conceivably legitimate educational  
purpose. (CS): So let's hear the examples  
then...

0:17:27.220,0:17:33.260  
(AL): Requiring parents to  
never let their children touch a

0:17:33.260,0:17:38.460  
smartphone. (CS): Yep.  
(AL): Requiring parents and families to seek

0:17:38.460,0:17:43.380  
the school's approval (of) DVDs they want to  
have in the home. Requiring the

0:17:43.380,0:17:47.910

installation of an app which allows the school to monitor the use of their

0:17:47.910,0:17:54.300

Internet-enabled devices. I mean, read this policy on our website - it's truly

0:17:54.300,0:18:00.390

bizarre. With all the pressure on members of this community to attend these

0:18:00.390,0:18:05.610

schools and, you know, not to speak out against problems - these schools and again

0:18:05.610,0:18:10.320

very often, though not in this case, state-funded - they're acting as

0:18:10.320,0:18:15.060

instruments of social control and unfortunately government are simply not

0:18:15.060,0:18:19.170

interested in taking action. They told us that examples like these don't breach the

0:18:19.170,0:18:24.110

independent school standards and are simply a matter of a contract between

0:18:24.110,0:18:30.210

parents and the school - it ignores the whole context of this social pressure, you know,

0:18:30.210,0:18:35.970

it ignores just how extreme these policies are. We are working with brave dissidents

0:18:35.970,0:18:40.320

within this community - unfortunately the government just doesn't seem interested

0:18:40.320,0:18:45.660

in protecting these pupils' rights and education and you know family's right to

0:18:45.660,0:18:49.890

a private life. (CS): Yeah okay so the government, part of the government's

0:18:49.890,0:18:55.320

defense seems to be while it's an independent school which, I mean, I think,

0:18:55.320,0:19:00.990

I think we all agree that given the extreme nature of the sort of crackdown

0:19:00.990,0:19:04.680

and I think you very well put it there the level of social control being

0:19:04.680,0:19:11.460

exercised is not a sufficient reason but this is also happening in state schools

0:19:11.460,0:19:16.410

to or least at least similar policies are being used in state schools. (AL): Yes and

0:19:16.410,0:19:23.580

we're seeing admissions policies being used to fine, counter and to put down

0:19:23.580,0:19:29.040

dissent within the community and, you know, it's very easy for people like

0:19:29.040,0:19:32.790

us, we, we oppose faith schools - we do want to get rid of state-funded faith

0:19:32.790,0:19:36.180

schools and it might be easy for us or for our people who aren't in the

0:19:36.180,0:19:39.810

communities to just say "well, you know, don't like this -

0:19:39.810,0:19:44.220

them bossing you around - don't go to those schools - that really does ignore the

0:19:44.220,0:19:48.570

level of social pressure which is often brought to bear. (MM): And I would also say its

0:19:48.570,0:19:53.670  
completely unreasonable to have policies that violate basic human rights, you know,

0:19:53.670,0:19:56.430  
it doesn't matter whether or not its a contract between the school and parents

0:19:56.430,0:20:00.300  
so, you know, the government is trying to wash their hands with this one when they're

0:20:00.300,0:20:03.840  
completely ignoring that these are fundamental human rights we're talking

0:20:03.840,0:20:08.100  
about here - the right to a private life, the right to free expression and the

0:20:08.100,0:20:13.290  
right to a basic education for children. So it's just unbelievable that the

0:20:13.290,0:20:17.970  
government are not taking this a bit more seriously. (CS): So, just to move on again

0:20:17.970,0:20:22.790  
I'd just like to raise a letter which we sent to the government last week on

0:20:22.790,0:20:28.740  
blasphemy laws. Now Megan, you monitor statements by ministers in Parliament

0:20:28.740,0:20:35.250  
and over recent months you noticed a trend in their language on this which we picked up on.

0:20:35.250,0:20:44.600  
(MM): That's right, um this has

been going on for some time. So, blasphemy laws in theocratic countries like Pakistan are often raised in Parliament.

0:20:44.600,0:20:50.040  
The case of Asia Bibi who's a Pakistani Christian who very narrowly escaped the

0:20:50.040,0:20:54.660  
death penalty for allegedly blaspheming against the Islamic prophet Muhammad -

0:20:54.660,0:20:59.550  
that case frequently came up last year and while of course it's a good thing

0:20:59.550,0:21:04.230  
that politicians show concerns about blasphemy laws around the world their

0:21:04.230,0:21:09.720  
language around the issue is troubling - again and again I found examples of

0:21:09.720,0:21:15.690  
politicians referring to an abuse of blasphemy laws or a misuse of blasphemy

0:21:15.690,0:21:19.680  
laws. These statements are concerning because they imply that there's a

0:21:19.680,0:21:24.660  
legitimate use of blasphemy laws which of course there isn't. All blasphemy laws

0:21:24.660,0:21:28.380  
are incompatible with the fundamental human right to freedom of expression

0:21:28.380,0:21:32.550  
and for that reason we should be calling for the repeal of blasphemy laws

0:21:32.550,0:21:35.130  
everywhere, we shouldn't be suggesting that there is

0:21:35.130,0:21:39.090  
ever an acceptable use of blasphemy laws  
because all use of blasphemy laws is

0:21:39.090,0:21:44.640  
abuse. (CS): Yes, so we've written to the  
government to raise this and we're

0:21:44.640,0:21:49.320  
making the argument that the best way to  
defend those who face religious

0:21:49.320,0:21:53.290  
persecution is, as you just said there  
Megan, to stand for the repeal

0:21:53.290,0:21:57.910  
of blasphemy laws. There is no legitimate  
use for a blasphemy law - the existence of

0:21:57.910,0:22:04.830  
a blasphemy law is just de-facto wrong so  
yeah, we've been calling for their repeal.

0:22:04.830,0:22:09.960  
So we accept that some cases are more  
severe and urgent than others but, and

0:22:09.960,0:22:13.750  
yeah, the government shouldn't normalize  
the idea that blasphemy laws are fine

0:22:13.750,0:22:19.960  
unless they are misused. (AL): There's also a  
related point which - we often talk about

0:22:19.960,0:22:25.540  
people being falsely accused of  
blasphemy and to my mind that seems like

0:22:25.540,0:22:30.460  
it's legitimizing a sort of victim  
blaming, I mean it's kind of like saying

0:22:30.460,0:22:35.170  
oh no, the person was falsely accused of  
wearing too short a skirt . This, you know,

0:22:35.170,0:22:42.190  
you, that is legitimizing the idea that  
there is a appropriate real legitimate

0:22:42.190,0:22:48.550  
function of these laws. (CS): Yeah, so this is  
something that we've raised recently and

0:22:48.550,0:22:52.900  
we'll try and keep our listeners updated  
if we hear anything back but ministers

0:22:52.900,0:22:57.610  
from across government have been using  
this in the Lord's and in the Commons so

0:22:57.610,0:23:03.000  
it's clearly a very deliberate policy.  
Megan and Alastair, thank you very much.

0:23:03.160,0:23:04.020  
(MM): Thank you.

0:23:04.240,0:23:05.240  
(AL): Cheers Chris.

0:23:09.420,0:23:13.870  
(CS): Thank you for joining us on the NSS  
podcast. There's a link to our report on

0:23:13.870,0:23:17.710  
religious appointees which is called  
religious reps: unrepresentative,

0:23:17.710,0:23:22.270  
unnecessary and unjustified in the show  
notes. You can also find links to our

0:23:22.270,0:23:25.690  
reporting on what you just heard and  
information on how to support the NSS.

0:23:25.690,0:23:29.250  
We'll see you next time.