

Ep 23: The NSS at the UN- interview with Josephine Macintosh

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdfQeKP8Tj8&feature=youtu.be>

0:00:05.530,0:00:11.299
(Emma Park, EP) How effective is the United Nations at supporting secularist principles? What

0:00:11.299,0:00:14.959
extra pressures will its Human Rights Council be under as a result of the

0:00:14.959,0:00:20.180
corona virus pandemic and what has the National Secular society been doing to

0:00:20.180,0:00:25.280
advance secularist causes before the UN? You're listening to the National Secular

0:00:25.280,0:00:29.990
society podcast hosted by Emma Park. Today I'm joined by Josephine MacIntosh

0:00:29.990,0:00:35.450
to discuss her work representing the NSS at the UN. Josephine is a solicitor in

0:00:35.450,0:00:39.950
London specializing in competition law and a vice-president at the NSS and

0:00:39.950,0:00:44.120
member of the Council. She has represented the Society at the UN Human

0:00:44.120,0:00:48.520
Rights Council in Geneva since 2012.

0:00:52.440,0:00:56.320
Josephine, first of all could you tell us about your recent work for the National

0:00:56.320,0:00:59.000
Secular society at the United Nations?

0:00:59.320,0:01:03.040
(Josephine Macintosh, JM) Hi

Emma. So, for my recent work, so, I was representing the NSS at the 43rd Human Rights Council at the UN in Geneva and

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0:01:09.580,0:01:14.720
in particular we had submitted written statements and I was there to deliver

0:01:14.720,0:01:20.810
some oral statements on three main topics and the first was on male

0:01:20.810,0:01:27.890
circumcision - essentially non-therapeutic genital cutting of boys. This ended up

0:01:27.890,0:01:31.220
not being an oral statement but we just had the written statement due to some

0:01:31.220,0:01:36.860
admin issues and then we also, I also delivered a statement on caste

0:01:36.860,0:01:41.659
discrimination in the UK, which was I think the third time that we were

0:01:41.659,0:01:46.640
addressing the council on that topic and then finally I delivered a statement

0:01:46.640,0:01:54.680
under the Universal Periodic Review of Italy on clerical child abuse in Italy

0:01:54.680,0:01:59.240
from the Roman Catholic Church.
(EP) Okay great. Thank You Josephine. And just,

0:01:59.240,0:02:04.820
just be clear, which um council? was

it the UN General Council? (JM) It's

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the Human Rights Council and the Human Rights Council is a meeting of

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a certain number of states and also of civil society who meet three times a year for

0:02:15.879,0:02:21.340

three weeks and they, during that time, go through a whole agenda of various human

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rights topics and there is also, in parallel to that, a

0:02:25.959,0:02:30.430

Universal Periodic Review which is what we talked about, which is what we, we use

0:02:30.430,0:02:35.620

to address clerical child abuse in Italy on, under and that is essentially a

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review of human rights concerns in various countries and so every country

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goes through this voluntary process of having their human rights situation

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assessed essentially by a UN body and then there is also contributions that can

0:02:51.940,0:02:57.400

be made from both states and also from civil society - so from NGOs, of which the

0:02:57.400,0:03:01.239

NSS is one. (EP) So Josephine, why is it important do you think for the National

0:03:01.239,0:03:06.010

Secular Society to be represented at the UN? (JM) I think it's really important for us

0:03:06.010,0:03:10.540

as an essentially non-governmental organization to be able to ensure that

0:03:10.540,0:03:15.099

the secular principles and values that we're trying to promote within the UK

0:03:15.099,0:03:20.940

are heard on the international stage and not just nationally, so the

0:03:20.940,0:03:26.139

Human Rights Council provides for that international platform but beyond that,

0:03:26.139,0:03:32.319

it also allows us to put pressure domestically in the UK by showing

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that the values that we are trying to push are essentially values that are

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often represented in human rights principles that are being upheld by the

0:03:42.040,0:03:48.669

United Nations and beyond that, we're able to point to ways in which secularist

0:03:48.669,0:03:55.090

principles are also not being upheld in other countries. Obviously the NSS is a,

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is a national organization but I think we still have an important understanding

0:04:01.479,0:04:06.370

of secularist principles and an ability essentially to be able to check

0:04:06.370,0:04:12.459

them and to bring them to bear when on an international stage, so that is one of

0:04:12.459,0:04:17.100

the reasons. (EP) How did you become involved

in this work for the NSS at the UN?

0:04:17.100,0:04:25.300
(JM) Um, so as I said I was, I started off as an intern.
I was suggested to Roy Brown by Anthony

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Grayling - A.C. Grayling who's a philosopher who'd come to speak at my university and

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he suggested given that I had an interest in these kinds of issues and

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human rights and he suggested that I get in touch with Roy Brown who was somebody

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who was heading a lot of the initiatives at the UN for various NGOs, ranging from

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humanist NGOs to the National Secular society but also Center for Inquiry

0:04:51.340,0:04:56.229
which is an American NGO, and so I started off as an intern and started

0:04:56.229,0:05:02.470
working for various NGOs under sort of Roy Brown's organization at the, in

0:05:02.470,0:05:08.740
Geneva and then from there became permanent representative for some of

0:05:08.740,0:05:15.100
these NGOs as well which meant returning during my holidays to Geneva and also

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having grown up in Switzerland, so having had that physical link to, to the country

0:05:20.110,0:05:23.350
as well helped because it meant I could do it from home and when I was visiting

0:05:23.350,0:05:28.390

my parents. (EP) How much support is there for secularist principles in the UN

0:05:28.390,0:05:33.310
both in non-governmental organizations and among states represented there? (JM)
There

0:05:33.310,0:05:38.260
is support but support from, from some states but the difficulty often

0:05:38.260,0:05:44.380
comes from who is in power in those states so we have had in the past

0:05:44.380,0:05:52.570
discussions with representatives from, from the UK delegation - I'd given a

0:05:52.570,0:05:57.760
speech for example on Saudi Arabia which was them essentially interrupted by the

0:05:57.760,0:06:04.240
Saudi ambassador representative and the Ireland I think it was, the UK, the US,

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France all of these representatives from these countries spoke up and said

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well you've got to let this person speak and so there, there's been some, some

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echoes and we've had people attend side events that we've hosted as well from

0:06:17.320,0:06:23.950
from some delegations. I mean, also I have to say, that I haven't, I attended the Human

0:06:23.950,0:06:27.350
Rights Council this time around which was cut short by the corona virus

0:06:27.350,0:06:31.850
but I haven't attended for a few years before that, for essentially three years,

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due to being working full-time in London
but especially when I was very active

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between 2012 and 2016, there was a lot of
push-back from countries that were belong,

0:06:43.940,0:06:48.830
that belong to what was, what is called
the OIC which is the, I think it stands

0:06:48.830,0:06:54.020
for the Organization of Islamic
Conference or something like that so

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essentially it's a group of Islamic
countries and also from Russia and these,

0:06:58.730,0:07:02.930
these delegations were essentially
pushing for what they termed traditional

0:07:02.930,0:07:08.960
values, which often looked to promote
family - so-called family values which

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often goes against secularist principles
which will promote religious

0:07:12.200,0:07:17.060
interference and religious prominence in
family life and in political life

0:07:17.060,0:07:23.090
and then also other issues such as
around gay rights, women's rights and so

0:07:23.090,0:07:27.470
there's been some difficulty because
there a lot of fault lines are

0:07:27.470,0:07:32.180
being created within the Human Rights
Council along, by it, by sort of alliances

0:07:32.180,0:07:37.040
along those kinds of principles. (EP) Well

let's take some specific examples on

0:07:37.040,0:07:40.940
that point, so you mentioned one of
the issues you were speaking about in

0:07:40.940,0:07:48.170
the forty-third conference was male
circumcision. What were your, first of all,

0:07:48.170,0:07:52.370
your main submissions on behalf of the
NSS? (JM) So essentially for that we were, on

0:07:52.370,0:07:57.350
the first hand, trying to raise awareness
around the fact that there is a lot of

0:07:57.350,0:08:01.310
discussion around genital cutting for
women and there's been a lot of progress

0:08:01.310,0:08:06.910
that has been made for female genital
mutilation however there's not much

0:08:06.910,0:08:12.920
consideration being given also to male
circumcision and traditional, what may be

0:08:12.920,0:08:19.310
seen as cultural values, often trump the
rights of the child in circumstances

0:08:19.310,0:08:26.450
where as a baby or sometimes a bit older,
they might then have to undergo a form

0:08:26.450,0:08:29.810
of genital cutting
and that genital cutting does not have

0:08:29.810,0:08:35.450
therapeutic reasons for, as to why
it is needed and it can cause quite a

0:08:35.450,0:08:40.070
lot of difficulties for the child in
later life but because this is

0:08:40.070,0:08:46.010

a very accepted cultural practice globally, we've had people provide input

0:08:46.010,0:08:52.610
on this from the US, for example, where it's incredibly widespread, questioning

0:08:52.610,0:08:56.780
it as a practice has become, it's quite unknown and also can be quite difficult

0:08:56.780,0:09:03.230
and can get quite a lot of push-back from some religious communities and so our

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main submission was to address that. (EP) I mean, where do you see it going with this

0:09:08.420,0:09:11.990
issue - what's the next stage? is the UN likely to condemn male circumcision

0:09:11.990,0:09:18.950
or is, is that an uphill struggle? (JM) I don't think, I don't think the next stage is as easy as the UN

0:09:18.950,0:09:22.070
sort of responding following us having submitted a written statement on

0:09:22.070,0:09:27.320
it - It will require lobbying and so what we're seeing in the past is that you

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need repetition of lobbying and of trying to find repetiteurs essentially so

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they're, the main UN sort of people and bodies responsible for addressing

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specific issues. So, for example, we would then be lobbying the repetiteur for the

0:09:44.810,0:09:49.510
children's rights, to try to ensure that this kind of issue is on their radar,

0:09:49.510,0:09:54.080
given that it's an issue that is not on many people's radar generally, it's

0:09:54.080,0:09:58.040
probably not on their radar either and then beyond that, whenever we return

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to the Human Rights Council and also as part of our work on the committee of the

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rights for the child, which is another UN body, we would then also try to do a

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coordinated effort in that area. And we've seen, we've been able to do that on

0:10:12.260,0:10:17.510
other issues as well, so for example, in, under clerical child abuse. (EP) Well let's

0:10:17.510,0:10:23.120
move to that topic then, so this is again, it seems to be a long and complicated

0:10:23.120,0:10:29.900
process, so what stage are you at now with the submissions for the NSS? (JM) So

0:10:29.900,0:10:36.530
essentially we do, we provide submissions on, under the Human Rights Council, so we

0:10:36.530,0:10:40.880
did it at this time around under the Italy UPR, so the Universal Periodic

0:10:40.880,0:10:48.380
Review, so we are able to, to sort of, bring to light the fact that legislation

0:10:48.380,0:10:52.580
in various countries does not provide adequate protection for children who are

0:10:52.580,0:10:55.370
victims

of abuse especially if that abuse has
0:10:55.370,0:11:00.800
come from members of, of religious
organizations and in particular the
0:11:00.800,0:11:05.810
Roman Catholic Church in the case of the
Italy Universal Periodic Review because
0:11:05.810,0:11:09.890
the Catholic Church has such a
privileged position within society and
0:11:09.890,0:11:14.300
also legally in Italy. (EP) Well what's been
the Italian government's response so far?
0:11:14.300,0:11:18.770
(JM) We haven't had any direct, as far as I
know, any direct response from the
0:11:18.770,0:11:23.990
Italian government and so this is the
issue sometimes with putting, making
0:11:23.990,0:11:29.060
these statements at the UN level - I've
often I think gotten feedback from other
0:11:29.060,0:11:32.360
NGOs and from people who are
specifically interested in these issues
0:11:32.360,0:11:37.340
but from the actual governments
themselves they have a tendency to reply
0:11:37.340,0:11:42.770
and just say well, and not directly to
the NSS statements, but just to civil
0:11:42.770,0:11:46.340
society statements and say well we will
take them on board, thank you for them, we
0:11:46.340,0:11:49.850
value the the input from civil
society but they won't specifically
0:11:49.850,0:11:54.200

address them so we would, we hope that it
will at least interest some people
0:11:54.200,0:11:58.250
within the Italian government or some
legislators who are working around child
0:11:58.250,0:12:04.730
protection and in particular child abuse,
so that is, in a way it's, it's a question
0:12:04.730,0:12:10.130
of being activists within that space and
and raising awareness and then never
0:12:10.130,0:12:16.790
giving up and so that when the time is
right maybe some other political
0:12:16.790,0:12:22.250
interests align and were able to see
some kind of difference. (EP) So your aim is
0:12:22.250,0:12:27.950
to put long-term pressure on the
Italian government basically, until something
happens and on the church. (JM) Yes, and
there is
0:12:27.950,0:12:33.140
also within the Universal Periodic
Review because there's a specific report
0:12:33.140,0:12:37.090
that is published - what we had been
urging is for that report to have,
0:12:37.090,0:12:44.030
to include the need for what we're
calling for - mandatory reporting -
0:12:44.030,0:12:47.660
essentially the idea is that if you're a
position of responsibility and you hear
0:12:47.660,0:12:53.780
of or are aware of abuse of children going
on or of a child you then have a legal
0:12:53.780,0:12:59.000
duty to report that abuse to the

authorities and those authorities have

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to be the state authorities rather than
for example the Catholic Church

0:13:02.390,0:13:05.750

authorities. (EP) and that's something
which

is not currently..... (JM) No and it's not

0:13:05.750,0:13:10.339

currently.....

so our aim in a way is to sort of show

0:13:10.339,0:13:16.100

that there is a lot of gaps still in the
protection around children. (EP) You
mentioned

0:13:16.100,0:13:19.430

the possibility of linking up with other
organizations - has that happened so far

0:13:19.430,0:13:24.410

on this issue? (JM) On child abuse, I think so -
I know that Keith Porteous Wood, who's

0:13:24.410,0:13:29.629

the President of the NSS, has worked
quite a lot with other organizations, so

0:13:29.629,0:13:34.220

for example, organizations for survivors
of abuse - he's also worked very closely

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with researchers in Australia who have
created a, a compendium of, essentially an

0:13:42.680,0:13:48.399

analysis of child abuse both in
Australia and abroad and who've provided

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ways in which it can be addressed and so
we've also worked with an organization

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called Mandate Now which develops the
mandatory reporting framework and made

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sure that this, these kinds of
organisations are also on the radar of

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the people to whom were, for example,
submitting written statements so whether

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it's within the UN Human Rights
framework or within the UN Committee of

0:14:13.939,0:14:18.100

the Rights, Committee on the Rights of
the Child, we would then seek to

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highlight what other organizations are
doing because they will essentially be

0:14:22.639,0:14:28.670

the experts in these fields to help
provide solutions or frameworks to be

0:14:28.670,0:14:32.389

able to address the issue. (EP) So it's a
collective effort basically. (JM) Yes it is. Yes,
yeah.

0:14:32.389,0:14:37.189

(EP) Let's move on to a topic
which is particularly close to home

0:14:37.189,0:14:41.269

which is caste discrimination,
now you said before that you can use

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your representation of the UN to put
pressure on the UK government. How have

0:14:46.579,0:14:53.290

you been doing that in the caste
discrimination case? (JM) So we, in 2012 I

0:14:53.290,0:14:58.459

gave a statement on caste
discrimination at the Human Rights

0:14:58.459,0:15:03.889

Council and what then happened with that is that we, I think it was Keith, was, so

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Keith Porteous Wood our president was able to lobby MPs and also members of

0:15:09.379,0:15:15.620

the House of Lords in London and then put, and as they were putting in changes

0:15:15.620,0:15:20.149

to the Equality Act, to try to say well actually caste should be a protected

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characteristic and so what's happened is that we

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have been able to get that, be, so essentially make, ensure that it is considered

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by members of the House of Lords as bills were being tabled. However, so just to

0:15:34.589,0:15:39.779

say, being able to say that this issue is an issue that is being considered at the

0:15:39.779,0:15:43.770

UN and it's being raised at the UN also puts pressure on Parliament and on

0:15:43.770,0:15:47.399

members of the House of Lords and on politicians within the UK because the UN

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obviously has, has clout and has, and is relevant to the way that the UK wants to

0:15:53.880,0:15:59.209

position itself. So we want to be able to show that any sort of human rights

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difficulties that are being encountered in the UK are not going to just be a

0:16:04.050,0:16:07.170

domestic issue but they're actually going to be highlighted at the UN and

0:16:07.170,0:16:11.279

this and, and for me specifically I think it's quite important that we don't

0:16:11.279,0:16:16.440

always position ourselves for example in the UK and in other Western countries as

0:16:16.440,0:16:21.000

saying that we value human rights but then not ensure that our own domestic

0:16:21.000,0:16:26.430

human rights record is essentially as clean as it can be. (EP) How big is, an issue

0:16:26.430,0:16:31.980

is caste discrimination in the UK? (JM) I think it is a big, really big issue but not one

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that is very easy to quantify so the difficulty is that there was a report

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that was provided, drawn up by a previous UK government, I think this was around

0:16:43.200,0:16:51.630

2016 perhaps a bit before and they saw that there, it's really difficult to get

0:16:51.630,0:16:56.670

people within communities that would, that would enforce a caste system, or

0:16:56.670,0:17:01.470

still have a caste system to then report on it to the authorities or to

0:17:01.470,0:17:06.059

sociologists who might be carrying out a qualitative or even quantitative

0:17:06.059,0:17:13.110

analysis and so what this report found was that caste discrimination was having

0:17:13.110,0:17:20.370

an impact on a huge variety of, of areas of society so for example it had impacts

0:17:20.370,0:17:25.140

on employment so it couldn't, which means that it could have been, it seems to

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be caste discrimination when people seek employment.

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There is also issues around care, elderly care, so if you are

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for example from a lower caste or so-called lower caste you might not then

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get the right kind of elderly care from providers who would give caste some

0:17:45.840,0:17:51.150

kind of regard, so there is essentially a huge variety and that, that's sort of

0:17:51.150,0:17:57.120

from, from a societal perspective these are examples that treat with, with sort of

0:17:57.120,0:18:01.800

organized parts of society but there is also a huge untold impact when it comes

0:18:01.800,0:18:06.570

to mental well-being so when it, when it comes to issues around depression and

0:18:06.570,0:18:13.050

social isolation as well.(EP) Why has the UK government so far failed to make caste

0:18:13.050,0:18:16.500

discrimination a protected characteristic under the Equality Act? (JM) I

0:18:16.500,0:18:21.690

think what we've seen is a difficulty to

get politicians to take the issue

0:18:21.690,0:18:29.820

seriously in a sense that they analyze it from an objective perspective and

0:18:29.820,0:18:35.160

what we've instead seem to be seeing as that politicians obtain information from

0:18:35.160,0:18:40.680

community leaders that are, essentially have a louder voice or a closer

0:18:40.680,0:18:44.490

connection to politicians and these community leaders are often those that

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have maybe more extreme views for example that might promote caste, a caste

0:18:52.380,0:18:58.740

based system and therefore there is a difficulty with MPs having to ensure

0:18:58.740,0:19:02.190

that they're keeping the support of their communities and being fearful of

0:19:02.190,0:19:08.550

alienating parts of the, their constituency and therefore not willing

0:19:08.550,0:19:13.590

to address issues which might be seen to be questions of cultural differences

0:19:13.590,0:19:19.350

rather than actual human rights violations.(EP) How do you see your work at

0:19:19.350,0:19:22.940

the UN or your representations at the UN on this issue

0:19:22.940,0:19:26.700

putting further pressure on the UK government? Do you think it's likely that

0:19:26.700,0:19:30.300

the government is going to change its stance at any time in the near future?. (JM) So

0:19:30.300,0:19:36.540

we, what does happen when you give a statement at the UN is that ideally the

0:19:36.540,0:19:41.580

represent..., the delegation let's say from the UK government will be taking note

0:19:41.580,0:19:47.869

of the statement that has been given and then will be reporting it back to,

0:19:47.869,0:19:52.940

I guess the Foreign Office, and so what then happens from that is that these

0:19:52.940,0:19:57.409

kinds of issues are then logged and hopefully the human rights world, lawyers

0:19:57.409,0:20:02.450

or human rights specialized people within the UK government would then

0:20:02.450,0:20:06.830

bring that issue back to let's say the Prime Minister or to specific parts of

0:20:06.830,0:20:11.629

government. That's obviously the ideal situation but of course the question is

0:20:11.629,0:20:14.960

whether these issues are actually politically expedient or not for the

0:20:14.960,0:20:20.119

government to take into account and so also the, the fact that as for example, as

0:20:20.119,0:20:24.710

lobbyists for the NSS we're able to then take the fact that this issue was

0:20:24.710,0:20:30.139

brought up at the UN back to MPs when we then do our own political lobbying in

0:20:30.139,0:20:35.719

Parliament and our own, when we send our own sort of report to various people

0:20:35.719,0:20:39.200

within government that we might know and so we're able to also put this other

0:20:39.200,0:20:43.460

tangential pressure that's not just relying on the UK delegation bringing

0:20:43.460,0:20:47.179

the information back to the government but us also saying well this is an issue

0:20:47.179,0:20:51.109

that has been raised and we've done, we, in the past we've raised the issue of

0:20:51.109,0:20:55.940

caste discrimination in 2012 but we've also raised it again in 2016 and now

0:20:55.940,0:21:01.609

this year and this provides continuity with a problem that's able to show that

0:21:01.609,0:21:06.049

it's not being met with any kind of action on behalf of the UK government

0:21:06.049,0:21:10.249

and this coupled with the fact that this, the issue of caste discrimination, was

0:21:10.249,0:21:14.509

also brought up in the Universal Periodic Review that the UK was

0:21:14.509,0:21:20.509

undergoing, so there is a specific requirement from the UN to the UK which

0:21:20.509,0:21:24.679

is binding in terms of international law that is saying well actually the UK

0:21:24.679,0:21:29.570

should change its legal framework so that caste is a protected

0:21:29.570,0:21:34.580
characteristic under the Equality Act. (EP) So as a matter of international law the UK

0:21:34.580,0:21:40.969
is, is now obliged to, is that what you're saying? (JM) Yes, yes exactly and beyond that, the Committee on, on

0:21:40.969,0:21:48.049
racism from, which is also a sub committee within the UN structure has also

0:21:48.049,0:21:53.119
reminded in 2016, the UK that they were under this obligation to

0:21:53.119,0:21:59.179
essentially put in, put this protection into law. (EP) How does the UK's lack of

0:21:59.179,0:22:01.970
specific law on caste discrimination compare with other

0:22:01.970,0:22:07.639
countries? (JM) I'm not exactly certain as to whether other countries have brought it

0:22:07.639,0:22:14.090
in specifically so I wouldn't be able to to speak on that, per se. What is

0:22:14.090,0:22:17.990
interesting though with the UK is that from a legal perspective the UK

0:22:17.990,0:22:22.759
government has been saying that it is fine for it to, not to legislate

0:22:22.759,0:22:27.350
specifically to change the law because the UK government seems to believe

0:22:27.350,0:22:32.960
essentially that they, there can still be a change in the law by case law rather

0:22:32.960,0:22:38.119

than by legislation. (EP) Is that adequate or inadequate in your view? (JM) No, which is

0:22:38.119,0:22:42.830
completely inadequate because case law is, does not provide any kind of

0:22:42.830,0:22:46.909
certainty that a protection will be put in place for people who are victims of

0:22:46.909,0:22:53.809
caste discrimination. Instead, case law would only develop if somebody brings a

0:22:53.809,0:22:58.399
case that is then successful and that then sets a precedent that says that

0:22:58.399,0:23:01.960
people who are subject to caste discrimination should be protected.

0:23:01.960,0:23:06.259
However it's extremely unlikely that that's somebody who suffers from caste

0:23:06.259,0:23:10.940
discrimination would have both the funds but also feel comfortable enough to be

0:23:10.940,0:23:16.730
able to bring such a discrimination suit in the courts because often that means

0:23:16.730,0:23:21.590
going, let's say, against their employer or speaking out about an issue that is

0:23:21.590,0:23:26.149
very specific to one part of their community especially if for them that

0:23:26.149,0:23:30.409
community is probably all that they really see in their daily life and we've

0:23:30.409,0:23:33.549
seen similar issues when it comes to things like female genital mutilation -

0:23:33.549,0:23:40.039
there is a parallel in a way between
these kinds of human rights violations

0:23:40.039,0:23:45.549
that are seen as being cultural norms
and therefore not something that

0:23:45.549,0:23:50.330
government should actually be engaging
with but actually all that this does is

0:23:50.330,0:23:54.559
mean that government is failing in its
protection of its own citizens. (EP) So there

0:23:54.559,0:23:59.059
is a real advantage in these, some
so-called culturally sensitive matters

0:23:59.059,0:24:04.220
to actually make it clear what the law
is so that people then feel confident

0:24:04.220,0:24:08.659
about protecting themselves by bringing
that suit. (JM) Exactly, exactly. (EP) And just
one final

0:24:08.659,0:24:13.009
question Josephine - how is the corona
virus pandemic affecting the UN's work

0:24:13.009,0:24:16.120
on human rights at the
moment that you've seen so far and how

0:24:16.120,0:24:22.270
likely, how is it going to affect it do
you think in the near future? (JM) So we, the

0:24:22.270,0:24:26.920
Human Rights Council in, this time round
was running between February and March and

0:24:26.920,0:24:31.780
actually the first two weeks went ahead
and the last week was cancelled. I was

0:24:31.780,0:24:37.060
quite surprised that it even went ahead

because at the time the Swiss government

0:24:37.060,0:24:43.330
had said that gatherings of a thousand
people should not be taking place and

0:24:43.330,0:24:46.870
I'm not exactly sure how many people
gather in Geneva for the Human Rights

0:24:46.870,0:24:50.170
Council but I'm sure it's at least
around a thousand, coming from all over

0:24:50.170,0:24:54.220
the world and we're all generally
milling about in the same building and

0:24:54.220,0:24:59.440
often within the same large auditorium
so I think it was to me quite surprising

0:24:59.440,0:25:04.480
that they hadn't yet put things in place
to deal with it but beyond that I think

0:25:04.480,0:25:07.840
that they ended up being, finding
solutions for example by saying that we

0:25:07.840,0:25:11.560
could really have a set number of people
in a room and separating everyone and so

0:25:11.560,0:25:18.000
in line with lots of other industries
and other international organisations

0:25:18.000,0:25:22.810
there's going to be obviously
a rise in online work and trying to

0:25:22.810,0:25:28.120
address issues that way. There is the
difficulty that, I think quite a lot of

0:25:28.120,0:25:33.400
the lobbying that happens at
the UN, happens during side, side

0:25:33.400,0:25:37.420

events that are essentially held in parallel to the main program of the

0:25:37.420,0:25:42.910
Human Rights Council and also it happens a lot in the main cafe, funnily

0:25:42.910,0:25:50.860
enough, in the UN building and so not having that one reunion of many people

0:25:50.860,0:25:54.520
who are physically all in the same place and all focused on the same kinds of

0:25:54.520,0:25:59.110
issues it will probably make quite a big difference but I mean the question

0:25:59.110,0:26:05.380
is whether they end up hosting it or not in, in June and then also in September. (EP) So

0:26:05.380,0:26:08.260
it's all uncertain at the moment basically? (JM) It's all, it's all

0:26:08.260,0:26:12.640
quite uncertain as far as I know. (EP) But that's interesting to hear that it's

0:26:12.640,0:26:16.390
about personal connections as much as anything rather than just the formal

0:26:16.390,0:26:21.910
events. (JM) And it is quite strange because I, I delivered a statement several years

0:26:21.910,0:26:27.760
ago on slavery and Mauritania and when I was delivering the statement

0:26:27.760,0:26:32.049
at the end the Mauritanian representative obviously spoke to

0:26:32.049,0:26:35.650
address the whole council during his right of reply and said that there was

0:26:35.650,0:26:39.279
no slavery in Mauritania but then I ended up being able to have like

0:26:39.279,0:26:44.020
off-the-record conversations with him about the issue when we were in the cafe

0:26:44.020,0:26:47.760
and, and he'd come up to me specifically to talk to me about about this issue

0:26:47.760,0:26:53.950
afterwards and, and because that whole environment is meant to be off the record

0:26:53.950,0:26:59.110
and no lobbying is meant to take place in the main auditorium there is that

0:26:59.110,0:27:03.159
ability to have these connections which you wouldn't be able to have if you're

0:27:03.159,0:27:06.390
in, and as far as I know, if you're on an online system.

0:27:06.390,0:27:10.929
Strangely enough as well there's another example from when I was, I delivered a

0:27:10.929,0:27:16.630
statement on a video that, the innocence of Muslim, Muslims video that was

0:27:16.630,0:27:26.840
published in 2012 I think, it was, yeah, it was in September and it surfaced and caused a huge number of riots and attacks on the, and

0:27:26.840,0:27:28.300
it was linked to the

0:27:28.300,0:27:34.570
attacks on the US embassies and I think in Egypt but then also in Benghazi when

0:27:34.570,0:27:39.760
the US diplomat was killed and for example when I spoke on that statement

0:27:39.760,0:27:44.320
which we, I was trying to make the point
that actually it's not because something

0:27:44.320,0:27:48.840
as horrid as that video was surfacing
that it was okay to start implementing

0:27:48.840,0:27:53.010
principles and also laws in various
countries that would allow for

0:27:53.010,0:27:59.520
censorship of criticisms of religion even if
that criticism is offensive and

0:27:59.520,0:28:06.690
at the time because the US was in such a
delicate situation because of the, of the

0:28:06.690,0:28:10.590
demonstrations and violence that was
happening in Egypt and also in Libya,

0:28:10.590,0:28:16.809
Obama, who was president at the time, was
leaning towards saying that censorship

0:28:16.809,0:28:21.549
was justified in circumstances of
statements that were offensive to

0:28:21.549,0:28:25.830
different religions and in parallel to
me giving that statement there was a

0:28:25.830,0:28:31.270
resolution that was being passed around,
on, attention on blasphemy at the UN and

0:28:31.270,0:28:34.710
it was being pushed a lot by the
OIC and

0:28:34.710,0:28:38.510
and it was starting to receive support
from Western countries as well and

0:28:38.510,0:28:43.830
interestingly just after I gave that

statement a change was made that

0:28:43.830,0:28:48.300
was pushed I think, I think by the
potentially the UK and the U.S. to the

0:28:48.300,0:28:53.430
resolution and again we were able to, I was
able to know about this because we had

0:28:53.430,0:28:58.980
our team on the ground in, in Geneva and
somebody was able to get a copy of a

0:28:58.980,0:29:03.240
photocopy of the resolution with the
mark-up by hand that said that there

0:29:03.240,0:29:07.440
should not be censorship simply because
offensive statements were being made

0:29:07.440,0:29:15.090
that caused religious offence, offence to
religious people and that evening which

0:29:15.090,0:29:19.800
would have been, sort of, noon for the
for the US, Obama then addressed the

0:29:19.800,0:29:25.290
General Assembly in New York and, and
changed his discourse at that point and

0:29:25.290,0:29:30.540
actually said there is no, essentially no
right not to be offended. Obviously we

0:29:30.540,0:29:35.940
can say that it is extremely offensive
to have videos like the innocence of

0:29:35.940,0:29:40.500
Muslims out and and it should not be
given any kind of notice but it doesn't

0:29:40.500,0:29:45.090
mean that freedom of expression should
be curtailed. (EP) Absolutely. (JM) ... and
being, and

0:29:45.090,0:29:48.270

having that presence at the UN and having, and being able to develop

0:29:48.270,0:29:51.270

personal relationships which comes from being able to go and have coffees with

0:29:51.270,0:29:56.480

people and, and being there on the ground helps a lot for that kind of situation.

0:29:56.480,0:30:00.780

(EP) So it's really important that the NSS should keep having representatives at

0:30:00.780,0:30:06.810

the UN. (JM) Really, really important and it's hard work I mean I, was lucky to have time off now

0:30:06.810,0:30:11.810

between two jobs to be able to dedicate to coming to Geneva and

0:30:11.810,0:30:15.690

logistically it's always a bit complicated but it is something that is

0:30:15.690,0:30:22.010

really important to do and to keep doing even if sometimes it feels like we're

0:30:22.010,0:30:26.280

shouting into the ether. (EP) Well Josephine Macintosh thank you very much.

0:30:26.280,0:30:30.170

(JM) Thank you. Thanks very much Emma.

0:30:33.590,0:30:38.740

(EP) That was episode 23 of the National Secular society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:30:38.740,0:30:42.960

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0:30:42.960,0:30:47.340

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0:30:47.340,0:30:52.860

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0:30:52.860,0:30:57.570

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0:30:57.570,0:31:03.140

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0:31:04.020,0:31:06.080