

Ep 41: Year in review

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You're listening to Episode 41 of the National Secular Society podcast presented by Emma

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Park (EP). 2020 has not been an easy year for anyone and the NSS has been no exception. I'm here

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today with Stephen Evans (SE), Megan Manson (MM), Alastair Lichten (AL) and Chris Sloggett (CS) to

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discuss the highs and lows of the year and what the NSS has been able to achieve despite

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the pandemic and government restrictions. We'll also be looking ahead to the prospects for 2021.

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(EP): Stephen, Megan, Alastair and Chris, hello. (All): Hi, hello. (EP):

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Let's start with the most important events of the year from the NSS perspective. Stephen what about

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you? (SE): Well obviously it's been a year where Covid has been ever present in one way or another;

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if not in the foreground then it's certainly been

there in the background. And certainly campaigning

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in a time of Coronavirus has had its challenges. But I think we have had plenty of successes,

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plenty of wins this year. Not least in getting blasphemy abolished in Scotland;

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well almost anyway. And successfully amending the Hate Crime bill to protect free speech.

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Some lobbying for reforms to religious education in Wales has been successful. We've got secularism

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on the curriculum there too; well almost again. That will all kind of come to fruition

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next year we hope but I think perhaps the most poignant moment for me this year was back in

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January before social distancing was even a thing when Lord Taverne

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introduced his Private Members Bill to end the automatic right of Church of England Bishops

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to sit in the House of Lords. So this was a bill

that we drafted with him so it was a proud moment

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for me. But what what struck me at that time was the reaction to the Bill in the Lords.

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So I got a call from Lord Taverne - I think it was the night before he introduced the Bill

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where he called me up and he said: 'Uh Stephen that they're not going to like it' and how right

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he was. When he stood up and announced the Bill to the Chamber it was greeted with a sharp audible

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intake of breath, which was actually comical and many peers actually laughed at the reaction.

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The other unusual thing was on first reading a Bill is always allowed to proceed but on this

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occasion there were noisy calls of: 'Not content' for it to proceed which led to a rather awkward

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and again I think somewhat comical moment for the Lord Speaker who, despite the very loud

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calls of 'not contents' had to declare that the 'contents' had it. Because that's what

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happens. Peers haven't had the opportunity to scrutinize and consider newly introduced bills

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and assess their merits or otherwise so naturally the Bill proceeds at this stage. It's a formality.

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But clearly on this occasion the very subject of the Bill - we called it the House of Lords

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Removal of Bishops Bill - the very subject of that Bill was enough for people to make their minds up

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already. And the reason this really stands out for me is that I think it was symbolic of just how

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entrenched religious privilege is in Parliament. Because, let's face it, a Bill to remove the

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automatic right of clerics to sit as lawmakers should not be controversial in the 21st century.

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But the mere suggestion of it was, you know, it was clearly outrageous to many peers. And

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it just got me thinking back to Charles Bradlaugh and Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament and

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because he was an atheist he wasn't allowed to take the religious oath which was necessary to

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take his seat in Parliament. You know, and he faced so much hostility just for daring

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to challenge the religious orthodoxy of the day.

And although society has changed a lot since then

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I think secularism has been a big driver of that change. It did make me wonder just how

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much Parliament had changed. I should say that

I think the House of Lords works fairly well

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as a revising chamber but it is too much of an old boys' club. It reeks of religious privilege.

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It looks like a church but it FEELS like a church, especially when you've got bishops in their robes

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on the benches and with peers on their knees being led in Anglican prayer. Which is how each and

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every sitting in the House of Lords begins. And yeah, the whole episode just reminded me of the

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disconnect I think that there is between Parliament and the public when it comes to

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the sort of issues that we work on. And of course

real reformers. So we are a radical organization in

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many ways but the changes that we want to see:

separation of Church and State; end to faith schools

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and end to religious privileges; they are actually

not particularly controversial with the public

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and they are supported I think by the majority of

the public. The polling shows that. But for MPs and

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peers it's just clearly too hot to handle somehow.

As I say I think it just shows how entrenched

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religious privilege is within the establishment and just how much harder our work is because of

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that. But yes getting the legislation to remove the Bishops: it was a nice moment but

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it was another stark reminder of the entrenched

religious privilege that we face, and you know

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what we're up against.

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(EP): Well I think especially

in the last four years we've certainly seen

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I think my sense is that a lot of people across the

country are increasingly in favour of widespread

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constitutional reform. So perhaps the removal of the Bishops will eventually take part of that

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if there's a moment when it comes that we should just reform the whole constitution.

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(SE): Well the Bill's there, the proposals, the Bill sets out how to do it. Of course it

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may form part of broader reform of the House of Lords, I don't know but one way or another

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we will get rid of Bishops in the House of Lords.
(AL): Ad I think we should remember that our history,

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the National Secular Society came out of a period where there was desire for radical

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constitutional and social reform. (EP): Megan what about you? What was your highlight of the year?

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(MM): Well the highlight of the year for me was a wedding proposal. But not that sort of

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a proposal. It was a proposal from the Law Commission on changing wedding laws. We've been saying for quite some time

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now that there is a real problem with wedding laws in this country. It's quite archaic and it's been

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developed in a piecemeal manner in which people of different religions or beliefs are treated

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differently. So there is a completely different process for how you get married depending on

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whether you want an Anglican wedding, a Jewish wedding, a Quaker wedding, a wedding of another

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religion or a civil wedding. And because of this, this has led to lots of inequality. So for example

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Jews and Quakers have a lot more freedom as to where they can marry than everyone else.

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And it's led to other sort of problems as well. So we've been saying: look this really

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is very much causing inequalities based on people's religion or beliefs, so we really

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want to try and unify this process.

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And fortunately the Law Commission agrees with us. So then their proposals which came out a couple of months ago did say they were

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looking into unifying and simplifying the process

for getting married. So they are proposing to have

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universal civil preliminaries which will make the first bit of getting married

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much simpler for everyone. They want to take off prohibitions on religious content in civil

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marriage. I think this is quite a big one because lots of people who are not religious

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or, you know they're a little bit religious but not so much they want a religious wedding,

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still find meaning in religious poems or hymns or blessings. But at the moment they are banned

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from having that in a civil marriage, even though it really has no bearing on the legal process

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getting married at all. So the Law Commission has proposed to take off this prohibition which we

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support and ultimately it says that as far as possible people from all religions and none should

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be treated the same. So it was a very pleasant surprise really to see how in line a lot of this,

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these proposals from the Law Commission were.

And they did emphasise that we want the equality,

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freedom and clarity at the forefront of what we're proposing which we completely agree with, that's

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completely in line with what we want really for a secular democracy. (EP): And how much chance

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is there that that's likely to be actually passed into law anytime soon? (MM): Well of course that's

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still quite speculative at this stage. So they are now consulting on this process so the

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the deadline for the consultation is at the beginning of January. So they'll be collecting lots

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of different opinions from different groups. The NSS is certainly going to be submitting a response to

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this but yes it is just advisory so the Law Commission advises what it thinks the law

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should do and then Parliament's got to ultimately decide which of these proposals it agrees with. So

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we're not quite there yet but it's certainly

a really big step and so that's why it's for me,

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when I read these proposals I think it was like Christmas had come early so yeah definitely a

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highlight for me. (EP): That's fantastic news. Alastair,

what about you? (AL): Well I mean I was looking at the

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annual report the other day and as I didn't have much involvement in it I think feel I'm

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a good position to praise it and and say just you know what a great document it is and

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to just look back at how much work we've done this year, particularly in education. Education is always

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the largest area of our work. It's the one when we you know when people join the NSS

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and they tell us why they've joined over and over again. We see education is just such a huge area.

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For me working this year on the 'No more faith schools' campaign,

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I would say the highlight has been hearing so many people's stories in so many different ways.

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So while we were running the national petition against faith schools many many people took that

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opportunity in the comments to share their own experiences and stories. And some people

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have you know sort of just a moral precept, a philosophical objection to faith schools. But for so

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many people it's about the stories of how their lives are affected by faith schools. And how,

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you know, just how many ways it impacts on their family life, on their ability just to

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seek a good education for their children or in the case of many teachers, how

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they feel compromised by the imposition of religious ethos on their work. (EP): D you have

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any particular examples? (SE): Yes, I think one case that probably springs to mind actually this year was

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the family that we helped in Wales who had been refused a meaningful alternative to collective

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worship for their children. So their children had been withdrawn from collective worship in a

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faith school because it was quite proselytising
in nature. And the school had been quite

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firm in their refusal to offer anything
other than just segregation for the children.

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They wouldn't offer them any sort of
meaningful
alternative. And we actually were prepared to
go

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to court and we got solicitors involved
because we thought they should have a right

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to a meaningful alternative. And so we were
able to
help them once we got involved uh the school
has

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now decided to review that decision so
hopefully
we'll have a better outcome for them. I think

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that's important that we do remember that
for all
these religious privileges that we have, there's

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always someone on the receiving end there's
always
a victim and as Alastair says, it's

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always interesting for us to hear those stories
brought to life. (AL): And one of the ways that
I hear

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people's stories is when I'm and also Megan
plays

a big role in this, helping with casework,
advising

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parents, not just parents often also teachers
and students. But when you're speaking to
someone

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on the phone and so often I hear from the
person
that they've raised a concern with the school

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and the school have just sort of told them:
'Oh no one's ever complained about this
before',

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and so often just speaking to them you
get the sense that they are only just hearing
from you that

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these issues come up all the time and that
they
don't need to be made to feel like they're

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a problem - like you know (they are told) 'you
should basically shut up and put up with it'.
That sort of

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almost emotional support often has a big
impact
on parents and then they feel more confident
to

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go in to speak to the school and to try and
find
a reasonable solution to these things. (EP):
Thanks Alastair

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and from the podcasting angle I would
say that there were two podcasts that made

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a particular impact on me. First was the one with Lloyd Riley and Mick Murray from 'Dignity in

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Dying and Dr Anthony Lempert from the NSS Medical Forum. I think they showed really powerfully how

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important it is to get the law on assisted dying changed so that it is possible, because the current

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situation is really inhumane. And the second podcast that I particularly found interesting was

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my conversation with Dr Sophie Richardson from Human Rights Watch on the difficulties with

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getting religious freedom in China, which is an atheist state but being atheist most definitely

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doesn't mean that you promote free speech. (AL): Yes and actually those two episodes are ones that

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we got a lot of comments on on social media and people responding when we send out

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the podcast and it is really helpful to know the topics that people are interested in and partly

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there is a real desire for going in-depth with expertise. And there's also a real interest in

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international issues and what we can learn about the situation in this country and some

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of the challenges we face by seeing some of the issues around the world. (SE): Yeah I think that issue

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as well, particularly assisted dying, is another example of what I was talking about earlier - this

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disconnect that there is between Parliament and the people. Public opinion is clearly in favour of,

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if not a change in the law which it is but certainly a review of the law

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of assisted dying. It's something that is absolutely overdue. It needs to happen.

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Everybody knows it but again in Parliament, where we see religious interests so deeply entrenched,

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it just seems to be - they're almost living on a different planet. (EP): And Chris what about you? (CS): So well

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my most important event of the year was also one of the most shocking events here certainly

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from a secularist perspective. And that was the killing of Samuel Paty in France

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and the subsequent attacks on French secularism that came out of it.

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So Samuel paty was a teacher in France. He was just doing his job and by that I

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mean he showed a cartoon from Charlie Hebdo magazine in a class concerning free expression and

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as a result he was subject to a vicious social media campaign. From the reports at the time

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I think a father of one of the students took exception and then there were some

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other people who got involved as well. It was a very targeted and personal social media campaign

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against him and then he was beheaded, killed in protest fashion. He had dedicated his

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professional life to public service and he lost his life in these sort of grotesque circumstances

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for it. Islamist fundamentalism of course is a ongoing threat globally but one of depressing,

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many of the depressing things about the story was how many people, particularly leaders in a lot

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of Muslim majority countries and some in the western press as well actually, to be honest,

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turned the conversation against France very quickly and turned it away from a conversation

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about how to tackle Islamist fundamentalism and into a conversation about the merits or

0:15:28.800,0:15:33.040
otherwise of French secularism. (EP): Are there any other highlights that any of you would like to mention?

0:15:33.920,0:15:37.680
(SE): Well I think I touched on the Hate Crime Bill in Scotland and certainly one of the positives for

0:15:37.680,0:15:43.680
me has been the coordinated defence of free speech in response to the badly drafted Hate

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Crime Bill in Scotland. I don't think free speech is very well defended in the UK or anywhere really

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so it's really nice to work alongside other civil society organisations' lawyers,

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artists, comedians, religious groups, opposition MSPs to get really meaningful changes to the Bill

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that I think will protect both everyone's right

to speak freely about religion and to disagree

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robustly as well. But it also was just good to defend the important principle of free speech

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and I don't think there's enough of that going on and I think always I already touched on the

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the reforms in Wales which are really positive. We've got legislation actually going through

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the Senate at the moment to replace our RE with a new subject of Religion, Values and Ethics with

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secularism specifically listed as a core concept to be studying. We've lobbied really hard on this.

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i met with the Minister back in January, Alastair has given evidence to the committee

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and going back years we've been liaising with civil servants who and the people responsible

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for building this new curriculum, so it's really been nice to see a lot of that work paying off.

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(AL): Yeah I really want to echo what Stephen said there.

I think there's exciting opportunities

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ahead for curriculum reform in Wales and maybe also going back to what Stephen was

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saying about the the Bishop's bill and the entire sense of entitlement and inertia

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in the English UK Parliament: I do find that when you deal with policymakers and politicians

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in Wales and in Scotland there's less of that just bone-deep deference to

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the Establishment and to religion and so that it means you can overcome more of these issues it seems.

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For me particular highlights I just want to say that we've been able to support some really high

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quality research this year that I'm really proud of. We did a research report on Academisations -

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some of the challenges that caused - you can check the bonus episode I did with Emma about that.

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Also this week we've published some research which isn't our research but we've supported it for

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our scholarship programme which is into religious education and how the Church of England and Relate

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and Church affiliated producer communities really dominate the way in which RE is taught

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and particularly how Christianity is taught in England. We've been able to begin looking at

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overhauling our 'exploring secularism' resources and that's going to be something we'll be continuing

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next year. We've also got two pretty major pieces of research which are coming to an end,

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they're completed and they will be being published next year. So that will I think both of

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those will position the National Secular Society as a really leading voice on many of these issues.

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(EP): Wat about the biggest difficulties or challenges that you've faced this year? Megan what about you?

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(MM): Well obviously it's been trying to campaign amid Covid-19 and all the lockdowns this has caused.

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I haven't really been working in the office since March and certainly at the beginning this

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was a huge challenge but I think the thing with challenges is very often they do create

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opportunities to innovate and to do other things that you wouldn't necessarily have thought of

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doing under different circumstances. So one thing as Alastair was saying and when you have

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this kind of situation it can be quite conducive to research projects and so I managed to get a

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new report out this year 'Faith Shaped Holes' which is about the the gaps in equality in the Equality

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Act which are there to basically facilitate religious demands., for example for faith schools to

0:19:24.640,0:19:30.880
prioritise children who are from particular faith backgrounds. And it was also an opportunity to

0:19:30.880,0:19:36.320
think of new ideas and different ways of reaching out to people and one of the ways we

0:19:36.880,0:19:43.360
did that was launching a series of online lectures by our Council member Bob Forder

0:19:43.360,0:19:49.520
who's also our NSS historian. (EP): Sort of, I don't know a descendant don't know how many generations of

0:19:49.520,0:19:54.720

Robert Forder who was one of the earliest
NSS
Secretaries in the 19th century? (MM): That's
right

0:19:54.720,0:20:00.080
so yes it was really good to be able to have
these online lectures and obviously we didn't

0:20:00.080,0:20:05.200
have quite the the equipment and things to
do a
really polished lecture series but it was nice

0:20:05.200,0:20:10.160
to be able to do something a bit different and
to
offer something, particularly in the early days
of

0:20:10.160,0:20:15.280
lockdown where it was particularly strict and
lots
of people were stuck at home to actually be
able

0:20:15.280,0:20:20.160
to give an opportunity for people to learn
more
about secularism in this way. That really was a

0:20:20.160,0:20:26.080
bit of innovation that came out of the
challenges
of lockdown. (EP): Necessity is the mother of
invention.

0:20:26.720,0:20:33.360
(MM): Exactly. (AL): On that note I just want
to say that
the podcast which Emma and Megan did with
Lynn

0:20:33.360,0:20:39.200
Featherstone about the the Equality Act
report which
Megan led on that's in the archive and I really

0:20:39.200,0:20:43.680
recommend listening to that. I think that was
just a brilliant episode and gives you a quite

0:20:43.680,0:20:48.400
good overview of some of the key issues in
that
report. (MM): Yeah definitely it was
wonderful to get

0:20:48.400,0:20:53.120
Baroness Featherstone on there because
she was obviously one of the architects of

0:20:53.120,0:21:00.080
the Equality Act so she knows exactly how it
was
made. So yeah really really great to get her to
take a

0:21:00.080,0:21:05.040
look at this report and comment on it. (EP):
Stephen what
have been the biggest challenges for you this
year?

0:21:05.600,0:21:09.440
(SE) Well I'd certainly agree with Megan that
working remotely has brought its challenges.

0:21:09.440,0:21:14.160
I think we've risen to those challenges in
numerous ways but certainly thinking back to
late

0:21:14.160,0:21:19.920
spring and the beginning of the first lockdown
my wife's a key worker so she was working
flat

0:21:19.920,0:21:25.600
out and we've got two primary school-aged
children
so kind of looking after the NSS and
homeschooling

0:21:25.600,0:21:30.720
at the same time was a challenge and it's

certainly not one I'm keen to repeat. I'm not a

0:21:30.720,0:21:35.680

fan of multitasking at the best of times but this really took it to its extremes. Something else

0:21:35.680,0:21:41.040

that was made more difficult by Covid I think was getting attention for the issues that we work on.

0:21:41.600,0:21:45.600

We are always looking to get stories into the media to raise awareness and effect change that

0:21:45.600,0:21:50.240

way through the Press but obviously that's that's been a really tough year given how

0:21:50.240,0:21:55.200

dominant Covid has been in the news. Numerous times we've been told by journalists it's a

0:21:55.200,0:21:59.680

good story, it's an important issue but you know Covid and Brexit are just squeezing everything

0:21:59.680,0:22:03.440

out. Nevertheless I think we've had a pretty good hit rate this year, we've had some good coverage

0:22:03.440,0:22:09.520

in the media but it was certainly something that's been made more difficult. (AL): So certainly Covid

0:22:09.520,0:22:17.120

and before that Brexit and now concurrent have

just taken up the whole bandwidth of policymakers

0:22:17.120,0:22:21.760

and the media. I mean just to give you just the strain we see that these things are putting on

0:22:21.760,0:22:27.840

government and their ability to deal with any any other policy area, I just yesterday got a

0:22:27.840,0:22:33.520

acknowledgement email from a consultation on independent schools which had been submitted in

0:22:34.080,0:22:39.200

May and I don't think any progress of that has been made. But maybe we can sort of see

0:22:39.200,0:22:44.640

light at the end of the tunnel then there' all this bandwidth if that can be freed up then all

0:22:44.640,0:22:48.960

sorts of issues which have been just left on the sidelines might be able to be picked up and looked

0:22:48.960,0:22:54.320

at and we could see some some exciting changes over the next few years. (EP): On that note though

0:22:54.320,0:23:00.320

do you think that the enormous strain on national resources caused by the combination of Brexit and

0:23:00.320,0:23:06.000

Covid will have an impact on what the NSS is able to achieve with the government

0:23:06.000,0:23:12.160
and local authorities? (SE): Well I think we're still
to see what the economic impact of Covid will

0:23:12.160,0:23:18.000
be. I really don't think it's even begun to start
to hit yet. I think we're in for a bit of a shock.

0:23:18.000,0:23:22.480
One particular thing I'm concerned about is that
we'll see government looking to religious
groups

0:23:22.480,0:23:27.680
to play an increasing role in delivering public
services and welfare provision. We're
certainly

0:23:27.680,0:23:32.640
starting to see the indications of that already.
And I'm a little bit concerned about that
because

0:23:33.760,0:23:38.160
where religious groups do play a role in
plugging those gaps and filling those holes

0:23:39.200,0:23:42.000
left by cuts to public services which we will
see

0:23:42.640,0:23:47.440
I think we can see increased discrimination
and
proselytisation and that can really undermine
the

0:23:47.440,0:23:52.320
secular nature and the accessibility as well
as public services and undermine the dignity

0:23:52.320,0:23:57.040
of service users. So that's certainly something
we'll be looking out for next year but yeah

0:23:57.040,0:24:01.680

I don't think Brexit is quite done and dusted
yet and I still think that's going to take up

0:24:01.680,0:24:09.120
quite a bit of bandwidth going forward. (CS):
Yeah I
think I'd agree that the biggest challenge that
we

0:24:09.120,0:24:13.920
as so many other people's organisations have
faced
this year has been the restrictions that have
been

0:24:13.920,0:24:21.280
placed on us as a result of the virus.
It's made it harder to make plans as a team

0:24:21.280,0:24:26.480
And also we've lost things that
we take for granted on a personal level.

0:24:26.480,0:24:32.240
Of course we're aware that many people have
had
it much much worse for all sorts of reasons
but

0:24:32.240,0:24:37.520
also on a professional level I'd also echo
Stephen's comments about the difficulties of

0:24:38.080,0:24:42.800
getting any traction in the media this year and
this has obviously been such

0:24:42.800,0:24:47.600
a fundamental shift in the way that everybody
lives that yeah has also had that impact on us.

0:24:48.480,0:24:52.480
(EP): Moving on to, I mean we've talked about
the difficulties and challenges posed

0:24:52.480,0:24:58.320
by Covid this year. How have these difficulties

changed the way you work? I mean obviously remote

0:24:58.320,0:25:01.600

working is one thing but is there anything more specific? Alastair let's start with you.

0:25:02.240,0:25:09.920

(AL): O think it's been an opportunity to take time away from the 24-hour news cycle because the 24 hours

0:25:09.920,0:25:17.040

news cycle is just the same issue over and over again and we can focus on some longer term work.

0:25:17.040,0:25:22.640

One thing we've noticed as more people are working from home we've had more response to

0:25:22.640,0:25:29.040

emails so we've actually had more ability to listen to our members though we do really need

0:25:29.040,0:25:36.240

to think about ways that we can harness people's enthusiasm for getting involved in these campaigns

0:25:36.240,0:25:42.480

into more different and more creative ways so we can ask people to do more than just writing

0:25:42.480,0:25:48.080

a letter to the MP. Of course though on all our campaigns writing to MPs is really important still.

0:25:48.880,0:25:56.400

(EP): Megan what about you? (MM): Well I think certainly

the switch to remote working has certainly

0:25:56.400,0:26:01.520

changed the way all of us do things and we've been thinking more in terms of how do we do

0:26:01.520,0:26:08.400

this without meeting in person and we have found that we can do this and in some ways it's opened

0:26:08.400,0:26:15.040

up opportunities that we didn't think of before. So with our Bradlaugh lecture for example that's

0:26:15.040,0:26:21.600

the first time ever we held our Bradlaugh lecture online and we held it with Geoffrey Robinson QC

0:26:21.600,0:26:28.800

on disestablishment this year and because it was online this actually opened us up I think to

0:26:28.800,0:26:34.480

a new audience. One criticism we do get is that a lot of our work tends to be London centric because

0:26:34.480,0:26:38.800

it was always the case that we'd hold things in a London venue, very typically Conway Hall

0:26:38.800,0:26:44.240

which is where we used to be based. But because we were online for the Bradlaugh lecture people

0:26:44.240,0:26:49.520

could tune in from anywhere in the world and so I

hope that we did reach out to new audiences there

0:26:50.240,0:26:54.720

and we did partner with Conway Hall as well. They looked after the technical side of it

0:26:54.720,0:27:00.240

and the bookings and we looked after the content and that's the first time I think we've really

0:27:00.240,0:27:06.000

done that in this sort of way doing it online. It worked really well. Again I think that

0:27:06.000,0:27:11.920

partnering with Conway Hall opened us up to a new audience and yeah it was a big success.

0:27:11.920,0:27:15.920

It was something very different to what we've done before but it really did work and that's

0:27:15.920,0:27:20.720

something we can maybe think of in the future, particularly if we want to and have lectures

0:27:20.720,0:27:26.000

with people from overseas for example and doing some of our lectures online could work really well.

0:27:26.640,0:27:31.040

(EP): It's certainly much easier to record podcasts with people in different countries if you do it

0:27:31.040,0:27:36.160

virtually. (SE): Sure I mean we had our first virtual AGM this year, we had our first virtual Bradlaugh

0:27:36.160,0:27:40.960

lecture, our board meetings have all gone virtual over Zoom. You know we've all gone virtual

0:27:40.960,0:27:45.920

this year and it's been really useful but I think working this way certainly has its downsides too

0:27:45.920,0:27:49.520

and we wouldn't want to work this way forever but clearly going forward we'll have a bit of

0:27:49.520,0:27:55.680

mixed economy of in-person events and online events too, because as Megan says it really does

0:27:55.680,0:28:01.200

open us up to a new global audience possibly that maybe we hadn't quite fully considered previously.

0:28:01.760,0:28:06.480

(EP): So perhaps you're looking in the future at say hybrid events which are both in person and

0:28:06.480,0:28:12.720

online simultaneously. (AL): I just want to say also in terms of new opportunities for collaboration... so we

0:28:12.720,0:28:19.040

advertised for an author to work on our education resources and because we'd committed that that

0:28:19.040,0:28:25.840

was going to be remote working we received a much wider variety of applications for that role

0:28:25.840,0:28:30.960
than we had previously. We received applications from people right across the UK who wouldn't be able

0:28:30.960,0:28:35.760
to you know move to London for four months to work on this project. We received

0:28:35.760,0:28:40.640
a very high quality application from someone in Australia and ultimately we didn't actually

0:28:40.640,0:28:45.840
go for them for that role but we would have been able to find a way through remote working to work

0:28:45.840,0:28:50.720
collaboratively with them if we had. (SE): I don't know if anyone else has noticed this but

0:28:50.720,0:28:57.360
given that we have been so virtual this year I do feel there's been a bit of a lowering

0:28:57.360,0:29:03.600
of the tone around public discourse. I'm just noticing more anger around people being a

0:29:03.600,0:29:09.120
little bit more vindictive and I don't know if this is because we're all living our lives

0:29:09.120,0:29:14.960
much more online and particularly on social media I'm talking about this year but that's something

0:29:14.960,0:29:20.960
I've just noticed which I think is an unpleasant development and I think we all need to learn to

0:29:20.960,0:29:27.520
disagree better and hopefully meeting each other in person again will hopefully just start to

0:29:27.520,0:29:32.240
kind of walk that battle back a little bit. (EP): I mean they always say that it's much easier to fire off

0:29:32.240,0:29:37.280
angry emails than it is to actually be angry with someone face to face so I'm sure that's part of it.

0:29:38.080,0:29:43.360
Now let's look forward to 2021 which hopefully fingers crossed, touchwood will be a better year

0:29:43.360,0:29:49.120
What are you most looking forward to in the coming year? Chris let's start with you. (CS): Well as

0:29:49.120,0:29:54.080
much as anything I think I'm just looking forward to what might hopefully be some kind of return

0:29:54.640,0:30:01.440
to some sort of more normal existence and I think that that's true for everybody both

0:30:01.440,0:30:06.160
personally and professionally. At the same time we have got some some interesting stuff coming up and

0:30:06.160,0:30:11.200
before the end of the year, at the end of each year since I've been at the NSS, we've tended to do

0:30:11.200,0:30:16.160
a quick round up of our favourite bits of writing that we've published over the course of the year

0:30:16.160,0:30:20.400
so we're now planning to do that and send it out between Christmas and New Year so if you subscribe

0:30:20.400,0:30:25.040
to our weekly newsletter Newsline you should be getting that between Christmas and

0:30:25.040,0:30:30.960
New Year so that's hopefully something that people look out for. I always find that

0:30:31.600,0:30:34.880
quite an enjoyable thing to put together actually because it's a good way of taking stock of what

0:30:34.880,0:30:39.440
we've done over the year and just reminding ourselves of some of the stuff

0:30:39.440,0:30:44.320
that we've said that has managed to make an important point. (EP): Alastair what about you?

0:30:45.200,0:30:53.040
(AL): Meeting more members is something I have missed this year. On my first day back at work in

0:30:53.040,0:31:00.880
2020 which was the first of April I'd been on paternity leave, I cancelled 13 events and

0:31:00.880,0:31:06.320

many of those were then rebooked subsequently and I've done talks around the country online around

0:31:06.320,0:31:13.200
'No more faith schools' this year. And next year I hope to do more talks for the first part

0:31:13.200,0:31:18.160
year they're going to be online again so hopefully there will be one at your local group but I'm

0:31:18.160,0:31:23.840
really looking forward to when we can move those talks to an in-person setting and I think just

0:31:23.840,0:31:28.800
uh the ability to be getting out there and talking to people about what THEY can do.

0:31:29.360,0:31:33.280
Not just going and talking to people about the problems with faith schools but actually you know

0:31:33.280,0:31:37.840
talking and collaborating about actual activism and things people can do.

0:31:38.480,0:31:43.680
We've already mentioned also the 'Exploring secularism' project and seeing the next generation

0:31:43.680,0:31:48.160
of those educational resources and seeing more of those in schools is something I'm really looking

0:31:48.160,0:31:54.800
forward to and the opportunities created around curriculum reform in Wales really open that up.

0:31:55.360,0:32:00.880

(EP): That sounds really interesting and positive. Megan
what about you? (MM): I'm looking forward to getting

0:32:00.880,0:32:07.360

back into our office. I've missed having in-person contact with all my colleagues. There

0:32:07.360,0:32:11.520

are some advantages to remote working but there's
lots of disadvantages as well and I really miss

0:32:11.520,0:32:16.080

being able to just talk with my colleagues in the office. We discuss a lot of the work we do.

0:32:16.080,0:32:21.760

We always work carefully and we try to discuss
and get as many different opinions as possible on

0:32:21.760,0:32:26.080

what we're going to do and I think that makes us that helps us make better decisions so I am

0:32:26.080,0:32:32.320

looking forward to that. I am also looking forward
to another online event that we have planned.

0:32:32.320,0:32:39.200

We are currently planning an online talk with Ray Argyle who has written a book

0:32:39.200,0:32:45.680

about George Holyoake who is another figure in the history of secularism and the NSS.

0:32:46.240,0:32:51.920

So we're not sure exactly when this is going to be. We are hoping early spring. Watch this space.

0:32:53.200,0:32:58.160

(EP): Thanks now Stephen you are actually in the
NSS offices at the moment. What's it like there?

0:32:59.040,0:33:04.960

(SE): Well it's a little bit quiet at the moment but yeah so for me certainly getting the team

0:33:04.960,0:33:09.600

back together in the office with more regularity
and just returning some sort of normality in terms

0:33:09.600,0:33:13.440

of human interaction is something I'm really looking forward to. There's been a lot of talk

0:33:13.440,0:33:20.080

about Covid-19 spelling the end of the office but for me I think it's made me more grateful

0:33:20.080,0:33:23.920

for it. There are certainly benefits to working from home but I think many of us are starting

0:33:23.920,0:33:29.360

to see the downsides to the social aspect that Megan was talking about of working with colleagues.

0:33:29.360,0:33:34.560

It really shouldn't be underestimated. We do work
quite collaboratively so it's just

0:33:34.560,0:33:39.600

harder to do that if you're not in person with each other. We are largely social animals and I

0:33:39.600,0:33:45.600

think the isolation and the loneliness of homework
in is significant too. It's fine for some people.

0:33:45.600,0:33:51.040
I consider myself to be a bit of a loner, I'm very happy in my own company but even I'm

0:33:51.040,0:33:56.160
starting to think this is all going a bit too far. So Zoom is great but it's certainly no substitute

0:33:56.160,0:34:03.200
for face-to-face interaction and in the long term I think the inability to disconnect

0:34:03.200,0:34:10.000
from work can have negative implications on our productivity as well. Some people really appreciate

0:34:10.000,0:34:15.600
and need that barrier between work and a home life that the office and the commute provides.

0:34:15.600,0:34:21.280
So working from home is definitely here to stay but for me the office will remain the primary

0:34:21.280,0:34:26.400
place of work and an important meeting space and for me it's where the magic happens and

0:34:26.400,0:34:31.600
of course we moved office this year as well during the lockdown we actually moved out of our small

0:34:31.600,0:34:36.960
somewhat dingy office in Conway Hall and we've got a nice new office so I'm really looking forward to

0:34:36.960,0:34:41.040
getting everyone back here. And we're also looking to expand the team as well which is part of the

0:34:41.040,0:34:46.480
reason why we wanted to move. We want to bring someone else in next year to focus specifically

0:34:47.040,0:34:52.160
on our engagement with members and supporters to help us better to communicate the work we do

0:34:52.160,0:34:56.640
and if we can bring someone in to help out with the comms work that will free up time hopefully

0:34:56.640,0:35:01.280
for the other campaigning staff because we've certainly got a lot of campaigning to do over

0:35:01.280,0:35:07.040
the next year. As Alastair said the RE reforms will reach some sort of conclusion as well as the

0:35:07.040,0:35:11.040
Hate Crime Bill in Scotland and next year. Of course we'll see the final report of the

0:35:11.040,0:35:16.320
Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual abuse too which is an issue we've been very much engaged in.

0:35:16.880,0:35:23.360
And so next year in 2021 it'll be interesting to see what IICSA recommend.

0:35:23.360,0:35:29.680

We've argued for a mandatory reporting law to compel religious institutions to report known

0:35:29.680,0:35:34.640

or suspected abuse to the relevant secular authorities so it'd be interesting to see if

0:35:34.640,0:35:40.720

it could go that way. I certainly hope they will. (EP): So a lot of things to look forward to in 2021.

0:35:40.720,0:35:47.440

From my perspective I also look forward to Exploring Secularism in the podcast. I'm not just

0:35:47.440,0:35:52.160

at home but also very much internationally we're going to look at secularism or the lack of it in

0:35:52.160,0:35:56.480

Russia. We're going to look at Laïcité in France and we're going to commemorate

0:35:56.480,0:36:01.200

Charles Bradlaugh the NSS founder. It will be the 130th anniversary of his death

0:36:01.200,0:36:06.240

in 2021. If you have any questions or topics you'd like to see covered in the podcast please do let

0:36:06.240,0:36:13.840

us know by emailing podcast@secularism.org.uk or contact us via twitter. And so Stephen to conclude.

0:36:14.880,0:36:19.440

(SE): Well clearly as we've discussed it's been a challenging year for the best of us

0:36:19.440,0:36:25.440

but we are almost through to the other side now.

Thanks to scientists we have a vaccine

0:36:25.440,0:36:29.440

and of course that wouldn't have happened if society was still governed by religious dogma,

0:36:29.440,0:36:34.000

so I think we should be grateful to the Enlightenment to secularism and rationalism.

0:36:34.000,0:36:38.720

For that we've seen an incredible response from the scientific community and let's just hope

0:36:38.720,0:36:43.840

that that means we start to get our lives back to some sort of normality next year and our

0:36:43.840,0:36:49.920

civil liberties fully restored in the near future but I think despite everything this year

0:36:49.920,0:36:54.960

we've as an organisation, as a team, I think we've certainly been able to make progress and of course

0:36:54.960,0:36:59.680

that's all made possible by our members and supporters who provide the funding and also the

0:36:59.680,0:37:04.240

moral support that really does make a difference and it enables us to challenge religious privilege

0:37:04.240,0:37:09.120

and I think doing that is as important now as it ever has been. So I just want to thank our members

0:37:09.120,0:37:16.080

and our donors for that and yes
let's do it all again next year. (EP): Great well

0:37:16.080,0:37:22.320
from all of us at the NSS merry Christmas.
(CS): Merry
Christmas and best wishes for 2021. (AL):
Happy holidays.

0:37:23.040,0:37:29.760
(MM): Have a cool yule. (SE): Have a good
one. (EP): And this podcast will be back again
in 2021. Thanks for listening.

0:37:35.360,0:37:39.920
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