

Intergenerational Solidarity: Setting the parameters for Tomorrow's Society in Europe

Speech delivered by Keith Porteous Wood at the annual meeting of European philosophical and non-confessional organizations with representatives of the European Union.

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Policies made by national and EU bodies almost always reflect the perspectives of politicians and advisers, rather than those of the young, which are often markedly different. Every EU institution needs to try harder to capture the hearts and minds of the young in order to arrest their growing alienation from politics.

One of the most striking features of the difference in attitudes between the older and the younger in much of Europe is in their attitude to religion — and arguably even more importantly — to sensitive social issues. On these, younger citizens tend to be very much more liberal than their elders.

Opinion polls in the UK show clearly that less than a quarter of young people regard themselves as religious. Only one in 14 of younger people think that the Catholic Church should “protect the sanctity of human life by campaigning, for example against abortion and euthanasia”. And a much higher proportion of the young than the old want contraception to be widely available, are liberal on the question of homosexuality and are pro-choice over abortion.

Indeed only about 10% of Catholics support their Church's doctrine on contraception, homosexuality and abortion. And only 4% of Catholics under 40 years old think that there should be no abortion, ever. Nevertheless, that is the stance their Church so strenuously campaigns for, including in this very building.

Recently, in Ireland, we appear to have seen the consequences of that policy, and the law it has led to, applied to everyone, not just Catholics, who wants the right to abortion. A young non-Catholic woman is reported to have been repeatedly refused an early-term abortion in a public hospital and died as a direct result.

And Ireland pats itself on the back for its low abortion rate, knowing full well that every year thousands of desperate women wanting abortions make the distressing journey to Britain to have them. That is those who can afford it. In other words, human rights are only for those who can afford them.

It is a scandal that this death could happen in Europe and that Ireland's laws deny women's human rights in this way. Mindful of the immense contribution of the EU to Human Rights, and that Europe's Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is unparalleled the world over, I come here to ask on behalf of the victims if there is any way that pressure could be applied by the EU to change this law as it appears to breach "the right to life" enshrined in Article 2 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

I am also seeking more EU help to protect the human rights of those who are denied them by the application of religious dogma in the provision of public services. Such concerns extend, for example, to pharmacy provision, schools, scientific research and equality law – where we (the

National Secular Society) are intervening at the European Court of Human Rights over four employment cases.

The crucial importance of such human rights protection stretches far beyond Ireland, since the austerity measures now being taken in many states have led to public services freely available until now being taken over by organisations with religious agendas.

When that is done with public money, there needs to be much less leeway given to religious organisations to deny employment and services on religious grounds; these organisations must be required to respect the human rights of both those who receive the services and the employees that provide them. It should not be permissible to discriminate against either employees or clients just because they are the wrong religion or belief.

We believe that some realignment along these lines needs to be made to the relevant EU Directives - present and future.

END

References:

ORB Fieldwork : 9th – 11th September 2011, 2,049 adults

YouGov / Marie Stopes Survey Results

Sample Size: 1636 Catholic Adults

Fieldwork: 31st August – 2nd September 2010

YouGov / ITV Survey Results

Sample Size: 1636 Catholic Adults

Fieldwork: 31st August – 2nd September 2010 Savita Halappanavar aged 31 death in Galway on 28 October 2012 22 weeks pregnant.