

Intervention at European Commission – 19 June 2017

By Keith Porteous Wood, executive director, National Secular Society

This is the text of an intervention by Keith Porteous Wood at the annual high-level meeting with philosophical and non-confessional representatives to discuss "The Future of Europe: a value-based and effective Union".

Whatever the political outcome of the Article 50 negotiations, we at the National Secular Society hope to continue contributing to such hugely important debates as this.

A major danger is the electoral power of those opposed – generally on religious grounds – to aspects of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

A disturbing development in the UK this month was that the balance of power could soon be held by the Northern Ireland's protestant Democratic Unionist Party despite their share of the UK vote being less than 1%. The Party opposes women's rights and equality of LGBTI+ people, they subscribe to a Creationist worldview and they support the death penalty.

In the longer term, there is much greater and growing problem as conservative religious denominations, sects and religions become an ever-greater proportion of the EU electorate.

Much larger families coupled with unprecedented levels of migration from countries where democracy, women's rights and gays – never mind gay rights - have no place, means European values may not be as widely shared across Europe as was once the case. Polling points to a lack of political secularism amongst many Muslims living in Europe, so assumptions about the place of religion in politics and modern society being settled, may no longer apply.

The historic pattern of gradual integration of successive generations of those of minority religions has in some cases gone into reverse with the younger being becoming ever more conservative than their forbears, even to the point of rejecting the Rule of Law.

Certainly in the UK, such attitudes are being embedded in future generations through segregated education in single faith and denominational schools.

Children of the protestant DUP are brought up in sectarian schools protected from meeting, far less socialising with, Catholics and vice versa. After decades of attempts to introduce integrated schools, only 7% of pupils attend them – probably the 7% who have the least need to.

Many minority faith communities, or their leaders, isolate themselves from the majority community and reinforce that isolation by sending their children to schools that are largely mono-religious, mono-ethnic and mono-cultural. In them these ultra-conservative values will grow unchallenged.

These are long term problems which require long term solutions.

One study concluded that the younger pupils were when they started integrated schooling the greater the community cohesion, even among their parents. There needs to be many more rigorous and honest studies of the problems of such schools in each member state and how education can be transformed towards all publicly funded schools being integrated schools.

The EU needs to persuade member states to make this change, warning of the existential consequences of not doing so.

We also need to provide platforms for young people to air their grievances and be much more effective in preventing and punishing hate speech in schools and places of worship.

Above all, political leaders and civil society must work together in building a more assertive European culture that robustly, actively and unashamedly promotes democratic values such as the separation of religion and state, the rule of law, human rights and equal treatment.