

Lord Avebury Memorial Celebration

A tribute from Keith Porteous Wood

30 JUNE 2016

Tribute given by KPW at the Royal Institution in London at a memorial meeting.

This meeting was given by his family and included numerous parliamentarians including Party leaders and the Lords' Speaker.

I had the great privilege to work for Lord Avebury for nearly 15 years as an honorary researcher, during which time I came to count him as a close friend. He was one of the most charming and compassionate people I have ever met. Unfailingly courteous, he had a talent to make those coming to him for help feel special.

That didn't however necessarily extend to Government Ministers who tried to pull the wool over his eyes. And woe betide anyone failing to get their facts straight.

He was as generous about the achievements of others as he was self-deprecating about his own successes. These of course include Orpington, yet his role in rebuilding the LibDems was arguably even more important. Fellow LibDem peers have told me that they thought him the most effective of their colleagues, and for so long; 52 years in Parliament. And that was 12 hours a day and 7 days a week.

His knowledge of foreign affairs was encyclopaedic. He led the pack on Human Rights and never missed an opportunity to stand up for the underdog or the outsider.

Such was his support for the Dalit community and his determination to introduce a law prohibiting caste discrimination, he courageously broke parliamentary convention forcing an amendment on an unwilling Government requiring it to introduce such a law.

He was justifiably proud of his role in the abolition of the blasphemy laws, started in the Commons by fellow LibDem, then MP, Dr Evan Harris and both were awarded the National Secular Society's Secularist of the Year prize for this historic achievement.

Eric was one of the NSS's most effective Honorary Associates and we will so miss his wonderful support. He introduced, for example, amendments to remove the requirement for daily worship in schools and to allow older pupils to withdraw themselves. The bishops and Government rejected them, but in the last month the UN has just asked the Government to implement them.

Never a fan of Parliamentary prayers, he wanted them to take place elsewhere than in the Chamber before business started. He refused to stop speaking and sit down if a bishop rose, as is still the archaic custom. He apparently audibly groaned if anyone else did so.

His last words to me were from his bed, barely awake, and concerned his Chancel Repairs Bill. He was sanguine about his own demise, "it

can't be helped" he would say. He was an active supporter of both voluntary euthanasia and old-age rational suicide. At least he avoided execution, which had befallen at least ten of his ancestors. Maybe needling the authorities was a hereditary trait.

Battersea Dogs' Home declined his offer to bequeath his body to vary the inmates' diet. He had a lovely sense of humour.

The oppressed and dispossessed will no longer have him to champion their causes, I only hope there are others able and willing to take his place.

Whether or not, the world is a poorer place without him.

Let us celebrate this giant of humankind.

