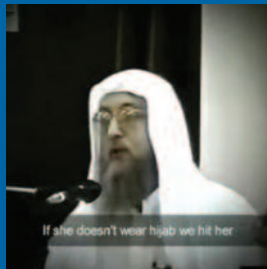


09





MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Occasionally, the NSS manages to land a media coup that gets our name and message out to a much larger audience than usual, sometimes even around the world. It's exciting when that happens, and important in that it brings the secularist message to people who would otherwise be unaware of it.

But such rare successes shouldn't distract us from the reality of the hard, day-to-day slog behind the scenes in our regular lobbying and campaigning efforts.

Our Executive Director, for example, works tirelessly in Westminster, Brussels and sometimes further afield trying to influence policy makers and politicians. He challenges the disproportionate political influence that religious bodies have attained over recent years, egged on by the Government.

Religious influence over Government

It is quite clear that the proportion of Christians in the Government is much higher than it is in the population at large – a trend that was encouraged by Tony Blair and which has been continued by Gordon Brown. One seasoned Parliamentarian, who is one of our Honorary Associates, told us that Ministers have been appointed, and even promoted, *because they are Christians*. In stark contrast to the “we don't do religion” façade he maintained during his Premiership, Blair himself has now admitted he is “more interested in religion than politics”. The hypothesis therefore looks very much more solid, and indeed can be supported by our own experiences in Westminster and Whitehall.

It shows the strength of opposition against which we have been battling.

We were, and are, much more sceptical than most that Blair's “son of the Manse” successor would prove very different in this respect. So anxious was Gordon Brown to assure the faithful that “faith... is very much alive and well” that he even misquoted statistics to ‘prove’ it. (See page 4 of our Spring *Bulletin*). And, somehow, it seems to have escaped the attention of Mr Brown

and his advisers that church attendance has been in decline for a century.

Christian Research forecasts that normal Sunday attendance by Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and other denominations will decline by 2050 to only *one per cent* of the population – and their average age will be 67. This compares with 10% and an average age of 40 in 1990.

Even this might not be of concern to secularists, were it not for the fact that the Government continues to promote the idea that religion has a special place in the life of this country and, as such, puts well over ten billion pounds annually into the coffers of churches under a number of different pretexts. Most of the money is in respect of “faith schools”. This is on top of gift aid on collections, grants from the National Lottery, English Heritage, various “capacity building” funds – not forgetting concessions on council tax and VAT on church repairs. The subsidy will soon rise dramatically as “faith-based welfare” steps in, enabling a major contribution to the overheads of the organisers.

How religious influences are harming our school system

On the topic of education, there has been a very noticeable increase this year in the number of parents who have contacted us worried about the rising aggressiveness of religious proselytisers in their children's schools.

Not only do some schools actively try to thwart parents who pursue their legal right to withdraw their children from Collective Worship, but we have now heard of Alpha Courses being set up in schools during the lunch break, of Gideon Bibles being handed out, or creationism being sneaked into lessons by religious groups who come into schools without being totally upfront about their purpose.

The Government and the Religious Education “industry” want us to think that RE is not used for proselytising. The falsehood has been left

unchallenged for so long that it seems to have become accepted as ‘fact’. But proselytising is still permitted by law in Voluntary Aided schools and in “faith” academies, and the Government would be very reluctant – to say the least – to change this. You will read of more falsehoods in our Education section on page 4.

Evangelising is common in other religious schools and even some community schools. Parents are frustrated and upset to see that there is little they can do about the indoctrination that their children are subjected to every day in school.

The spread of minority “faith schools” also does a huge disservice to children *in all schools* by denying them the opportunity to meet others from different communities. This is particularly true of Muslim schools, which are – whatever their proponents and apologists say – exclusive and insular. The emphasis on religion in these schools is completely disproportionate. They are almost entirely under the control of individuals whose own lives are dominated by an excessive religious zeal that they are determined to transmit to the next generation.

The pop singer Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens, is a leading light in the Islamia School in Brent, north London. He made quite clear the purpose of these taxpayer-funded Muslim schools when he said: “The ultimate aim of Islamic education is the realisation of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large”.

If the Government believes that this is a proper purpose for state education, then we can look forward to a future of a segregated Britain, with Muslims on one side of the fence and the rest of us on the other.

Maybe our message has permeated a little, however. As this Report went to press, the Government announced a freeze on the conversion of private (including Muslim) schools to state schools.

Non-believers are frequently being denied access to our local schools, whether as pupils or employees. So, although we accept as worthy the short-term objectives of the Accord Coalition – reforming the unfair

admissions criteria and removing discrimination in employment – we do not share Accord’s support for the retention of the “faith school” system, even if discrimination is removed.

While the control or running of so many publicly-funded schools remains in religious hands, religious indoctrination and segregation will continue to grow. The NSS will continue, practically alone, to oppose religious schools in principle. Other countries manage very well without publicly-funded “faith schools”, so can Britain.

We have consistently opposed Labour’s stance on religious schools. But if a Conservative Government is elected, we anticipate that the education outlook will become even bleaker. The Conservative Party seems even keener than the Labour Party to farm out more of our schools to local groups, many of which will be religious, a practice deceitfully disguised as offering “choice”. As far as we can see, the LibDems are less smitten with this idea.

Religious organisations – some of them rather extreme – are seeing new opportunities for evangelising in schools and are determined to make the most of the warmer welcome they are receiving. The reforms will make it much easier for unrepresentative but determined groups to carpet-bag the education budget for their own.

That is why it is so important to stick with the NSS for the long term. We have made some important progress over the past year, but we are rowing against a tide of increasing religious influence, and we are all going to have to try much harder to make our resistance felt. And I think we can.

Terry Sanderson
President, National Secular Society

“I’m really, and always have been in a way, more interested in religion than politics,”

— Tony Blair (BBC interview 13 April 2009)

PARLIAMENT

Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood has spent a great deal of time lobbying in Westminster this year. There were many key meetings connected with debates in the public eye, such as the Equality Bill, the Royal Marriages Bill or the [debate](#) we instigated on *Undercover Mosque*, all detailed below. Significant time was also expended on less glamorous, but nevertheless important, work such as communicating the NSS’s views to opinion formers.

The UK-wide Equality Bill was trailed as a major step forward in equality and we set out determined to eliminate some of the most glaring remaining inequalities. We had hoped, for example, to tackle the discrimination against non-religious teachers in religious schools, or the exemption for those existing charities, such as the Scouts, to continue to require a religious oath. Sadly, the Bill fell far short of its advertised target and it soon became plain that if rectifying an injustice might mean upsetting the religious, there was little chance of the Government proposing remedial amendments. Practically the only progress in this direction volunteered by the Government has been to codify decisions already made in case law.

We have nevertheless been fighting hard for improvements and Dr Evan Harris MP has acknowledged our help, as well as the high quality of our research and proposals we have made.



Dr Evan Harris MP

Vice President Carla Revere, who is a barrister, and Keith Porteous Wood, have played a key role in this work and have been involved in numerous meetings in Parliament including at ministerial and top civil servant level.



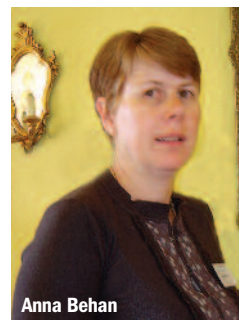
Carla Revere

Perhaps the most shocking revelation arising from our work there came as part of protracted correspondence with lawyers at the schools’ ministry, the DCSF. Oblivious to the implications, they wrote “During the negotiations for the Directive, Ministers were clear, and stated publicly, that the maintenance of sections 58 to 60 of the SSFA was a requirement for the UK’s agreement to the Directive.” These sections, ones the bishops were so keen to retain, permit the discrimination in religious schools

against non-religious teachers. So desperate was Tony Blair’s Government to do the bishops’ bidding that it was prepared to abort the whole EU Employment Directive. It would sign only if every other country agreed to a special exception which would permit the retention of this legislation that would otherwise have fallen foul of the Directive. You will remember that Mr Blair has subsequently made clear he thinks religion more important than politics, or – it seems from this – fairness.

The Government is showing no appetite to row back on this grossly unfair discrimination against non-religious teachers.

Vice President Anna Behan has been pressing senior civil servants because we thought the statutory protection for the non-religious who have little choice but to seek admission to Roman Catholic sixth form colleges was actually being reduced. This led to the issue being taken up by Evan Harris in the Commons.



Anna Behan

We have not exhausted our arsenal on the Equality Bill, however, and we have more to do in both the Commons and Lords.

Having been present with him in the Bill Committee, Keith Porteous Wood will testify that Evan has done his utmost on this and other areas. His great eloquence and mastery of the arguments sometimes seemed even to frighten Ministers. He deserves wholehearted thanks from us all.

As a direct result of [NSS investigations](#) and representations, a [debate](#) was held in the House of Lords to probe the actions of the Police and CPS over the Channel 4 programme *Undercover Mosque*, which exposed the presence of hate-mongering extremists preaching in British mosques. Instead of prosecuting the extremists, the police tried to prosecute the producers of the programme. In the debate, the Attorney General recognised “the importance of freedom of speech”, acknowledged there had been a bad mistake and assured the House that lessons had been learned by both the Police and CPS. We are grateful to LibDem members in the House of Lords and Paul Holmes MP for their support.



Paul Holmes MP

The march of religion in our schools remains one of the NSS's prime concerns

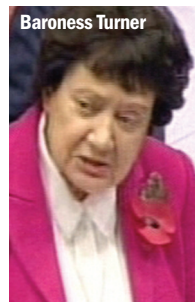
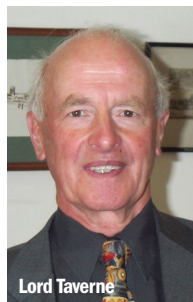
Having won a Members' ballot, Dr Evan Harris MP introduced the **Royal Marriages and Succession to the Crown (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill** in the Commons in the spring. Its purpose was to eliminate sexism and religious discrimination in the line of succession. The Bill was debated for five hours in the Commons. Keith Porteous Wood was responsible for much of the research.

Extraordinarily, the Queen's permission was required before the debate could take place. The debate provoked widespread comment and the Prime Minister was forced to admit on Radio 4 that the debate tackled some important issues that would have to be addressed.

When John Bercow MP was elected Speaker of the **House of Commons** on a ticket of modernisation, the NSS immediately wrote to ask him if he could bring an **end to the prayer session** that begins every sitting. We suggested that if the prayers could not be completely abolished, they should be replaced by a few moments of silent contemplation.



A question was also raised in the **House of Lords** about the feasibility of introducing "multi-faith prayers" into the chamber. The NSS composed a letter in response, which was sent in the name of Honorary Associates Lord Desai, Lord McIntosh of Haringey, Lord Taverne and Baroness Turner of Camden, as well as Lord Avebury, asking that rather than trying to accommodate all religions, **prayers should simply be scrapped.**



EDUCATION

A series of amendments that we proposed to the Education and Skills Bill to **allow mature pupils in England to opt themselves out of both Collective Worship and Religious Education** were rejected out of hand in the House of Lords by the Government, despite our having the specific support of Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights. The amendments were intended to build on our success in 2006 permitting sixth formers in England to opt out of collective worship in their own right. We thank the Lib Dems for their support. As reported on page 6, the 2006 success has now spread to Wales.

As the President has indicated, the march of religion in our schools remains one of the NSS's prime concerns. This year we have seen the Government continue to insist that "faith schools" are a valuable resource. So much is the Government in the thrall of the churches and minority religious groups, they keep repeating their delusional mantra that "**faith**" **schools aid cohesion**, despite the research, and common sense, that they do the opposite. Some "faith schools" are even vulnerable to take-over by fundamentalists, including creationists.

A further Government fallacy is that **church schools perform well because they are church schools**. This wilfully, indeed shamelessly, ignores the increasing body of research that shows that the "success" of these schools is rooted in their privileged admissions policies. Even worse, creaming off the most promising pupils directly undermines community schools, whose task is already an uphill one.

This year the Government dropped its requirement for sponsors of **academies** to contribute £2 million to the set-up costs. As these schools are not subject to local democratic scrutiny, we can expect even more groups of cranks and crackpots to take on new ones. They receive running costs in perpetuity and a spanking new school building *gratis* for their exclusive use. This is equivalent to much more than each sponsor hitting the lottery jackpot. Not only is each academy funded by the hard-pressed taxpayer, but the money spent on each one plunders the general education budget of funds for community schools catering for all to which some of those taxpayers would have hoped to send their children.

An Islamic foundation with no educational experience made a takeover bid for a new primary school that was being built in **Swindon** in Wiltshire. There are few Muslims in the catchment area of the school and the NSS wrote to the local authority giving a list of reasons why the bid should not be accepted. Fortunately the council listened to the arguments and the bid was rejected.

The Society publicly supported calls for Catholic schools to be required to employ teachers who are not Catholics

We have also seen in some parts of the country attempts to close community schools leaving parents with no option but to send their children to “faith schools”. In Dorset, for instance, the County Council proposed to close **Swanage First School**, leaving only church primary schools in the whole district. We understand that Church of England officials attended a school reorganisation meeting there and identified themselves only when forced to do so. The NSS sent a solicitor’s letter to the County Council saying that it would face a legal challenge if it failed to provide community education. The Council has backed off from its plans and is carrying out further consultation to find out what parents truly think and want. The Society has been active here and elsewhere in “bringing in the big guns” to oppose such moves which we are convinced the churches are making, despite the century of decline in church attendance.



Swanage First School

The NSS won a round of applause at a plenary session of the **Fabian Conference** on *Fairness* when we challenged Minister Ed Miliband on the unfairness shown to the non-religious in admissions and employment in religious schools. Our stall at the conference was visited by delegates and speakers.

LibDem Education Policy. We helped secular Lib Dems frame their motions on education for a policy conference.

The General Teaching Council for England – the professional body that oversees teachers – consulted on changes to its code of conduct. Some of the changes that were proposed did not sit well with some fundamentalist Christians who orchestrated a mass response to the consultation. They particularly objected to a clause that would have given protection to gay pupils who are especially vulnerable to bullying. The Christians claimed that the clause would force Christian teachers to express approval of homosexuality. The NSS encouraged the GTC not to be influenced by this pressure and to stick with their proposals. Unfortunately, they chose to change them in line with the demands from the Christian Institute.

Scotland

NSS Honorary Associate Iain Banks stepped into the public arena to speak out against **sectarian schools** in Scotland. This was [reported](#) in the *Sunday Times*, *Scotland*.

We also had a public argument with a priest trying to convince readers of the Scottish press that the latest guidelines on **Religious Observance** in Scottish schools marked a radical departure from Christian assemblies of the past. We quoted from the guidelines which still allowed confessional/proselytising teaching – and not only in Catholic schools.

The Society publicly supported calls, made in a motion to the Education Institute of Scotland AGM, for Catholic schools to be **required to employ teachers who are not Catholics**.

The previous (Labour) Scottish Executive famously pandered to the churches, but sadly their SNP successors seem even worse in this area. They would even like to undermine in Scotland the UK-wide ban on **Roman Catholic adoption agencies** discriminating on grounds of sexual orientation, something we are working on with the assistance of Honorary Associate Patrick Harvie, MSP.

The Society challenged Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill in Scottish broadsheets when he made references to a ‘higher power’ giving cancer to Abdul al-Megrahi during the speech in which he justified the release of the supposed Lockerbie bomber. We also caused comment North of the border when we [suggested](#) that parliamentarians who belong to Opus Dei should be open with the electorate about their religious affiliations, as it could have a material bearing on how they were likely to conduct themselves politically.

We criticised **Strathclyde Fire and Rescue Service** for paying out of court compensation to a Catholic fireman for being required to hand out safety leaflets at a gay pride march.

During the year, **Alistair McBay** attended an Equality and Human Rights Commission conference for us. He has also written to newspapers and taken part in radio programmes.



Iain Banks



Patrick Harvie MSP

The NSS supported the Welsh poet Patrick Jones when a bookshop at which he was due to give a “blasphemous” reading suddenly cancelled the event

Wales

The NSS [criticised](#) the Archbishop of Wales, Barry Morgan, for his condemnation of the adoption by the Welsh Assembly of a law that permits older school pupils to **opt out of collective worship** without their parents’ permission. This was the law that the NSS was instrumental in introducing in 2006 to the Parliament at Westminster that applied only to schools in England.

Dr Morgan said that the law “degraded the status of faith schools”. Keith Porteous Wood responded by saying: “The Archbishop is either ignorant of, or cares nothing for, older pupils’ human rights. It is not legitimate for the state to force older pupils to worship. The National Secular Society fully supports assemblies at which values can be shared, but this is not the same as forced worship.”

The NSS [supported](#) the Welsh poet Patrick Jones when a bookshop at which he was due to give a reading suddenly cancelled the event. The shop had received a threat of “disruption” from Stephen Green of Christian Voice if the “**blasphemous**” reading went ahead.

Outraged by this, NSS Honorary Associate and Welsh Assembly member Lorraine Barrett and her colleague Peter Black AM, arranged a reading for Patrick Jones inside the Welsh Assembly. Because of the controversy surrounding this incident, the book *Darkness is Where the Stars Are* sold far more copies than it would have done otherwise. Another excellent own goal for Stephen Green.



NSS Vice President Carla Revere represented the Society at Lampeter University in a **debate** on whether a secular state can legislate for religious citizens.

Keith Wood and Terry Sanderson have contributed to news and current affairs programmes on Radio Wales throughout the year.

Ritual slaughter – some unexpected good news

The NSS has been campaigning for some time for the lifting of the exemption for religious groups that allows them to ritually slaughter animals without pre-stunning them. When we discovered that the European Parliament was about to make it illegal *not* to grant

such an exemption, we went into action, informing MPs in this country about the proposals.

We did all we could in both Brussels and Westminster to fight the removal of the option for countries to demand pre-stunning before ritual slaughter, including organising a petition of MPs to the relevant

Minister, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP.

MEPs voted at the European Parliament to remove the option at the agriculture committee in Brussels and then in the Parliament itself. The final decision rested, however, with the Council of Ministers (which includes of course one from the UK). It was a surprise therefore to discover that the Council decided not to follow the Parliament’s decision. So now Member States can still refuse to exempt religious slaughter from the pre-stunning regulations. Britain still chooses not to, however.

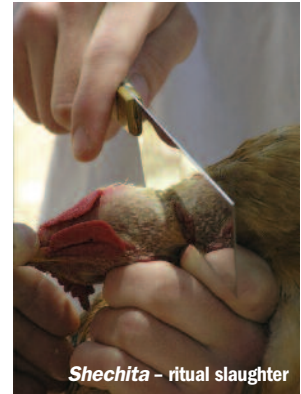
Hospital chaplain campaign stirs controversy

NSS member Dennis Penaluna managed to organise 40 volunteers around the country to establish – thanks to Freedom of Information legislation – how much is spent on chaplains by the National Health Service. The annual salary cost is [at least £32 million](#), equivalent to around £40 million when all associated expenses are taken into account.

This sparked a national debate, mostly supporting our stance that the churches should fund this service themselves or provide it themselves for those patients who actually request it. It was clear from the reaction to this campaign that few people were aware that chaplains were being paid out of public money.

The Churches responded with a vigorous fight back, insisting that the chaplains were “essential” and “indispensable”. Their propaganda campaign was ably assisted by the BBC which carried numerous reports giving the church’s point of view but failed to include that of the NSS.

With large-scale cuts to hospital services predicted, the position of chaplains in hospitals must once again come under scrutiny. We will continue to press for savings in that department before any are made in front-line medical services.



Shechita - ritual slaughter

The Society was pleased to receive invitations to a lunch with President José Manuel Barroso, for representatives of non-religious organisations

INTERNATIONAL

Working Lunch with European Commission President Barroso

The Society was pleased to receive invitations to a lunch in June with President José Manuel Barroso. The small working lunch was held for representatives of non-religious organisations and Keith Porteous Wood attended on behalf of the NSS.

Among the concerns Keith raised were religious attacks on Human Rights in general and the growing acceptance around Europe that sharia law may have a place alongside secular law. Staff member Stephen Evans presented President Barroso with a copy of *One Law for All*. Keith's intervention led directly to an opportunity for him to hold helpful exploratory talks on the issue in September with senior Commission staff.



Keith Porteous Wood with José Manuel Barroso

Council of Europe at Strasbourg

At a conference on the *Religious Aspects of Intercultural Dialogue* devoted to Religious Education, Keith Porteous Wood made more interventions than any other of the delegates.

While he recognised the importance of lessening the tensions between religions, he disagreed that introducing even more religion into schools was the way to achieve this. It was far better to concentrate on what pupils have in common rather than what divides them.

He expressed alarm at the increasingly proselytising nature of much religious education. He also objected to "confessional" religious education in publicly-funded schools and religious education being described as facts.

His interventions were certainly the ones least popular with the religious delegates, but we were pleased that



EU Ambassador to the Council of Europe (Mme Pavan-Woolfe) and Advisor to the European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso (Georg Cesar das Neves) with Keith at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg

members of the Council's Parliamentary Assembly and diplomats were on hand to hear our counter arguments.

We would like to place on record our gratitude to Honorary Associate Lord (Andrew) McIntosh, who does so much stalwart work for the Council of Europe, for his help and valuable counsel.



Lord McIntosh

IHEU conferences including one on 'Untouchability'

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), to which the NSS is affiliated, held its AGM in London this year and a number of associated events were held in conjunction with it. The Society played a prominent role in a number of these including The International Liaison Committee of Atheists and Freethinkers (ILCAF) and the first [world conference on Untouchability](#). Surprisingly, "untouchables" or Dalits (largely Hindu) encounter difficulties in some parts of Britain, although of course not as much as in Asia. The Society hosted a soirée for delegates and NSS members which proved popular.

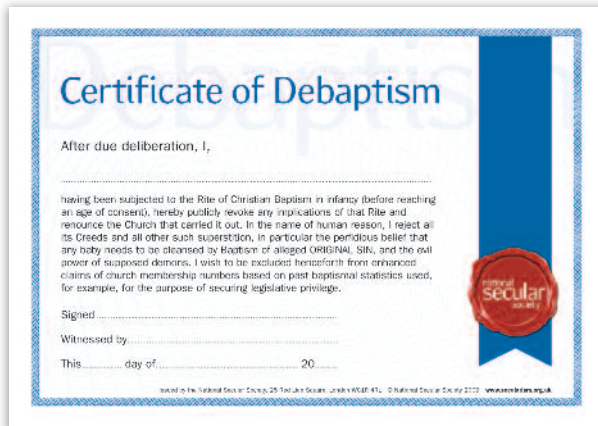
European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics

We continue our high profile membership of the secularist working group in the European Parliament, which is chaired by NSS Honorary Associate Sophie in't Veld. In the new parliament, the group has been renamed to the title shown above. Elizabeth O'Casey and Keith Porteous Wood alternate as representatives of the Society at the regular meetings in Brussels.



Elizabeth O'Casey

We continue our high profile membership of the secularist working group in the European Parliament, which is chaired by NSS Honorary Associate Sophie in't Veld



Debaptism Certificate causes worldwide furore

The NSS has had, for years, a tongue-in-cheek [certificate of debaptism](#) that was originally devised by former president Barbara Smoker. When we put it up on the website it became one of the most visited pages.

Even the BBC was intrigued about this, and featured it on radio, TV and on its website news. This was then taken up by various news agencies and the story rapidly spread internationally. The interest was quite phenomenal, as judged by the number of copies of our attractively designed certificate printed on a parchment-style paper that have already been sold all over the world.

Controversy rages about the value of the certificate, for example a concern that it imbues baptism with a kind of spurious legitimacy. The churches are divided on how to react.

The controversy opened up many opportunities for the NSS to bring its wider message to a vast audience – thanks to hundreds of newspaper articles and countless broadcasting opportunities, especially in the United States.

SECULARIST OF THE YEAR

The Irwin Prize for [Secularist of the Year](#) was awarded jointly this year to Dr Evan Harris MP and Lord Avebury for their successful parliamentary campaign to abolish the blasphemy law.

At a crowded and convivial event in London in February, the two were presented with their trophy – a Golden Ammonite – by Richard Dawkins. Both declined to accept the cash prize, which will be used to finance the award for another year. A special trophy was given to Ariane Sherine for her atheist bus campaign.



The £5,000 annual prize is sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin. He has been in the news himself this year with his continued campaign to change the law relating to assisted dying.



Evan Harris and Lord Avebury celebrate with Keith Porteous Wood

A Date For Your Diary

The 2010 Secularist of the Year Prize will be awarded at a lunchtime event in London on **Saturday 13th February**. Tickets are £45 (to include a three-course meal, welcoming drink, tea and coffee and all entertainment) and can be obtained from the NSS on-line shop at www.secularism.org.uk or by post from NSS Tickets, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

Our researches have revealed that the Holy See was in breach of several Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

HUMAN RIGHTS

UN Convention on The Rights Of The Child

Our researches have revealed that the Holy See (the Vatican's *alter ego* in diplomatic circles) was in breach of several Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Keith Porteous Wood took our findings to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and Roy Brown, their main representative at the UN in Geneva. We place on record our gratitude that he laid the ground for Keith to set out our accusations formally at a plenary session of the UN Human Rights Council. He did so in person on 22 September 2009, and a detailed statement was published concurrently by the UN entirely from information we produced.



We alleged that the Holy See had broken five Articles of the Convention and catalogued institutional failures compounding the abuse suffered by individuals and allowing the cycle of abuse to be perpetuated over decades.

Keith attacked the minimisation of compensation to victims and the secrecy which went to the very top of the organisation at the Vatican. He named the Archbishop of the largest diocese in America who had remained a cardinal despite being heavily implicated in court for covering up abuse on an epic scale. We pointed out that the cardinal has escaped to Rome, where his status continues to grow.

Keith explained how the Holy See had manipulated itself into a position of maximum influence but minimal accountability. We believe our Executive Director was the first to confront the Holy See at such a meeting. He called on the international community in future to hold the Holy See to account.

The Apostolic Nuncio, an Archbishop, responded – yet did not deny even one of the charges. He said the Holy See would include *just one paragraph* on abuse by priests in a report which he acknowledged for the first time that the Vatican would produce. It will be hopelessly overdue – the UN Convention required the report to be submitted in 1997.

Not wishing, as they said, to “add gasoline to the fire” on an already volatile topic, the Church authorities refused to post their reply on their website. Nevertheless, the exchange was published in around

fifty newspapers in fifteen countries around the world, including several UK broadsheets, a red top and *The Tablet*. There was minimal disagreement with our stance. Our [statement](#) and [video footage](#) of our intervention can be viewed online.

The **EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)** is charged with promoting Human Rights in the EU, originally concentrating on racism and xenophobia but now with a wider remit.

Keith Porteous Wood has been serving for some time on the Agency's Platform – a group of about a hundred organisations that represent civil society – on behalf of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). The Platform meets in Vienna annually to suggest priorities to the Agency for its future work plan.

Keith has played a prominent role in this process, acting as a chair in Vienna and providing high quality written submissions. One of these was a comprehensive dossier detailing the many fields in which religious pressure was compromising Human Rights. It led directly to the intervention on child abuse at the UN (detailed in the preceding column).

Just after the last Annual Report was completed, Keith was selected, in a personal capacity, to serve on the Agency's initial advisory panel and has now been elected for a second term. This has provided a greater opportunity to provide input. We are also making sure that new areas for the Agency, such as discrimination based on religion or belief (including non-belief), are given appropriate weight in forthcoming work. We have been heartened by the positive reaction by the management of the Agency to these approaches, and especially to our dossier.

In connection with Keith Porteous Wood's work promoting Human Rights, jointly with IHEU, he has been working closely with the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)**. He had a detailed and highly constructive personal meeting with the First Secretary dealing with Human Rights. Later in the year he was invited to two receptions at London's Lancaster House. One was given by the Prime Minister to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the other the launch of the FCO's Human Rights Report for 2008. We had made some constructive suggestions about the previous Report which we were pleased to see had been taken up.

It has been a difficult initial year for the **Equality and Human Rights Commission** ending with a serial resignation of Commissioners. Before that, we had been putting the Commission under increasing pressure to take action on a range of issues. However,

We supported Camp Quest, the non-religious summer camp for children, when it came under attack from the right-wing press



there is no evidence of any practical response to our many representations. In some cases the opportunity for their intervention has passed. We can only hope that when a new regime emerges it will be more effective.

Freedom of expression

The Society reacted decisively to the Government's refusal to admit the Dutch MP Geert Wilders to Britain. He had intended to show to British parliamentarians his film *Fitna* which highlights passages in the Koran about violence and the treatment of women, inviting viewers to conclude where this leads.

The NSS was the only group to [protest](#) about his exclusion in Parliament and on TV. The Executive Director spoke to peers and MPs and later to an international press conference that was televised.

Keith Porteous Wood said he was ashamed of the contempt shown by the Government for the law and freedom of expression, another example of spinelessly caving into threats from Islamists.

The President defended Mr Wilders' right to be heard (but not necessarily his opinions) on British and Dutch TV. He also wrote to the Home Secretary protesting that the decision was a dangerous restraint on free speech. Our stance was later vindicated when Wilders' appeal against the ban was upheld.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- The NSS has complained to the BBC Trust about the exclusion of non-believers from **Thought for the Day**. After months of appeals, the complaint was one of the rare ones accepted for adjudication by the Trust, which oversees the BBC and represents the BBC's audience. We expect the response before the end of the year.

- The NSS had a contingent at the **March for a Secular Europe**, which protested about the growing influence of the Vatican in European politics. Terry Sanderson was one of the speakers.

- People from all walks of life got together in considerable numbers at the

Modern Liberties Convention to look at the erosion of Human Rights and civil liberties by recent legislation. The NSS stall was surrounded by interested visitors. It was hosted by VP Anna Behan and Council member Peter Vlachos as well as the President and Executive Director.



- We supported **Camp Quest**, the non-religious summer camp for children, when it came under attack from the right-wing press. It was being unfairly represented as an "atheist indoctrination centre". Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson defended the camp on several radio and TV programmes.



Keith Porteous Wood debates Camp Quest live on the BBC

- Several members of the hierarchy of the **Church of England** launched an attack on the Government's economic policy, which gave the NSS the opportunity to question the legitimacy of the Established Church. Keith Porteous Wood then debated the matter on Radio Five Live with the Church's representative in the House of Commons, Sir Stuart Bell. In a rare show of unanimity, they both agreed that the Church had overstepped the mark.

Roger Bolton – A lot of church leaders speaking on national matters sound rather defensive but you've gone on the attack because you've talked about secularists having an "impoverished understanding of what it is to be human". They might find that quite offensive mightn't they?

Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor – I think what I said was true, of course whether a person is atheist or any other...there is in fact, in my view, something not totally human, if they leave out the transcendent. If they leave out an aspect of what I believe everyone was made for, which is, uh, a search for transcendent meaning, we call it God. Now if you say that has no place, then I feel that it is a diminishment of what it is to be a human, because to be human in the sense I believe humanity is directed because made by God, I think if you leave that out then you are not fully human."

(BBC Radio 4's *Sunday Programme* 15 March 2009)

- Following speculation that **Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor** was to be given a **peerage**, we wrote to the Prime Minister urging him not to go ahead with this. We opined that the Cardinal "would bring the Vatican's reactionary, homophobic, misogynistic and manipulative agenda right into the heart of our parliament." We also pointed to O'Connor's disgraceful record on covering up for child abusers.

- Extraordinarily, the Society was credited by *The Times* with speaking for Anglicans following an apparent **bid by the Vatican for the allegiance of conservative Anglicans**: "It was left to the NSS to say publicly what many Anglicans would only admit privately. 'This is a mortal blow to Anglicanism which will inevitably lead to disestablishment as the Church shrinks yet further and becomes increasingly irrelevant... Rowan Williams has failed dismally in his ambitions to avoid schism. His refusal to take a principled moral stand against bigotry has left his Church in tatters'."

- Keith Porteous Wood spoke for the motion "State funding should be withdrawn from faith schools" at **University College London**. It was carried by 72% to 28%.

- The NSS maintains links with the **One Law for All** Campaign, which is agitating to stop the spread of Sharia law in Britain. We were present at the House of Lords for the launch of the campaign, when Vice President Carla Revere and Director Keith Porteous Wood spoke. Terry Sanderson spoke at the campaign's first rally in London's Trafalgar Square and will do so again at the next one on 21st November in Hyde Park, London.

- In the USA, Keith Porteous Wood made an **appearance** on the popular Penn & Teller show. The episode in question offered robust, and often humorous, criticism of the Vatican. The show was subsequently pulled from the CBS-owned Showtime website following a furious attack from conservative Catholics.

Lawyers Secular Society

This year, the LSS launched its website. www.lawyerssecularsociety.org. Its membership continues to grow and it is regularly contacted by journalists for comment.



Since its launch last year, the LSS has worked on anti-discrimination claims. It is working with Southall Black Sisters in a project to advise on the way courts deal with consent orders in family cases where there has been religious mediation/arbitration.

It also works with the Secular Medical Forum giving lectures on topics such as whether "religious conscience" should be accommodated in UK law and advising on the legal aspects of their campaign to outlaw non-medical circumcisions.

The LSS is also currently examining the implications of attempts to gain official status for Sharia law in the UK.

Secular Medical Forum

In June the **SMF** represented the NSS at the General Medical Council (GMC) conference on end-of-life treatment and care. At the British Medical Association conference, a motion that would have allowed doctors to 'share their faith' with patients was voted down.



The SMF responded to a parliamentary consultation, arguing that hospital chaplains should be funded by the religious bodies they represent. It also responded to a broadcasting standards consultation on condom and abortion agency advertising.

Some of its views were adopted by the Royal College of GPs on the need for children in religious schools to receive adequate sex education whatever their parents' religious objections.

Co-ordinator Antony Lempert spoke on national and local radio about chaplains and doctors praying for patients.

The SMF website is www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk and their email is antony@secularmedicalforum.org.uk

Submissions

The NSS works behind the scenes researching, and writing submissions and consultation documents for government and other public bodies covering a wide range of topics, including:

[Schools admission consultation](#)

[RE guidance submission](#)

[UK consultation on European Commission Proposal for Equal Treatment Directive \(Discrimination in goods/services\)](#)

[Broadcasting Advertising Standards Code on condom/abortion advice centre adverts](#)

[DEFRA Ritual Slaughter of Animals consultation](#)

[Avebury Human Remains Consultation](#)

Links to all of these can be found on our website www.secularism.org.uk/submissions.html

The NSS maintains links with the One Law for All Campaign, which is agitating to stop the spread of Sharia law in Britain. The NSS campaigns hard in the UK and Europe on this issue

Students

Our student campaign is going well; we have helped more new groups set up this year, as well as providing existing groups with materials for Freshers' Week, and speakers for meetings and debates. In February, we ran a stall at the launch of the [National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies](#) (AHS) and in the summer we had a very productive meeting with Jenna Catley, its new president, on how we can work together more closely in future. We are increasingly hearing from students who object to the aggressive proselytising of religious groups on campus and want to make a stand for secularism and rationalism. Our special concessionary membership rate of £9 a year for students is encouraging them to join in growing numbers.

The NSS has now published a [series of eight Leaflets](#) (pictured) on a variety of secularist topics covering Separation of Church & State; Islamophobia; Education; Science & Medicine; Freedom of Speech; Lesbian and Gay Rights; Religious Oppression of Women and the War on Condoms. Read more here: www.secularism.org.uk/nss-on-campus.html

In addition to the new leaflets, we also have a new poster. If you would like leaflets or posters for your student society, local group or events, please contact the office.

New Media

Our Facebook page, Friends of the National Secular Society, continues to grow in popularity, with well over 2,000 members. More join every week. It has lively debates between members and we use it to keep everyone up to date on campaigns, issues and news stories. See <http://tinyurl.com/nssfacebook>.

We are encouraging our members and supporters to explore and exploit the internet, to write secular blogs, to find out about events or news stories to help them campaign at national and local level, and to engage in forums to spread the secular message. The NSS co-hosted a panel discussion on blogging and podcasting at Conway Hall in October.

If you would like to learn more or help please contact the office on 020 7404 3126 or email admin@secularism.org.uk.



GROUPS AFFILIATED TO THE NSS

Belfast Humanist Group; Birmingham Humanists; Brighton and Hove Humanist Society; Bromley Secular Humanist Group; Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society; Chiltern Humanists; Cornwall Humanists; Cotswold Humanists; Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists; Cumbria Humanist Group; Durham University Humanist Society; East Kent Humanists; Essex Humanists; Farnham Humanists; Greater Manchester Humanist Group; Hampstead Humanist Society; Havering and District Humanist Society; Humanist and Secular Liberal Democrats; Humanist Society of West Yorkshire; Isle of Wight Secular Humanist Group; Kings College London Secular Society; Leicester Secular Society; Lewisham Humanist Group; Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group; North London Humanist Group; Sheffield Humanist Society; South Somerset Humanists; Suffolk Humanist and Secularist Group; Sutton Humanist Group; Welsh Marches Humanist Group.

GROUPS THE NSS SUPPORTS

Abortion Rights; Amnesty International; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Dignity in Dying; European Humanist Federation; the European Women's Lobby; International Humanist and Ethical Union; Lawyers' Secular Society; Liberty; National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS); Secular Medical Forum.

VOLUNTEERS AND DONATIONS

The NSS Council and staff greatly value the time and effort given by our volunteers from all over Britain. They work in our central office, help out at our events and work on specialist projects, generally with our Executive Director.

Barry Thorpe and Stewart Ware were presented with prizes as Volunteers of the Year at the Secularist of the Year celebrations for their work in campaigning and administration, respectively. This year, member Dennis Penaluna co-ordinated our research into spending on hospital chaplains, assisted by many other volunteers, to produce a valuable document.

We would also like to thank members who run stalls at local events, get involved in local campaigns, organise debates and who alert us to local issues. If you would like to do any of these, please contact the office.

We would particularly like to thank the growing number of members who give financial support to the Society through standing orders. Our gratitude also goes to the members who have generously made donations this year. We are especially grateful to those who have remembered the NSS in their wills and would encourage other members to do this as a tangible way of improving life for generations to come. The Executive Director will be happy to assist anyone contemplating this. He can be contacted through the office on 020 7404 3126 or email admin@secularism.org.uk.

We are always on the lookout for volunteers, particularly those with specialist skills, and anyone willing to help out in the office or at functions. If you would like to help, we will be delighted to discuss this with you and look forward to hearing from you.

YOUR COUNCIL AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2009

President

Terry Sanderson

Vice Presidents

Dr Anna Behan

Carla Revere

Treasurer

Jim Nugent

Other Council Members

Dan Bye

Denis Cobell

Jim Herrick

Jennifer Jaynes

Surendra Lal

Elizabeth O'Casey

Martin Perry

Afonso Reis e Sousa

Peter Vlachos

Among those standing down at the AGM are long-serving Council members Denis Cobell and Jim Herrick. Denis joined Council in 1976 and served as president from 1997 to 2006. Jim joined in 1979 and was Vice President from 1996 to 2006. We place on record our gratitude for their decades of service.

Executive Director and Company Secretary

Keith Porteous Wood, FCCA

Senior Office Staff

Tessa Kendall

Stephen Evans

COUNCIL ACTIVITIES

President – Terry Sanderson

Apart from being President, Terry is the eyes and ears of the NSS, working hard to keep on top of the news agenda. His research provides the basis for our campaigning efforts and for our ability to respond in an informed manner to press enquiries.

Terry compiles and edits *Newsline* – our weekly e-zine which goes from strength to strength. It has thousands of subscribers worldwide and the mainstream press frequently pick up stories from it.

He also spearheads our work with the press, in conjunction with Keith Porteous Wood, and both contribute to the print media, radio and television. Terry is a frequent contributor to the *Guardian's* 'Comment is Free'. He also masterminds the Secularist of the Year event and has compiled and hosted a number of fundraising shows which have raised thousands of pounds for the Society.

Vice President – Anna Behan

Dr Anna Behan has again chaired the Council this year, a task which brings with it a considerable administrative burden. She has continued to lead our work on equality on the Religion and Belief Consultative Group, assisted by Peter Vlachos. She led the NSS's delegation to meet the then Community Minister Sadiq Khan, along with Peter Vlachos. Anna was also involved in meeting senior civil servants over faith-based welfare and on concerns about the Equality Bill and Roman Catholic sixth form colleges.

Anna also represented the Society at the prestigious launch of *Church and State in 21st Century Britain: the Future of Church Establishment*, asking a searching question that will have made the Church's representatives uncomfortable.

Vice President – Carla Revere

Carla has undertaken a huge amount of research on legal matters to help us with our campaigning, especially on employment issues and the Equality Bill (mentioned elsewhere). She is also the leading light in the Lawyers' Secular Society, which she founded.

Treasurer – Jim Nugent

Jim has had an extremely busy year selecting and successfully implementing a new membership and accounting system that was necessitated by our expansion. This was all completed within the deadline Jim set himself at last year's AGM. He has also completed the year's accounts with record speed. Jim played the key role in transferring our portfolio to our new fund managers.

Dan Bye spoke to Leeds Skeptics in the Pub on *How to annoy a skeptic*.

Elizabeth O'Casey

Elizabeth often represents the NSS in Brussels and always makes a powerful contribution. One such occasion was a conference at the European Parliament entitled *Religion in Education: a contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries*. She continues to share the NSS representation at the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, most recently at a meeting on *Religion and Democracy in Europe*. Her criticism of the costs of chaplains in hospitals being met from public funds proved to be controversial. She also spoke on a panel at the UNISON National Black Members' Conference about faith and cohesion in the workplace. Elizabeth attended WAFE (International Federation of Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality) and Institute of Advanced Legal Studies meetings on *Sharia Law*, and on *The Limits of Tolerance*. These provided an opportunity to raise the treatment and subjugation of women in Islam and the consistent denial of women's equality through Islamic legal, traditional, and dress practices. Elizabeth spoke at a Liberty conference on the defamation of religion. She is involved in both the student campaign and the campaign against religious slaughter.

Martin Perry's first year on Council has been a busy one as it has entailed reviewing our investment managers' performance and devising a process for prospective managers to be vetted. Jim Nugent and Keith Porteous Wood also took part in the selection process which has resulted in the Society's investments being moved to two new fund managers.

Peter Vlachos has been involved in giving a number of meetings for local groups and has taken part in tackling the creeping insinuation of religion into academe. He has ably assisted and deputised for the Vice President Anna Behan, as noted above.

The Council of Management held two strategy meetings during the year to discuss ways of strengthening and expanding the organisation's campaigning work. They first looked at what was needed to take our vision forward and the second was to plan the practicalities of these changes.

The new structure will be implemented in the coming months and will improve the NSS's ability to expand into new areas of campaigning and lobbying and intensify our involvement in areas we are already covering.

HONORARY ASSOCIATES

Graham Allen MP	Robert Marshall-Andrews QC, MP
Professor Peter Atkins	Baroness Massey of Darwen
Iain Banks	Lord McIntosh of Haringey
Lorraine Barrett AM	Jonathan Meades
Edward Bond	Sir Jonathan Miller
Michael Cashman MEP	Maryam Namazie
Colin Challen MP	Taslima Nasrin
Nick Cohen	Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan
Prof Richard Dawkins	Lord Peston
Lord Desai	Phillip Pullman
Angela Eagle MP	Lord Raglan
Baroness Flather	Claire Rayner OBE
Rt Hon. Michael Foot	Martin Rowson
Ricky Gervais	Joan Ruddock MP
Professor A.C. Grayling	Joan Smith
Johann Hari	Dr David Starkey
Dr Evan Harris MP	Lord Taverne QC
Patrick Harvie MSP	Polly Toynbee
Christopher Hitchens	Baroness Turner of Camden
Paul Holmes MP	Sophie in't Veld Veld MEP
Prof. Ted Honderich	Gore Vidal
Mary Honeyball MEP	Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC
Kelvin Hopkins MP	
Baroness (Glenys) Kinnock of Holyhead	
Stewart Lee	
Graham Linehan	

Changes during the year

We welcome new Honorary Associate Glenys Kinnock (Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead), who was MEP for Wales from 1994 to 2009. She is Minister for Africa and also speaks in the Lords on European matters.

We are sorry to report that **Harold Pinter**, a long time Honorary Associate, died at the end of 2008. He was a Nobel Prize winner and committed campaigner for freedom of expression and secularism. He was prominent in the struggle against apartheid.

We are also sorry to report the death in October 2009 of **Sir Ludovic Kennedy**, a long-time Honorary Associate of the NSS. Sir Ludovic was a doughty campaigner on a range of issues, including capital punishment, voluntary euthanasia and miscarriages of justice. He was a man of deep compassion and strong principle. We are proud that he chose to associate himself with the NSS.

JOIN US

A secular society is one where no one is either privileged or disadvantaged by virtue of their religion or lack of belief. We hope you have found that the activities detailed in this report show that the National Secular Society is working hard to secure a secular society for Britain. If so, we invite you to express your support by becoming a member. The more support we have, the more we can do.

You can join securely online at www.secularism.org.uk/join.html or by contacting the office at **NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.**

UK membership is £29 per annum, £17 for the unwaged and £9 for students. Joint membership (for two people at the same address) is £45 and overseas membership is £51.

Start a standing Order

A monthly standing order is the most effective way to join and donate to the NSS – it allows us to predict how much money we will have available, and also cuts down on administration costs, enabling us to considerably increase our scale of activities. A form can be downloaded at <http://tinyurl.com/2k5rqy> or posted to you from the office.

THE SECULAR CHARTER

The Creation of a Just and Equitable Secular Society in Britain

The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where Human Rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

1. There should be no established state religion.
2. The state should not fund religious activities.
3. The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
4. The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
5. The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
6. No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
7. No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
8. The state should not express any religious beliefs in any publication, speech or implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
9. Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
10. No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

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admin@secularism.org.uk

Executive Director:
Keith Porteous Wood FCCA

Senior Office Staff:
Tessa Kendall, Stephen Evans

www.secularism.org.uk

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