



Newsletter

of the Liberal Democrat Humanist & Secularist Group

March 2008

**HUMANIST & SECULAR
LIBERAL DEMOCRATS**

Liverpool Conference Fringe

Evan Harris will continue the debate on faith schools at the HSLD fringe at Liverpool.

Time: 6.15pm, Saturday 8th March

Venue: Canada Suite, Crowne Plaza Hotel

Topic: "Faith Schools - The Debate continues"

Those attending Conference may also be interested in the Christian Forum fringe on Friday evening (8pm Brunswick Suite, Crowne Plaza) at which Paul Holmes is speaking on "Living in a multi-faith society".

The most interesting item on the main Conference agenda is the Q & A session on schools. This is an opportunity to put questions to a panel including education spokesperson David Laws and Cllr. James Kempton (chair of the schools working group). Should you wish to submit a question (25 words max) then it must be submitted by 6pm Saturday evening at the speakers table. Alternatively it can be e-mailed to questions@libdems.org.uk before 6pm Thursday March 6.



● Dr Evan Harris MP

**Campaigning for Humanist &
Secular values within the Lib Dems**

A Successful One Day Conference

A very cold Conway Hall provided the historic setting for the Lib Dem Humanist and Secularists one day conference. There was plenty of lively debate to warm the participants up.

Keynote speaker Dick Taverne kicked the day off by talking about Lord Joffe's Bill to legalise assisted dying for the terminally ill. He described how the debates leading up to its 2006 defeat in the House of Lords had, along with the faith schools issue, turned him from being a passive atheist into a militant one.

He described how well various forms of voluntary euthanasia and assisted dying have worked in other countries. Arguments from choice, autonomy and compassion for suffering all favour some form of assisted dying.

Yet the largely religious opposition ignored all rational arguments and evidence. The Church Times said the proponents of Lord Joffe's bill to legalise PAD were following the Nazis, so that useless people would be killed off. Archbishop Rowan Williams said the motive was to save costs and beds in the Health Service. He and the Catholic Archbishop said time and again that the right to die would become the duty to die. "Their campaign was a disgrace", commented Taverne. "It would have made Goebbels proud."

Taverne was very critical of those who impose their religious beliefs on others, who deprive others of choice and impose suffering on them in the name of God, who claim that only religion can be the basis for morality. "On issues like euthanasia or physician-assisted dying, we do not need moral lectures from clerics who seem more concerned with dogma than compassion," said Taverne.

But the deliberate distortions, scare-mongering and lobbying

worked. It has been claimed that the Catholic Church's campaign cost £10 million, an impossible sum for Dignity in Dying or the secularist and humanist organisations to match, and Taverne thought that because peers were less used to concerted lobbies than MPs, they were unduly influenced by the religious lobbying. Despite it, however, the defeat was not by a huge margin, the issue would return to the Lords, and Dignity in Dying was preparing actively for it.

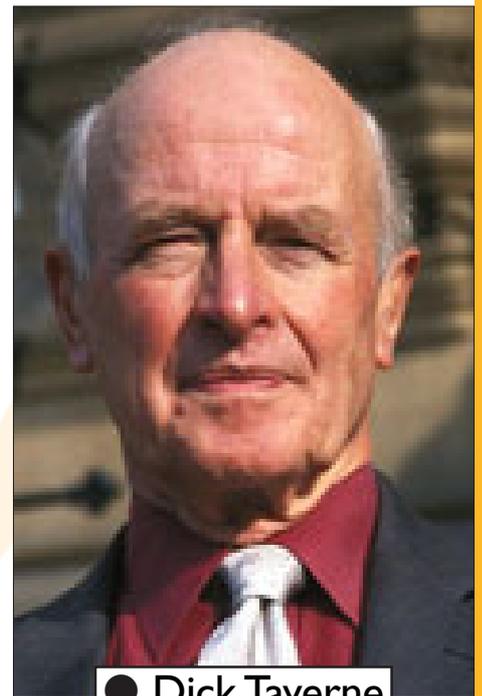
Questions and discussion followed. The challenge for those campaigning for dignity in dying is to mobilise the largely passive support from 80% of the population to the point where it outweighs the noisy and mendacious campaign conducted by the religiously motivated minority.

After lunch, those present chose to discuss the perennially popular topic of faith schools and issues around about free speech, blasphemy etc.

Both groups concluded that our desired policies in these areas fitted well with Lib Dem philosophy, though sometimes we needed to demonstrate that more clearly,

The conference ended with good news from the elusive Evan Harris, who has managed to table an amendment to the next Criminal Justice Bill abolishing the offence of blasphemy.

The final session was a discussion of strategy for the group. The fundamental issue is how far do we need to concentrate on one or two things vs. the desire to follow



● Dick Taverne

up every suggestion.

The general view that the group should prioritise influencing party policy. Although there is a need to react to policy initiatives and ensure that policy pronouncements are 'secular-proofed' the main focus needs to be on actively promoting one or two issues. Faith Schools remains the clear central plank of this activity but there is less agreement about how far we go beyond this topic.

A corollary of this is that the group will be very focused on party conference in the Spring and Autumn. This begs the question of how do we reach out beyond our core audience of those who go to Conference? How do we promote our policies within the party and also reach out to our fellow humanists and secularists, and beyond?

Any views you have on these questions would be welcome.

(e-mail:

arnie_gibbons2004@yahoo.co.uk)

Chair's comment -

But Does God believe in Nick Clegg?

We expected some early headline grabbing pronouncements to follow Nick Clegg's election to the leadership. But his "I don't believe in God" statement surprised us all and created a bit of a stir. He isn't the first party leader to make such a declaration – Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock both acknowledged their secularist outlook.

Reaction has generally been positive – people want politicians to be open and honest and by giving a straight answer to the question (asked in a radio 5 live interview) he has enhanced his reputation as a trustworthy politician. It clearly is welcome news that our new leader shares our position, but it may turn out to be a mixed blessing.

As evidenced by his immediate rush to issue a clarifying statement, the party leadership may become overly sensitive in



their desire to avoid upsetting various religious interest groups. So don't expect a wave of new secularist policies to engulf the party. The debates will continue to be passionate and hard fought and we shouldn't expect Nick to intervene.

Arnie

Getting Heard

Committee member Marilyn Mason has been busy spreading the word. Her thoughts on sharia law and the archbishop's clumsy intervention can be found on Lib Dem Voice at <http://www.libdemvoice.org/opinion-how-liberal-are-liberals-obliged-to-be-2190.html>

Her letters have frequently appeared in the national press. For example this is what she wrote on Christina Odone's bleating about being censored:

Dear Sir

Poor little Cristina Odone ! No one will listen to her diatribe against atheism and political correctness except for The Observer, Radio 4's Today programme, The Telegraph, Channel 4 News, BBC's Question Time... She is adopting an all too familiar role – that of victim – though a singularly inappropriate one in her case. Did it never strike her that her angry polemic was simply unsuitable for a carol service?

In fact, to respond to Odone, most atheists and humanists are completely indifferent to harmless public displays of religious belief, but we are often irritated by the assumptions and prejudices displayed by her and others, not least that all well-meaning but foolish interventions on religious display are motivated by hatred of religion; they are often motivated by politeness and concern not to offend religious minorities (though rarely atheists). I agree with her on one thing only, that such interventions are liable to create a backlash, as her article demonstrates.

Marilyn Mason

An End to Blasphemy

It looks like one of the objectives of the secularist movement is about to be realised. The Government intends to abolish the blasphemy laws – and the hero of the hour is our own Evan Harris.

On January 9 Evan Harris MP, tabled an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, calling for an end to the blasphemy law.

At first the Government were unsympathetic, and early reports indicated that they had "no intention" of scrapping the antiquated law. But it soon became apparent that a large number of Labour back benchers didn't agree with the official line and intended

to support Evan's amendment.

A flurry of behind the scenes activity then resulted in a compromise. If Evan would withdraw his own amendment, the Government would bring forward its own amendment to do the job, in the House of Lords.

Although the CofE has indicated in other debates that the law is an anachronism and are not averse to it going, they may change their tune now the possibility is imminent.

We must also thank Stephen Green of Christian Voice whose failed attempt to prosecute the BBC for blasphemy last December strengthened the case for abolition!

Faith Schools - The Debate Continues

HSLD made another attempt to create party policy on the contentious topic of faith schools by submitting a motion for debate at Spring Conference. Although not accepted for debate it looks increasingly likely that the topic will receive an airing at Conference within the next year.

With an education policy paper

Manifesto Conference

The Humanist and Secularist group joined forces with the Christian Forum and the Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats at January's manifesto conference.

A packed room provided the backdrop for a lively debate. Once again it illustrated that the respective groups have more in common with each other as Liberals than divides them on issues of faith.

There was a broad measure of agreement in two of the three

due next Spring it would be very difficult to keep the topic off the agenda. We are currently in discussion with various people (including the Federal Policy Committee and Parliamentary education team) about the best way to approach this. HSLD maintains the position that it would be better to debate a

group discussions. The group discussing religious symbols concluded that except in a few extreme cases (for example where there might be health and safety issues) the wearing of religious symbols or clothing was a matter of personal choice that did no harm. A second group on free speech/incitement to hatred laws came down against incitement to religious hatred legislation – existing laws on incitement to violence should cover extreme cases – in favour of free speech.

motion on faith schools at the Autumn Conference in advance of the policy paper. This would then inform the contents of the policy paper and avoid the party's education policy proposals being overwhelmed by the faith schools debate.

The third group contained a much greater divergence of views. There are clear divisions about faith schools and it would be dishonest to pretend there is any consensus. The discussion highlighted that there are a large number of people who are not enthusiastic about faith schools but would be unwilling to abolish them given that they already exist. These are the people whose views will determine the outcome of any conference debate on faith schools.

Why not get in touch with your State/Regional Rep?

Wales:

Cllr. Ed Bridges edbridges@hotmail.co.uk 07776 233753

South East

Mike Simpson mikeg.simpson@virgin.net 0845 330 3960

Western Counties:

Jenny Shorten jenny@jennyshorten.com 01793 766759

South Central:

Cllr. Sam Payne spayne1701@yahoo.co.uk 02392 592072

East of England:

Richard Carden r.carden@btinternet.com 01986 788279

East Midlands:

Cllr. Richard Church churchr1@btconnect.com 01604 719097

West Midlands:

Geoff Freeman geoff@freeman.org.uk 01789 840584

North West:

Mike Quinton patmikequinton@supanet.com 01524 770220

Northern Region:

Paul Cowie p.j.cowie@ncl.ac.uk 01830 520121

London:

Balan Sisupalan balansisupalan@aol.com 020 8444 8081



The Team for 2007-08

The Group elected a new Executive Committee at its AGM in Brighton. Here are the details.



Chair: Arnie Gibbons arnie_gibbons2004@yahoo.co.uk

Arnie has been involved in the party at all levels over the last 25 years. This includes 14 years as a councillor (ten in Leicester and four in Islington, where he was Executive Member for Finance) and agent for local, general, and European campaigns. He is currently a member of Federal Conference Committee and was recently a member of the party's Tax Policy Commission.

Other posts held in the past include Treasurer of ALDC, Treasurer of DELGA and East Midlands Regional Chair.



Vice-chair: Cllr. Vera Head vera.head@tiscali.co.uk

Vera is group leader on both Chiltern District Council and Amersham Town Council.

A member of the parties from way back she has enjoyed a interesting political life having been a general election agent in winning seats and campaigned locally in an area full of Tory true blues.

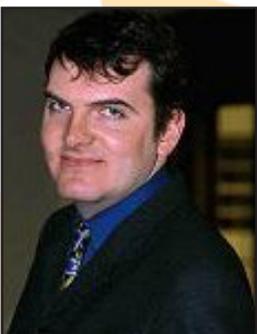
Has worked in Cowley Street conference office and is currently Treasurer of Women Liberal Democrats. Vera decided its time to stand up and be counted, so joined LDHSG last year.



Secretary: John White John.White@concore.co.uk

John White has been Secretary of the LDHSG since the first elections some 15 months ago. He was a founder member of both the SDP and the BHA - and is currently Chair of Oxford Humanists.

He has yet to hold a position within the LibDems but campaigns for others. Within the executive committee, he aims to represent the views of other lay members of the party and is in regular contact with many of them throughout the UK.



Treasurer: Peter Dunphy petergdunphy@hotmail.com

Peter Dunphy has been a party member for over 20 years and has served as a Councillor, Parliamentary Candidate and Chair of both the Parliamentary Candidates Association and the Party youth section. He is a member of the National Secular Society.

Professionally he is CEO of an international recruitment business and lives in Westminster.



Membership Secretary: Cllr. Richard Church rchurch1@btconnect.com

Richard is Executive Member for Regeneration in the new Lib Dem administration in Northampton. He is also a Northamptonshire County Councillor and Chair of East Midlands Region.

Richard's hero from history is Northampton's Victorian Liberal MP Charles Bradlaugh, who led the way in securing the right of atheists to take their seats in the Parliament.

The Team for 2007-08 (continued)

Elected Committee Members



Marilyn Mason

marilyn.mason@virgin.net

Marilyn Mason taught for 20 years before being appointed the first ever Education Officer for the British Humanist Association.

In her 8 years at the BHA she wrote and spoke extensively on Humanism and humanist concerns, briefed the media, MPs and peers on educational issues, and worked on BHA policy and campaigns, including the ongoing campaign for secular schools that would accommodate children of all faiths and none.



Mike Pictor

m.pictor@ukonline.co.uk

Mike lives in Cheltenham, and first became a Liberal council candidate in the 60's; he's since served one term as a councillor.

He spent thirty years in the retail trade up to retirement, both in the West End, and in Cheltenham. Mike includes the Army and trade unionism as influences on him. He is committed to the environment, and is a long-standing member of the Campaign for Real Ale. Mike likes to approach each new situation from basic principles.



Balan Sisupalan

balansisupalan@aol.com

Balan was born in British India, grew up in British Singapore and have been in the Britain since 1961.

He is a qualified town planner and transportation engineer and has worked with 6 local authorities.

Balan left the Labour party in 2002. He was a Labour Councillor in Haringey and served as Chair of both the Council's Environment Services Committee and Haringey Community Health Council.

At present he is Executive Committee member of the London Civic forum and Vice Chair of EMLD.



The Humanist & Secularist Liberal Democrat is affiliated to both the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

Why not check out their websites:

www.humanism.org.uk

www.secularism.org.uk

**national
secular
society**



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values within the Lib Dems**