



An “Activist in a Suit” Speaks at Farnham

Farnham Humanists were privileged to have Keith Porteous Wood, President of the National Secular Society (NSS), as their guest speaker at their meeting of 18th February. The meeting attracted a full house which included members of other local Humanist groups. The audience was treated to a summary of the work of the NSS, enlivened by many personal experiences and anecdotes from a person who has been at the forefront of the NSS campaigns for over 20 years (as General Secretary, Chief Executive, and now President). Keith Porteous Wood is popularly known as “the activist in a suit” because although he is a powerful person in what he does, he does it in the nicest possible way!

Majority in society

The NSS fights on behalf of those who want religious privileges removed from government, from education, and from those areas of society where they are imposed on those who have no religious beliefs, or different religious beliefs, or where minorities are being oppressed. The privileges have a long history, and are a powerful force to be reckoned with, both nationally and internationally, at the highest level of national and international institutions. An interesting aside is that the NSS finds the EU, with its formal structures and laws, is at least in theory easier to confront and challenge than the UK because of the latter’s lack of a written constitution. Brexit may therefore make its work somewhat more difficult.

26 Unelected Bishops

In the UK the NSS faces obstruction from the presence of the 26 unelected bishops in the House of Lords, serving as of right, which is a unique position in the democracies of the world, and also by the recent procession of strongly religious prime ministers (including Thatcher, Blair, May), particularly Theresa May who has turned back the clock on progress made against religious privilege in schools. England and Wales remain the only democratic countries to have compulsory daily religious worship in all state funded schools. Currently the NSS is campaigning to extend the right to all pupils, not just sixth form pupils (for which it was responsible) to exempt themselves from collective religious worship.

Women’s rights and religion

Overseas, the NSS is active in promoting many policies, including extending women’s rights, opposing sharia, and other discriminatory beliefs. It often faces an unlikely alliance of conservative Christians and Muslims. It was noted that the Human Rights Council, a body within the United Nations, proscribes discussion of sharia except by “experts”, who are unlikely to be critical.

New statue in House of Commons

The speaker proudly mentioned the new portrait bust of Charles Bradlaugh MP donated to the House of Commons by the NSS thanks to many donations, and now located in the Lower Waiting Hall, adjacent to the Central Lobby. This bust commemorates the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the NSS by Charles Bradlaugh. It is fitting that it finds a place in the House of Commons because he was elected as MP for Northampton on four occasions but was not allowed to take his seat because he was an atheist. A doughty fighter, he succeeded at his fifth attempt, and became a popular and respected member. The first bill that he presented to the House was to legalise affirmation, which became law, so he won through eventually.

Further information

www.farnham.humanist.org.uk

www.secularism.org.uk