

Depleted uranium—a dirty mess

At our meeting in Colchester on May 14th, we had “Ten Minute Topics”. Anyone could talk about anything for ten minutes. **Mervyn Carter** chose to talk about depleted uranium and its uses. Since it’s a subject that few of us seemed to know about, though maybe we should, Mervyn agreed to write about it.



At its simplest, depleted uranium is a type of nuclear waste. It is the 97% of uranium after extraction from its ore that cannot be used to make nuclear fuel (or bombs). Depleted uranium is mildly radioactive and chemically very toxic. Like lead, it accumulates in body tissues and causes slow poisoning.

During the “Cold War” era, both sides produced thousands of nuclear bombs and in the process created huge amounts of depleted uranium. There is about one million tonnes of it still being stored around the world, including about 21000 tonnes in the UK. Since it has a radioactive half-life of 4.5 billion years (yes billion!), it needs to be stored securely, in effect, for the rest of the life of our planet. Naturally, the cost of storing it will be huge. In a sane world, we would never have produced it in the first place.

Some depleted uranium has also been created as power station fuel rods have been recycled. This is particularly dangerous, as it may be contaminated by the more radioactive and toxic products of radioactive decay that arise as the fuel is used, especially plutonium.

What is depleted uranium used for ?

Given the cost of storage, the military industrial complexes that created the depleted uranium have struggled to find a cheap way of getting rid of it, without worrying too much about the environmental consequences. It has been made into counterweights for aircraft control surfaces and keel weights for boats. It is used to shield radioactive sources as its density means that it is impermeable to some radiation. Moves have been made to disperse it in industrial metal castings. But mostly, it has been used in armour piercing munitions. Its strength and density are much better than the lead used in most shells. Fired at high velocity it is very effective in puncturing armour plate. But there is a downside that the military would rather not address.

Margaret is spreading the word on life without gods

We put faith in

HUMANISM IN THE MEDIA

A centre-page article about Humanism and Secularism by Lynne Mortimer was in the Evening Star on 2nd June, and the same article was in the East Anglian Daily Times on 10th June. BBC Radio Suffolk's website has a new article by Andrew Woodger, "Belief in a Secular Society"* , about Humanism v religion. Both Lynne and Andrew approached me for interviews—the articles were unsolicited. MN

*<http://tinyurl.com/5mkuwt>

When a depleted uranium shell hits a target, its kinetic energy is released in a powerful flash of heat. The depleted uranium bursts into flame and fragments, sending particles flying throughout the target vehicle and the surrounding area. These can be large enough to kill the occupants of the vehicle and they can be a fine dust that blows in the wind and spreads widely, contaminating the area in a toxic and radioactive cloud. Over time, the depleted uranium can contaminate ground water supplies.

The Geneva Conventions outlaw the use of weapons that fail to discriminate between combatants and civilians. It can be argued that this makes the use of depleted

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uranium illegal under international law. The powers that be are more interested in economics than people. Those responsible for the storage of depleted uranium stocks are pleased to give it to arms manufacturers at negligible costs, just to be rid of it. Shells could be made using tungsten instead of depleted uranium, but that would be more expensive and would still leave the cost of storing the depleted uranium. So profit comes before ethics.

What are the effects of depleted uranium contamination?

Contamination by depleted uranium causes many long-term health crises. It increases the risk of getting cancer, it causes terrible birth defects and it can cause spontaneous abortion. We have fired about 3000 tonnes of depleted uranium into Iraq. It has also been used in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Cancer rates have risen by about 60% and hundreds of children have been born with deformities, often missing body parts or with terrible defects. Many believe that depleted uranium is a cause of the so-called "Gulf War Syndrome" that has affected soldiers who fought in Iraq.

In some ways, depleted uranium is rather like landmines. It affects people long after a conflict has ended. Unlike landmines, it goes on killing and maiming people for centuries, or even millennia. Given how easily depleted uranium spreads around, it is almost impossible to clear up. The only way to stop the damage and indefinite harm to target areas is to ban its use in weapons.

"People of Faith" - a response

John Palmer wrote an article for our May newsletter on "People of Faith" invited to join Local Strategic Partnerships. He ended, "We don't need and cannot afford even more people to join what appears to be a swollen, quango-like organisation, especially if they're bringing agendas which could be unacceptable to the majority of the local community."

Pepper Harow, the BHA's Local Campaigns Officer (who'll be our guest speaker in October) has responded.

John Palmer makes some good points about the problems caused at local level by the unrepresentative amount of power which is given to "faith communities" in decision making bodies. All too often our members tell us about local initiatives targeting religious people for involvement and treating organisations with a religious character differently to other community organizations.

At the British Humanist Association we have been running a project to try and combat this. The Local Development Project aims to identify how humanists and non-religious

What can we do ?

- Join the Campaign Against Depleted Uranium
- Ask your MP to take up the issue
- Contact the UK media and keep the issue in the agenda
- Contact the army to call for them to cease the use of depleted uranium
- Push for an EU-wide ban on depleted uranium (there have already been three calls for a moratorium on DU use in the European Parliament)
- Push for a NATO ban
- Push for a UN world-wide ban
- Call for serious efforts to clear up the mess left by depleted uranium, especially in populated areas of war zones

Further information can be obtained from: -

UK Campaign Against Depleted Uranium
www.cadu.org.uk

International Campaign to Ban depleted uranium
www.bandepleteduranium.org

Low Level Radiation Campaign on DU
www.llrc.org/du/dupage.htm

Depleted Uranium on Wikipedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depleted_uranium

people might contribute effectively to the work of equality bodies and networks, including groups which discuss religion and belief issues, within local authority areas. We have done this by recruiting individuals around the country who are interested in taking on an active role in their locality for the BHA.



Pepper Harow

Although we understand that some of our members find this idea difficult (particularly as a lot of this work means getting involved in work dubbed "interfaith") we believe that the benefits outweigh the difficulties. For example, since May 2007, we have recruited volunteers to sit on bodies such as a Community & Social Inclusion Group in Lancashire, a Local Citizens Panel in Essex, a Social Inclusion Working Group in York and the Diversity and Equality Tactical group in the City of London Police. There are also volunteers on several interfaith forums or working

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British Humanist Association 2008 Annual General Meeting

The British Humanist Association (BHA) AGM was held at Conway Hall, London, on July 12. In what was considered by the platform to be a very well-attended meeting, the usual AGM motions were passed and elections carried out. The meeting was chaired by Robert Ashby, chair of the Board of Trustees, supported by Hanne Stinson, the BHA chief executive, and John Woolhouse, BHA treasurer.

Hanne Stinson spoke on a wide range of subjects and campaigns. BHA membership was currently over 7,800, with 90 local groups. She described how BHA ceremonies were becoming more professional and that they should soon become revenue generating. There were 193 accredited officiants in 2007, who carried out over 7,300 ceremonies. The current number of accredited and candidate officiants was 235. Improvement of the BHA ceremonies "brand" was the team's objective. The cost of ceremonies to the BHA was covered in the financial presentation.

Hanne referred to the launch of the schools resource website, which had already become "massively popular". It can be found at www.humanismforschools.org.uk.

A major campaign was being mounted to change the 2011 England & Wales census question relating to religion. A two-part question would be preferred, but there was no sign of any change being made so far. Members were asked to let the BHA know of local authorities that were using the 2001 census statistics relating to religion to justify policies, as the 2001 results were considered to be misleading.

Hanne announced a fund-raising initiative, called "Living The Logo", to achieve donations of £100,000 by the end of 2008. She bravely said that she would undertake to have the Happy Human logo tattooed on her shoulder, its size to depend on the final amount achieved! She caused puzzlement then amusement by referring to Leviticus 19:28 – "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh ... nor print any marks upon you ...".

Questions were raised about Remembrance Day ceremonies, The Scouts Association and the BBC's Thought For The Day slot. Apparently, Mark Thompson, BBC director-general, has become more inclined to talk to the BHA of late. A member raised again the ambition of changing the National Anthem. Another member criticised the current BHA newsletter, feeling that the old-style magazine should be reinstated.

A representative of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, Maryam Namazie, was warmly received by the meeting.

John Woolhouse gave a presentation of the association's accounts. He stated that there were currently 13 salaried members of BHA staff. The most controversial part of the statement was around the charge for the ceremonies effort

which, out of a total BHA expenditure of £708,000, cost £240,000. There was income that should be allocated to this item, but ceremonies had taken up 35% of the association's general overhead expenses. The next largest expenditure was campaigning, with a cost of £169,000.



BHA President Polly Toynbee gave a closing address. She expressed surprise at the apparent resurgence of religion, not just as a result of 9/11, but also from the interest shown by politicians, at least in their public utterances. Privately, their views were often very different. She was particularly disappointed at New Labour's pro-religious policies.

The BHA website contains full details of the "Living The Logo" appeal. A full report of the AGM will be available later in the year. The BHA website is at www.humanism.org.uk.

John Palmer

Recently two local families were denied the Humanist funerals they asked their funeral directors for. One was told that no Humanist celebrants were available (though no one had contacted us); the other's request was ignored, while the funeral arranger kept repeating that they needed "a minister". They took their business elsewhere, and were soon put in touch with us.

Since then, we've been assured by one of the organisation's senior managers that this won't happen again. We've arranged to distribute more of our leaflets to all their branches, where staff will be properly trained.

If you hear of any similar problems, please let us know.

There was a time when BBC announcers were regarded with amusement for their exaggerated diction, strangulated vowels, and all. At least they set a standard for the correct use of English. Today we hear of Laura Norder, and because this is approved by authorities, we think she must be quite a girl. Hopes are dashed when we see it in print as "Law and Order". Weaker Slink is apparently a quiz programme hosted by a ginger



midget. When a pop singer has a Layter's Tit it is not necessarily an ailment. There must be many other examples that occur to you; contributions will be welcome.

Derek Mason

Maybe The Queen's English Society should be alerted? *MN*
www.queens-english-society.com

Council prayers—make them optional!

Over the last few months I've exchanged emails with the Chief Executive of Babergh District Council, where they have prayers at the beginning of full council meetings. I've been trying to persuade the council to adopt Suffolk County Council's practice of having optional prayers ten minutes *before* meetings, so that no assumptions are made. So far, my suggestion has been rejected.

Meanwhile, Keith Denby from Devon Humanists has begun a campaign to ban prayers before council meetings, and says that the BHA and the NSS will support legal action against those who won't stop.

NSS President Terry Sanderson asked if we couldn't join forces with Devon Humanists. We haven't discussed this formally yet, but my immediate response was that I wouldn't support a threat of legal action—yet—as Suffolk's local authorities (and Devon's) will no longer exist within the next couple of years. It's proposed to have two new unitary authorities in Suffolk. One will cover the Felixstowe and Ipswich areas, the other will cover the rest of the county, excluding Lowestoft. We'll keep an eye on them, and if either adopts the old-fashioned practice of obligatory prayers, *then* we can challenge them. *MN*

In Brief

David Mitchell apologises for neglecting to thank Nathan Nelson in his AGM report (Nathan is our webmaster). David says that we all appreciate Nathan's work, and that he often recommends our website (www.suffolkhands.org.uk).

On 6th June I visited Year 10 students at Thomas Wolsey Special School, Ipswich, to talk about Humanism. It was a thoroughly enjoyable session with a group whose physical disabilities haven't affected their wit.

Essex Humanist Brian Whitelaw, group secretary and celebrant,

died on Sunday 15th June, after two and a half years with lymphoma. I was unable to go to his funeral but sent a tribute to his widow, Diane. Brian worked hard to raise the profile of Humanism in Chelmsford and the surrounding area, and he conducted many Humanist baby-namings, weddings and funerals.

On 17th June I spent the day at Leiston Community High School with a SIFRE team of tutors—a Buddhist, a Pagan and a Muslim. We discussed making ethical decisions (focussing on abortion) with the 6th form. A quick straw poll revealed that only about three of the students would

describe themselves as religious, though a couple of the girls thought that the Pagan speaker's philosophy of responsible hedonism sounded attractive. My thanks to Andrew Morrison for coming with me and pushing my wheelchair.

John Palmer represented us at the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource AGM recently. He reports that it was a quick meeting, where Cynthia Capey reported a lot of interest from schools in SIFRE's speakers, and police training seems popular too. The board game Diversity is still seen as a useful tool, which can generate more income for SIFRE. *MN*

"People of Faith" - a response

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with their local authorities on community cohesion work.

Some people have asked us whether this means that Humanism is a "faith". However the BHA would argue that the correct term to use would be "religion and belief". This term is becoming widely respected as it includes everyone from both religious and non-religious backgrounds and is backed up by the Human Rights Act and anti-discrimination legislation. This project aims to identify how humanists and non-religious people might contribute effectively to the work of equality, diversity and social cohesion in their locality. This means engaging with the structures and procedures which already exist to work on these issues. This does not mean joining structures which would be inappropriate or counter productive just to gain influence. Also, it does not mean defining ourselves as a "faith based organisation" to fit into existing structures.

What it does mean is working with these structures to encourage inclusion and make sure our voice is heard in these discussions.

So far the project has recruited over 150 volunteers who are all helping to raise the profile of Humanism in their local communities and are helping to make their local authorities more inclusive of non-religious people. By getting involved and demanding that non-religious people are given the same opportunities as "faith communities," the BHA is hoping to change the current "faith-based" perspective of government at all levels.

Pepper Harow

Do you think that we should expect to influence local authorities as Humanists, as well as ordinary council tax payers and voters? Or should we be calling for the removal of any special privileges for religious organisations? *MN*



Care of the elderly, with or without God

Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource held a forum on July 8 on the subject of care for the elderly, chaired by Dr. Ann Spalding, faiths officer. It was held in conjunction with Partnership with Older People, a unit from Suffolk County Council which has links with Age Concern. Partnership with Older People receives financial help from the government's prevention budget.

At Suffolk University Campus, the views of members of the SIFRE Senior Citizens' Tea Party and others were presented on how best to care for older people in the future. People from various faiths gave presentations on how their communities cared for their old people.

A Sikh woman said that her community still cared for its elderly, 'though things were changing as younger people were westernised. A significant problem was to do with language, with difficulties in talking to medical personnel. A woman of Jamaican origin described how she cared for her sick mother, with little respite, but finished by saying that she found help was available in this country. A Muslim man said that the Qur'an requires the faithful to help the elderly, and that a percentage of personal wealth must be donated to the elderly, particularly the poor. Care was expected to be family-based. A Buddhist and a Hindu also confirmed the tradition of home care in the family for the elderly.

A Christian woman of white ethnic origin told of her caring responsibilities, at home, for her mother, and cited major complaints against the NHS and other organisations when specialist help was required. She recalled how, having waited a day for a doctor to attend her mother one weekend, she was told that if people must live in the countryside, they should not become ill! She said that patients' rights should be strongly asserted and that carers should always attend patient assessments. Stories of home family care for the elderly were related from African, South American and Ukrainian backgrounds.

Care homes seemed to be unpopular. A Christian pastor said that there were problems of visiting in care homes, with a loss of interaction between residents and their relations and friends. Care home residents needed to feel they belonged and had something to contribute to society. A question was asked about what proportion of old people go into care homes. The answer was not known. (Government statistics for England in 2007 show that there were 442,000 places in registered care homes for adults of all ages.) However, a Christian priest stated that he was aware of many people who were happy in care homes and that they were well looked after. A Humanist said that whilst family care might be preferable, it had not been possible for a growing number of people in recent times. Society in this country had changed. Efforts should

therefore be concentrated on improving the care offered by institutions both in homes and at home. The remarkable recent story of the Bury St. Edmunds care home that improved its residents' physical and mental health just by ensuring that they drank enough water each day was cited as an example of what could be achieved with thought and a little science.

The forum was mostly about the benefits of looking after the old in a family environment. Little positive was said about the extent to which financial and personal help was provided by social service authorities and how it could be improved.

John Palmer

From what John's reported, the problems faced by religious people in caring for older relatives don't seem very different from everyone else's, though some appear to suggest that religious "communities" are more committed to family-based care than others. I doubt that the statistics would support that view. We have an aging population, and the proportion of frail elderly is increasing. A huge amount of money is saved by the efforts of family carers who look after their elderly relatives at home, with little practical or financial support. The Government has said it will provide more support, but so far this has been limited. Many, like one of my friends, are "sandwich" carers, who look after grandchildren and elderly parents at the same time. This is 24/7 commitment, and can be exhausting. In reality, a "community" is usually a lot of individuals doing their best, rather than some sort of idealised communal care system.

An increasing number of older people are rejecting the idea of "going into a home" (which many dread) and losing their independence. "Homes for Life" (houses designed to be accessible as people get older) are a rarity. Most houses were built without much thought for decreased mobility and other problems in old age, so adaptations may be necessary, if you can find the money or get a grant. From my involvement with a local authority housing department, I can report that sheltered housing schemes are unpopular, and that some have been converted to general housing stock for lack of applicants, while specialist housing for the very frail elderly (those in their eighties and nineties with severe health problems) is in demand.

Considering that the demographic writing's been on the wall a long time, planning for older people has been neglected. Maybe we ought to make a fuss?

A friend who died a few years ago, in her nineties, told me, "Margaret, don't grow old; it's no fun at all."

Unfortunately, there's not much we can do about it. MN

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The Suffolk & N E Essex Humanist group was founded in 1991 to promote Humanism and Secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We changed our name to Suffolk Humanists when the Essex group was formed, then again in April 2008, to reflect the importance of secularism when religious organisations are being increasingly assertive.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE). The group is a member of SAVO—the Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team, which is independent of the BHA network, has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions. For more information, see the contact details above.

HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion;

Humanists think we can be good without God.

SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

IMPORTANT MESSAGE: I founded the Suffolk Humanist group in 1991 and have been its secretary and main spokesperson since then, apart from a year or two when I took the chair. I won't be standing for re-election as secretary next year and have already begun to hand over some of my responsibilities to other committee members. I've been a local radio broadcaster, Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource tutor, newsletter editor and publisher, public speaker, school visitor, publicist and general administrator. If anyone is interested in finding out more about any of these roles, I propose to run some informal training sessions, beginning this autumn. Please get in touch. *Margaret Nelson*

Dates for your diaries

Please note: few Essex members have attended Colchester meetings recently, while Suffolk members have travelled long distances to get there, so we've cancelled them. All meetings will be at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich, IP1 6DG. Meetings start at 7.30pm and end at 10pm. Raffle prizes and guests welcome. For directions or to request or offer a lift, phone 01473 658828 or email us. If you get lost on the way, phone 07901 656463.

Saturday 2 August, pub lunch at The Seal, on the corner of Old Barrack Road and Ipswich Road, **Woodbridge**. You can't book at The Seal, so come at noon to be sure of finding a table. Phone 01473 658828 if you're coming so we know how many to expect. Look for a copy of the newsletter on a table.



Sunday 31 August, fund-raising breakfast in Elmsett, 10 'til noon. If

wet, the breakfast will be postponed until the following Saturday. Please bring a

garden chair. Croissant, pain au chocolat, pain aux raisins, fruit, juice, tea and coffee for £5.00. Raffle, bring & buy books and plants. Funds will go to the Sangkheum Centre for Children, Cambodia. RSVP 01473 658828 by 25 August please.

Sunday 7 September, Burston Strike School Rally, Burston, near Diss (see our February newsletter). The Norfolk Humanist Group has had a stall at this

event for several years, and we're going this year to promote Humanism & Secularism, with special reference to what's going on in education today. If anyone's interested in helping, please get in touch ASAP.

Wednesday 10 September, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre—**Rebecca Crerar from Suffolk Refugee Support Forum**. Rebecca may be accompanied by a refugee with a story to tell. We'll spend the last half hour of the meeting brainstorming about how to mark Darwin Day (12 February) next year, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin.

Wednesday 8 October, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre—**Pepper Harow from the British Humanist Association on its Local Development Project**.

Wednesday 12 November, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre—**Julie Coombes, teacher, on RE in the primary school**.

Wednesday 10 December, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich—**Jim Herrick, author of "Humanism: an introduction", on The Humanist Heritage—a look at the history of Humanism**.

January 2009—no meeting.

Wednesday 11 February 2009, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich—**Ten Minute Topics**.

Note our new URL—www.suffolkhands.org.uk