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Mar 2005
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Margaret Nelson at Suffolk Fabian Society, 8th March 2005

While a vocal minority in our country is campaigning for publicly-funded segregated education in faith schools, the [Integrated Education Fund](#) in Ireland is campaigning just as hard for children to learn together in the same schools.

The IEF says that between 1969 and 2001 over 3500 people have died and many others have been injured physically and mentally as a result of the bigotry and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. The 2001 census showed that the population of Northern Ireland is 53% Protestant and 44% Catholic. Several generations of Catholic children have never had anything to do with Protestant children, while Protestant children have never knowingly spoken to Catholic children, apart from exchanging abuse.

A small group of parents and others believed that things would never get better unless their children went to school together and stopped demonising one another. They called themselves 'All Parents Together' and founded the first integrated school, [Lagan College](#), in 1981. They took out personal loans and ran jumble sales to raise the money for that first school, in a scout hut on the outskirts of Belfast, where they had 28 pupils. Now there are more integrated schools, but still only 10% of the total in Northern Ireland, and they are still forced to raise funds themselves.

The US Ambassador to Ireland, Richard Haas, attending a function in Washington earlier this year, said, "Young children of different traditions need to develop the habit of sitting side-by-side as students so that they can work and live side-by-side in later life." The [Voices Behind the Statistics](#) report, published last October, studied young people's views of sectarianism. Sixth-formers from across the religious divide said integrated schools would help foster better community relations.

About four and a half years ago, when there was racial unrest and rioting in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, I remember hearing a northern imam complaining that his community wasn't keen on sending its children to RE lessons because they were being 'confused' about what to believe. 'We are having great difficulty forming their beliefs,' he said. This made me deeply angry. No one has any right to form a child's beliefs. As Professor [Richard Dawkins wrote in the Observer](#) in December 2001, there are no Catholic babies, or Protestant babies, or Muslim babies, or Hindu babies – they are all just babies. When my son was born, no one said that he was an Atheist baby. Dawkins wrote,

'Where we might have said, "Knowing his father, I expect young Cowdrey will take up cricket," we emphatically do not say, "With her devout Catholic parents, I expect young Bernadette will take up Catholicism." Instead we say, without a moment's hesitation or qualm of misgiving, "Bernadette is a Catholic." We state it as a simple fact even when she is far too young to have developed a theological opinion of her own.'

As Dawkins points out, we may be strongly influenced by our parents in all manner of things, from bird-watching to book-loving, but reasonable parents do not assume that our children will be bird-watchers or book-lovers, whatever we might hope for. The preposterous presumption made by advocates of faith schools is that it is acceptable to label children by faith, without their comprehension or consent.

Let's get the definitions right, shall we? 'Faith' means having a strong belief in something, especially without proof. 'Belief', in this context, means accepting that something is true or real, such as the existence of a god or gods, again without proof. So please tell me how one can form a child's beliefs, especially a child who is too young to make a critical judgment about what is or isn't true? This is not education – it's indoctrination, the antithesis of education.

After the northern race riots in the summer of 2000, the British Humanist Association published the following:

There is often a gulf between the religious segregation that older generations and 'community leaders' want, and what young people in those groups want, as Lord Ouseley's report on Bradford notes: 'What was most inspiring was the great desire among young people for better education, more social and cultural interaction ... Some young people have pleaded desperately for this to overcome the negativity that they feel is blighting their lives and leaves them ignorant of other cultures and lifestyles... Young people realise that being taught in religious ghettos is not a good preparation for life in a multi-cultural society. The Ouseley report also observes 'signs that communities are fragmenting along racial, cultural and faith lines. Segregation in schools is one indicator of this trend... There is "virtual apartheid" in many secondary schools in the District.'

So why, with all the evidence of the deep divisions created by segregation, have the main British political parties said they support the creation of more faith schools? There are several reasons, none of them good enough to justify this daft policy.

We've already got a lot of faith schools – Anglican and Catholic – for historical reasons. We have an established church, which has had considerable influence. In the first third of the nineteenth century, voluntary church societies developed a national system of elementary schools. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 created a compromise between the church, which wanted to extend its influence, and radicals like Jeremy Bentham, who wanted a totally secular system. Voluntary schools continued with grants-in-aid, while local school boards ran state schools. The system remained more or less the same until the 1944 Education Act, which strangely specified that only one subject was compulsory in the curriculum; religious instruction, now called 'education'. Despite declining church attendances (or perhaps because of them), the 1988 Education Reform Act (introduced by a Catholic Education Minister) set the clock back by insisting that religious worship 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' is now compulsory in school assemblies. This legislation has been widely flouted. In areas like Luton, where schools had worked hard to reflect the multicultural nature of their catchment areas in assemblies, it was perceived as unworkable.

Now the minority faiths are demanding parity with the so-called 'Christian' majority, and with an election looming the party leaders are anxious to get as many votes as possible. Labour used to be able to rely on most Muslims to vote for them, until George and Tony invaded Iraq. Not to be outdone, the Tories and Lib Dems are anxious to tell faith organisations that they offer no threat to their plans for schools.

I said 'so-called' majority because I doubt that many of those who described themselves as Christian in the last census actually know or care what that means. Few nominal Christians go to church and most find it difficult to explain what they mean by being Christian. Various surveys have demonstrated, for example, that few nominal Christians believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection. Just about the only things that many nominal Christians have in common is a belief in an afterlife (which isn't exclusively Christian) and the false notion that being religious is synonymous with being good, which is deeply insulting to decent atheists and agnostics. Interestingly, the last census showed that 390,000 people in England and Wales regard themselves as Jedis, or Jedi Knights – may the force be with them.

We're getting some very mixed messages, it seems to me, about education and faith. The new National Framework for Religious Education in the curriculum aims to be 'broad and balanced'. As a co-opted member of Suffolk's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, I can assure you that, despite some resistance, we encourage Suffolk teachers to provide religious education, not indoctrination – though I still come across worrying examples of bad practice and the subject is poorly resourced. How then is the proliferation of faith schools compatible with a 'broad and balanced' approach? Faith schools inevitably have a partial approach to religious education.

The problem with religious education is that, in many cases, there's an underlying assumption that it's a good thing to be religious, despite the fact that religions contradict one another and can be very intolerant of one another. It's definitely not a good thing to be a Muslim, for example, wherever fundamentalists regard leaving the faith as a capital offence. I know that things have changed since I was at school. We didn't learn about other cultures and religions; we learned how to be good little Christians – they failed with me. Many RE teachers still see that as their role. If taught properly, RE can be enlightening. If not, it can put children off religion for good. You might expect me to say that this is a good thing, but I feel this is just a wasted opportunity to explore the fascinating background to religion and religious belief – the whys and hows. I visit schools to talk to children about Humanism as part of their RE courses, and fifteen and sixteen-year-olds have spoken about feeling 'got at' by religious people. They're often deeply suspicious of not so subtle attempts to persuade them that religion is 'a good thing'.

If it were up to me, I'd scrap religious education altogether as a separate subject and include the study of religion in other subjects, such as history, social studies, and art. As long as it is a separate subject, it will be regarded as having a special status, and won't be taught with the same intellectual rigor as other subjects. There's little time given to the study of how religions developed in a social and historical context, for example. The subject attracts teachers with their own agenda, especially in primary schools. A friend who teaches Key Stage 1 volunteered to co-ordinate RE teaching in her school when there was no one else to do it. Her offer was greeted with hoots of derision because the other staff knew she's an atheist, and they didn't think an atheist could or should teach RE. The job was given to an evangelical Christian.

Instead of teaching RE as a separate subject, it would be better if philosophical enquiry was included in the curriculum, teaching children to think, and covering logic and ethics as they develop. This would, however, be resisted by fundamentalist religious organisations who aspire to have their own schools. Thinking and belief aren't compatible.

Many defend faith schools by insisting that they have a positive ethos and get good results. Any school, religious or secular, can develop a positive ethos. It's an insult to non-religious teachers – and there are many – to suggest otherwise. As for the results; religious secondary schools are, on the whole, selective. Some parents will become devout Christians overnight or move house to secure a place for their darlings. Children of pushy and ambitious parents will tend to do better than others, so they push up a school's ratings. An Ofsted spokesperson wrote in the Times Educational Supplement in 2001 that 'Selection, even on religious grounds, is likely to attract well-behaved children from stable backgrounds.' Such schools have fewer pupils receiving free school meals and fewer statemented or non-statemented children with special educational needs. There are, however, religious schools that don't do well; schools like the Catholic one where headmaster Philip Lawrence was murdered are sometimes put on special measures.

In an article written in July last year the BHA asserts that 'Choice' in education creates more problems than it solves. There could be more state-funded academies being run by people with very eccentric views, such as the creationist millionaire Sir Peter Vardy, and more state-funded schools being run by faith groups, thus separating and segregating children according to the religious views of their parents, which is inconsistent with Government commitments to improving social cohesion. They also said that more schools will choose their intake and exclude many children on grounds of belief or aptitude, despite Tony Blair's statement at the Fabian Society seminar on 7th July that 'We want parents to choose schools, not schools to choose parents.' Then we have the ridiculous waste of money and environmentally unfriendly spectacle of more children travelling to distant schools in cars or requiring subsidised school transport to get to the schools of their choice. Suffolk County Council decided last year to stop providing subsidised transport in such cases, because the cost was draining our education budget. The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report on the Draft School Transport Bill (published on 7th July) pointed out that the stated objective of encouraging more children to walk or cycle to their local school 'does not sit easily with Government policies to increase diversity in schools and to allow for the expression of parental preference: an approach that encourages greater mobility.' Then, to have choice, you must accept that some schools will have empty places – how does that make sense? – while more popular schools won't be able to expand because of planning constraints. We simply can't afford to encourage this sort of crazy marketplace mentality, economically or educationally.

I predict that it'll be a while before it sinks in with our political leaders, currently trying to outdo one another as 'faith-friendly' to religious leaders with ambitions to open schools at public expense, that faith schools are divisive, expensive, an infringement of the human rights of children, and a generally bad idea. By the way – who decides what a 'faith' is? If they can take the millionaire Peter Vardy seriously, with his creationist schools, why not equally crackpot 'faiths' – when will we have the first Flat Earth school, or the first Satanist school? And there are plenty of zealots like that Bradford imam who'd love to have control over their own schools to

prevent children from learning anything that conflicts with their beliefs, like sex education or gender equality.

In 2001 the Humanist Philosophers' Group published an excellent booklet – Religious Schools: the case against. They concluded:

1. In a free and open society, beliefs about fundamental religious and value commitments should be adopted autonomously and voluntarily;
2. Neither parents nor faith communities have a right to call upon the state to help them inculcate their particular religious beliefs in their children, nor further their own projects, customs or values through their children;
3. In a pluralist, multi-cultural society, the state must promote the tolerance and recognition of different values, religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs.

So no faith schools thank you. Let's just have secular education for all.

July 2012: The BHA publication, 'Religious Schools - the case against', appears to be out of print.

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Jan 2005
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I tend to take the name of this slot literally, so I offer some thoughts for today. Today is the 8th January 2005, at the beginning of the 6th year of the 21st century, and we (by 'we', I mean the human race) have enormous potential, vast resources, and great knowledge. So why do we make things so difficult for ourselves? I often try to imagine what a highly intelligent alien from another part of the universe would think, if she or he were to come and see how we carry on. An alien with superior intelligence and an ethical approach to life might ask how we can be both so stupid and so clever.

My alien might be impressed by the compassion shown by so many, and the ingenuity, and the creativity, but might well ask why these things aren't shared around. Why are a million and a half children a year dying from malnourishment and preventable diseases, when we could stop that happening? Why is it that their plight is largely ignored because they're dying in ones and twos, while an event like an earthquake or plane crash that kills a lot of people at once attracts so much more attention? Why do we seem to care more about some deaths than others?

Why talk about disasters like tsunamis being a 'punishment', when we know that they're caused by natural events? Nature's indifferent to human or any other sort of suffering. Earthquakes happen because the earth's crust is moving around on top of a molten mantle, and the continents are colliding or separating. We can't stop that happening, but we can predict when major events might happen, and take steps to limit the destruction and loss of life.

The American Humanist Gene Roddenberry wrote the TV series Star Trek, in which he imagined what life might be like in the future. He imagined living without money, because if you lived in a fair and equitable society no one would need it. An alien coming here now might ask why so much is spent on armed conflict while others starve? And why is so much destructive energy devoted to maintaining differences, rather than developing what we have in common?

I think an alien might assume that, in terms of development, the human race is only at an ignorant adolescent stage, and has yet to mature. I think an alien might say it's about time we grew up.

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Feb 2005
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A Humanist point of view - Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource Forum of Faiths

The dictionary definition of democracy is: 'a system of government or organisation in which the citizens or members choose leaders or make other important decisions by voting; a country in which the citizens choose their government by voting.' It's not as simple as that; there are many forms of 'democracy', and many self-styled 'democrats' who are anything but.

The British and American governments claim they've taken democracy to the Iraqi people. There's been a lot of rhetoric about 'freedom and democracy' from George Bush, but freedom from what, or to do what? This new 'democracy' is fragile. Interim Prime Minister Allawi is forming a coalition to challenge the Shia candidate, Ibrahim Jaafari, for the role of Prime Minister in the new government. Allawi wants Iraq to remain a secular state, not an Islamic one. If the Shia leadership has its way, Iraq could become a religious state like neighbouring Iran, which is not a democracy. The democratic process could be exploited by those who seek religious dictatorship.

Democracy is under threat here too. Compare the queues at the polling stations in the first free election in South Africa in 1994 and the dismal turnout in most local elections here. Women were given equal voting rights in 1928, yet how many vote now? Democracy's under threat from apathy, indifference and ignorance, and from a failure on the part of some party politicians to listen. To enjoy living in a democracy, one must participate. Too many people regard politics as boring and irrelevant, so don't or won't.

In a true democracy, no special interest group or organisation is allowed special privileges, and there's a danger of that now, as a General Election looms. The Government is so anxious to regain the Muslim votes that they lost during the Iraq war that they're making too many promises to religious organisations about things like faith schools, which we oppose. The badly conceived law on incitement to religious hatred is another example of anti-democratic political manoeuvring. Some Humanists, including members of the British Humanist Association, think it can be made to work, with revisions; others, including members of the National Secular Society, are opposed to it.

Humanists are naturally democrats. The founders of the 19th century ethical societies that developed Humanist ideas and principles tended to be politically radical people who were also involved with campaigns for human rights, women's suffrage, and social change without religion. Today's Humanists are involved with a variety of campaigning organisations, including Amnesty, The Voluntary Euthanasia Society, and many aid organisations. Because we work as individuals our contributions go unrecognised, while specifically Christian organisations appear to be doing more.

The dictionary definition of a citizen is a native or naturalised member of a state or nation, or an inhabitant of a city or town. The second definition, logically and literally, applies to anyone and everyone who has their primary dwelling in a specified place, irrespective of their origins. But I think we're here to consider the first definition.

For Humanists, nationalism, like religion, can be a source of conflict. We regard ourselves as members of one race; the human race. As the world becomes more overcrowded and problems are exacerbated by conflict, natural disasters (such as the earthquakes in the Indian Ocean and Turkey), and the effects of global warming, there is greater pressure on space and resources, especially clean water. Many people of the developed world jealously guard their privileges, while avoiding the sort of work that keeps the show on the road – cleaning, caring, food processing, etc. There is deep suspicion of strangers. Ignorance and prejudice are twin obstacles to a rational approach to the challenges we face.

There are Humanists abroad who promote civic citizenship ceremonies for young people. Norwegian youngsters will have completed a course in civic rights and responsibilities before they do this. Under the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, all applicants aged 18 years or over who are accepted for naturalisation or registration as a British Citizen must swear a citizenship oath to the Queen at a citizenship ceremony. There is also talk of introducing such ceremonies for naturalised British young people at 18. Republicans like me would a problem with this, so where does that leave us?

'Citizenship' is part of the National Curriculum, but the definition used in this context is broader than the dictionary definitions I've referred to; it seems to mean living responsibly and making a useful contribution to society. One website I've come across refers to 'Citizenship – the global dimension', which must mean being a citizen of this planet, rather than the planet Zog in a galaxy on the other side of the universe. The Key Stage 1 guidelines on citizenship say that children should be taught to recognise what they like and dislike (which I think they already know), what is fair and unfair, and what is right and wrong; to share their opinions on things that matter to them and explain their views; to recognise, name and deal with their feelings in a positive way; to think about themselves, learn from their experiences and recognise what they are good at; and how to set simple goals. It strikes me that this is about forming ethical values, learning self-discipline, and building self-esteem. I don't understand why it's called 'citizenship'. Some schools have already been covering these things through a philosophical enquiry programme. All French schoolchildren study philosophy. Ours should too.

The citizenship rigmarole that immigrants to this country have to go through is about loyalty and a willingness to adapt to British customs and practices. In an open democratic society, social harmony matters. It's much more difficult to achieve that when any section of society is segregated, or when many stubbornly resist change without good reason, and as long as 'them and us' attitudes prevail, we'll have problems.

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Jan 2005
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From 1911 to 1986 coalminers relied on canaries to warn them of dangerous gases. The birds were taken down the pits in cages and if they showed signs of distress, the men knew they must get out quickly. Canaries react to very small quantities of deadly carbon monoxide. They were made redundant when cheaper and more reliable electronic gas detectors were introduced. The miners missed the canaries, which were treated as pets

In a way, our wild birds fulfil the same function as those canaries, because their behaviour can warn us of changes in the environment. Rachel Carson wrote her book 'The Silent Spring', published in 1962, to warn about the damage caused by the indiscriminate use of agricultural pesticides. If all the birds were poisoned, what would that mean for us? Not just a silent spring, but serious damage to human health. Although there are much tighter controls on pesticides now, we still rely on birds to warn us of danger, though now it's more to do with global warming and loss of habitat.

I buy bird food by the sack, which partly explains why my garden is full of birds, including lots of sparrows. Many people think that sparrows are common, but their numbers are declining. Wherever birds have trouble finding food, they fail to breed. Last year hardly any sea bird chicks were hatched around the Shetland and Orkney Islands because there were no sand eels for them to feed on. It's thought that the small fish are being affected by climate change and shifting currents, which are also affecting the melting ice caps.

Next weekend many people will participate in the [RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch](#), which involves choosing one hour over the weekend to watch the birds in your garden or local park, and note the most you see at any one time of the several species listed in the survey. Details are in the Radio Times, or you can get a survey form from the RSPB. The results will be published in March, and will tell us

whether the number of birds has increased or decreased.

One evening last week I was leaving a house in Ipswich at dusk, when a blackbird was singing nearby. I didn't start the car straight away, but sat with the window wound down until I got cold, listening to the beautiful song. We'd all be the poorer without birds, and not just because we pick up important signals about the state of the environment from them.

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Feb 2005
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Whatever you think about Iraq, and the reasons it's in a mess, you surely can't help but admire the courage of the Iraqis who risked their lives to vote for an interim government. At one polling station, a suicide bomber killed himself and a policeman, and badly injured a number of voters. Despite this, they cleaned up the body parts and carried on queuing. Can you imagine anyone doing the same in this country?

Hearing the news, I remembered the election in South Africa in 1994, when people queued for hours. Everyone was desperate to make their vote count.

Turnout in our elections over the last few years has sometimes been very poor. It's apathy or a shower of rain that puts people off, not bomb threats. Why is it that so many can't be bothered? Some might say that they feel it'll make no difference if they vote; that the politicians are only interested in what they think at election-time. Others may feel that the ya-boo-sucks style of politics we see at Prime Minister's Question Time in the House of Commons is off-putting. They'll ask, why should we vote for people who can't even behave like grown-ups? I think most women feel this way. We can't be doing with all those silly goings-on.

I have some sympathy with those who don't exercise their right to vote, but we ought to be asking why, and one of the answers might involve taking a long hard look at how government works. There have been some changes, it's true, like more sensible working hours for MPs, but there are many more ways we could change the system for the better, and encourage, even inspire people to vote.

One might be to tell the main political parties that some issues are too important to be left to party politics, like the environment. There's no shortage of evidence from environmental experts that our small planet is in serious need of attention. So why waste time with political point-scoring, when they could just be getting on with it? Why not start the General Election campaign by saying that some issues are so important that we're going to agree that we'll all work together to sort them out, whoever wins. Then we could just vote for whoever makes the most sense about everything else – or is that too much to ask?

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May 2005
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I've always been keen on trees. I've planted them whenever I've had the space. Thirty years ago, I lived near Oxford, where I planted a balsam poplar. It smelt gorgeous after it rained. I'd love to know if it's still there – someone might have cut it down.

A year ago, the [Green Light Trust](#) had a stall at our village fete. The trust supports and encourages those who want to establish community woodlands – woods planted by and for local people. I registered an interest in establishing one in Elmsett.

In March this year we signed a People Planting Agreement with the Green Light Trust and set up [Elmsett Greenlife Grove Scheme](#), a name chosen after consulting the village schoolchildren, who liked the acronym EGGs. In a way, it's especially apt. An egg is used as a symbol of new life at Easter, the spring equinox festival, and we're aiming to create new life – trees, and the creatures that live in them.

On Monday, we'll have an EGGs stall at the village fete, to raise awareness of the scheme. We've had encouraging messages from local landowners. Next month we'll launch the scheme at the school, where the children have started a tree nursery. They're all going to visit the trust's woodland at Lawshall. When you plant trees, you need an imagination, and seeing what other people have done should inspire them and make them aware that trees need time to grow and mature. Far-sighted people plant trees.

One of my favourite poems is by an American poet, Wendell Berry. He wrote about planting trees,

“Let me desire and wish well the life these trees may live when I no longer rise in the mornings to be pleased by the green of them shining, and their shadow on the ground, and the sound of the wind in them.”

But it's not just the beauty of trees, the sight and sound of them, that matters. They're the lungs of the world. They stop soil erosion. They provide a habitat for birds, beasts and insects, and they mean jobs, timber, and the materials for all sort of woodcraft too.

We'll be collecting tree seeds and seedlings and buying plants from a tree nursery for our woodland. One day, maybe, the grandchildren of some of the children who go to the village school may walk in our woodland. I'll be long gone by then. I'll be buried under a tree.

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Jun 2005

Apparently [Baroness Mary Warnock](#) has been attacked by [Daily Mail columnist Melanie Phillips](#) for changing her mind. Baroness Warnock, now 81, has had a distinguished career as a head teacher, academic, moral philosopher, and public servant. Melanie Phillips is most well-known for expressing her opinions in various newspapers.

What's most upset Ms Phillips is that Baroness Warnock has modified her views about the integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Mary Warnock strongly influenced this education policy in the early 1980s, but has now written that the policy needs to be reviewed. This is fair enough – the idea of educating children all together, to overcome prejudice and isolation, seemed good at the time. The problem was that, if it was to work, it needed smaller class sizes, and, in an ideal world, children who knew how to behave themselves. As most people know, bullying is a serious problem in some schools, and special needs children are often the victims.

So it seems perfectly reasonable for Mary Warnock to change her mind, in view of the evidence and the experience of those who've tried to put the policy into practice. Some children may benefit from being integrated in mainstream schools, but not all.

I think there'd be something rather odd about reaching the age of 81 as a thoughtful, intelligent person if one didn't change one's mind about a few things along the way. Experience can teach us a lot; if we live into old age loudly insisting that we're not changing our minds about anything we decided 30 or more years ago, that wouldn't be very sensible. A lot happens in 30 years.

Mary Warnock, most well-known for her chairmanship of the Warnock Committee on Human Fertilisation and Embryology, is primarily a philosopher, and changing minds is what philosophers do. Melanie Phillips seems to think that once you've made up your mind, that's it; it stays made up, regardless. She also blames Mary Warnock for everything that went wrong with the education policy on special needs, however inappropriately it may have been applied.

Once upon a time, I used to quite enjoy reading some of Melanie Phillips' articles, but, do you know, I've changed my mind about her. I doubt she's ever likely to admit she got anything wrong.

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Jul 2005

When intelligent people display ignorance of world affairs, such as poverty and global warming, I can't help feeling they've put some effort into staying ignorant. If you don't know or care about the suffering of other human beings, you won't feel any compulsion to do anything about it.

Many of us are keenly interested in what will happen in Scotland next week, at [the G8 summit](#). I'm afraid that all the emotional hoo-ha generated by [Live 8](#), the so-called 'anti-poverty' international music event, may distract attention from the issues, rather than highlight them. The Edinburgh march may have some influence on the world leaders at Gleneagles, but the pressure needs to be continuous and widespread.

The G8 countries – France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, America, Canada and Russia – are, with the exception of Russia, leading industrialised nations with a strong influence in world affairs. The sticking point at their summit in Scotland next week, with world poverty and climate change on the agenda, is that the most powerful nation, America, is led by people who refuse to acknowledge the extent of these problems.

Which brings me back to my point about ignorance. It's hard to believe that the American Government really doesn't know what's going on. If it didn't, it would be like an old-fashioned king from a fairy story, whose courtiers maintain a delusion that all's well when it isn't, for fear of losing their heads if they tell the truth. But there are no kings in the G8, and as Nelson Mandela said, 'It is not the kings and generals who make history, but the masses of the people.' In the 21st century, so much information is available – through the media, the internet, and by word of mouth – that it's impossible to keep us in ignorance, unless we choose to remain ignorant, and we masses can make a difference. If you don't believe me, consider this; the abolition of slavery began as a mass movement; so did the end of apartheid in South Africa. If you think it's wrong that one in six of the world's population lives on less than 65p per day, or that global warming is already causing severe weather, don't just sit there; do something. Write letters, send emails and faxes to the politicians, keep up the pressure. You don't have to march to make a difference, but you will have to change your lifestyle. So don't just sit there; do something.

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Jul 2005

I should have been doing all sorts of useful things yesterday, like tidying my office and trying to find all the unpaid bills and unanswered letters. Then there was the usual outbreak of dirty dishes in the kitchen. Dunno who leaves them there, but if I ever catch him or her there'll be hell to pay.

Bucket

Anyway, it had been raining, so there were lots of lovely puddles and drips to play with around the garden. Instead of going straight to my desk, I wandered around with the camera, taking pictures. Several are of the ripples and splashes in a bucket of water by the greenhouse as I dropped pebbles into it. Yes, I know. It might sound uninteresting, but I was engrossed. You had to be there – well, no, actually you hadn't. You'd probably have thought I was barking mad, standing there in my pyjamas and dressing gown, taking photographs of a bucket. The dog was a little perplexed. She came to keep me company but had no idea why we were hanging around the greenhouse for so long.

It's all very therapeutic, playing, and idleness is an underrated quality. Jerome K Jerome wrote, "It is impossible to idle thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do," and my all-time favourite procrastination quote is from Douglas Adams; "I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."

My son suggested that, to illustrate this point, I shouldn't bother to write anything for today, but come into the studio and ad lib. I said that might unnerve these lovely BBC people, as they know I left my script in the garage a couple of months ago and had to borrow a pencil and paper when I got here. If I do that too often I'll be deemed unreliable – which I am, but cleverly hide. Then there's my short-term memory problem; I might forget what I was going to say.

So what's the point of all this, you may be asking. There isn't any. Does there have to be? That's the beauty of procrastination and idleness. It frees us from having to justify what we're doing, or not doing. If you haven't already, you should try it sometime.

Anyway, as you can tell, I haven't been completely idle. After I'd written this script, I felt ready to do some real work – when I'd had a spot of lunch. After all, as the American philosopher [George Santayana](#) said, "There is no cure for birth and death, save to enjoy the interval."

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Jul 2005
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Since [the 7th July](#), there's been no shortage of opinion about what we ought to do about terrorism. The official line is that we stand resolutely together against it. The trouble with this is that we don't know which direction it's coming from, so we're not sure where to stand.

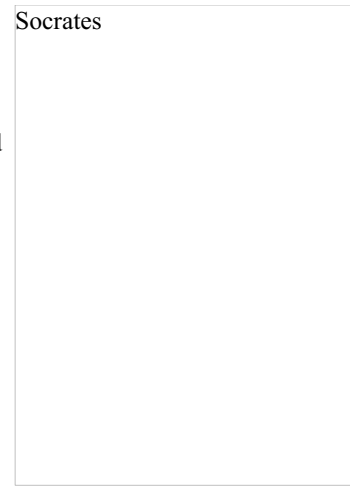
Some young Muslim men in Leeds were interviewed in the street by a BBC journalist, and one said something about the silence in remembrance of the dead. He didn't condone the bombing, he said, but wondered why the deaths of those people in London had warranted a silence, while the deaths of thousands of civilians in Iraq didn't? It was a fair comment. Within days of the London blasts, [a suicide bomber killed 90 people and injured over 150 in Musayyib](#), south of Baghdad, and the British medical journal [the Lancet](#) has just put the Iraqi death count at over 100,000. It's hardly surprising that many young Muslim men are so angry. That doesn't make them all potential terrorists, but anger is a potent recruiting tool for terrorism.

Fundamentalism of all sorts is about simplification. Fundamentalists think that if they convert, displace or kill anyone who doesn't agree with them, everything will be all right. In the introduction to her book about religious terrorism, the [American academic Jessica Stern](#) wrote, "Its converts often long for a simpler time, when right and wrong were clear, when there were heroes and martyrs, when the story was simple, when the neighbourhood was small, when we knew one another." If that doesn't sound how you imagine a terrorist should think, because they seem like the sort of longings that many other people might have, then maybe it's time to think again. When you think like this, it's easy to demonise anyone who doesn't subscribe to the same childish, simplistic view of the world. The world's a mess, and it's always someone else's fault, if you're a fundamentalist. The difference between a terrorist's mindset and that of others who'd like an uncomplicated life is that they're prepared to kill to achieve purification – which is how they see it.

We must avoid falling into the same simplistic traps. We might not want to kill anyone, but unless we resist the temptation to think and talk in black or white terms, including about terrorism, we'll be little better than them. It's not going to be easy, but we need to understand terrorists, before we can defeat them.

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Aug 2005
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Those who know me probably won't be surprised to hear that I used to get into trouble at school, not because I was a juvenile delinquent, but for asking so many questions – too many, as far as some of my teachers were concerned. They expected us to absorb all the facts, dates, grammar and maths they taught us, and not to spend too much time questioning where all of these things came from, and what they were for, and whether they were likely to be any use to us. Questions like that tended to hold things up, so that my class might be in danger of failing to cover the whole of a carefully planned syllabus, and risk failing an exam. I'm sure that some of my teachers regarded me as a confounded nuisance.



I used to drive my parents mad too. If they didn't have an answer to one of my questions they sometimes answered – because – in exasperation – just one word – and left me frustrated at their lack of co-operation. – Because what? – I'd say. – Because we say so, – they'd answer. As I grew up, I realised that they didn't have all the answers – in fact, they hardly had any. It was a disappointment until it dawned on me that parenthood doesn't make you the fount of all knowledge, and that libraries are a good place to look for answers.

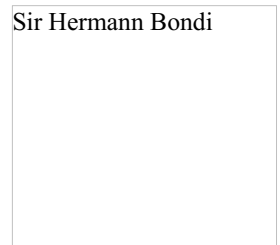
I'm still asking questions that don't all have answers. Many lead to more questions. It's childish to imagine that someone or something has all the answers, yet many people do. It's arrogant to imagine that you have all the answers, yet many people are. The Greek philosopher [Socrates](#) liked to say that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing. An ignoramus will believe he or she knows or understands something while demonstrating that he or she doesn't. Socrates wasn't stupid; he was only teasing when he said he knew nothing; he knew, for example, that it was important to be clear about what we mean by the questions we ask, otherwise all we end up with is a muddle, not an answer. Sometimes, as I've already said, there is no answer.

It's no good expecting a sceptic like me to accept anything you say unless you can give me a good reason to believe it. As the Scots philosopher [David Hume](#) said, – A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence, – and you don't have to be super-intelligent to be wise. It's amazingly easy to be foolish though, if you never ask questions, and the world is full of people who'll exploit your gullibility, cleverly disguised as priests, potentates, and politicians.

Photo: Bust of Socrates

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Sep 2005
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The funeral of [Sir Hermann Bondi](#) takes place at midday today in Cambridge. Sir Hermann was 85. He was a staunch supporter and former President of the British Humanist Association, and was Vice-President when he died.



Sir Hermann came from Vienna to study at Cambridge in the 1930s, just before Hitler took over. There isn't time to detail his distinguished career now, but his [obituaries are worth reading](#). He's described as a mathematician, astronomer, civil servant, and teller of homespun jokes. As an astronomer, he worked with Fred Hoyle on the origins of the universe. As a scientist and civil servant, he was responsible for getting the Thames Barrier built. He was Director General of the European Space Agency and Master of Churchill College, among many other roles.

Sir Hermann spoke about “the arrogance of certainty” in relation to atheism and religion, and encouraged co-operation between people of different faiths. The BHA obituary quotes his [address at a Spanish humanist conference](#) in 1995:

“Our humanist attitude should be to stress what we all have in common with each other and relegate quarrelsome religion to the private domain where it can do less harm... I tend to think that perhaps the greatest importance of science is that it has taught us that people of different religions, different ideologies, different race or gender can work together successfully in science. This is the case because all scientists accept the supremacy of the empirical test of observation and experiment, and firmly refuse to be swayed by arguments that are based on a ‘holy’ text of an alleged ‘certainty’.”

Those words are especially relevant today, as science is being challenged by theories about “intelligent design” as an alternative to evolution. American schoolchildren are being taught that evolution is only one explanation for the origin of life, while businessmen with fat cheque books are taking over British schools to peddle the same falsehoods. People who champion this nonsense say the Earth was “created” a few thousand years ago. Sir Hermann the astronomer would have told them that the evidence collected through the [Hubble Space Telescope](#) shows that the universe is between 12 and 14 billion years old, and that we are made from space dust – or elements – that date back to that time.

Sir Hermann didn't expect an afterlife – no humanist does – but his influence in the development of science and humanism will persist long after he's gone.

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Child

If everyone who produced a child became a responsible parent overnight we'd solve a lot of problems, but they don't, so when I hear that "parents' rights" are in the news, I anticipate nonsense. There are currently two news stories about "parents' rights". The first is about [Mrs Axon from Wythenshawe](#), who's going to the High Court to try to change Department of Health guidelines stating that girls aged under sixteen can have abortions without their parents' consent and that doctors should respect their privacy. Mrs A thinks she ought to be told. The second story is about the [Children and Adoption Bill](#) being heard in the House of Lords, which will give divorced parents an automatic right of access to their children; a move backed by militant father's groups.

Oh yes, you might be thinking, and a good thing too, but is it?

If girls get pregnant they should be able to tell their parents, but if they can't or won't, it may be for a very good reason. They're entitled to expect health professionals to respect their privacy, as it says in [Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), adopted by the UN in 1989. If girls are denied confidentiality, they're far less likely to seek help in matters of sexual health.

The [NSPCC](#) says 29 children have been killed by an estranged parent during access visits during the last decade. You can't assume that a child is safe with someone who happens to be his or her parent; each case must be judged on its merits.

Article 3 of the convention states "All actions concerning the child should take full account of his or her best interests." In an ideal world, such rulings shouldn't be necessary, but children must be protected. If a child is at risk, who's most likely to harm or neglect him or her? Those closest to him or her; not predatory paedophiles, but a parent, relative, or family friend – all the statistics bear this out. Within the family, the adults have all the power. A shocking 16% of children are seriously mistreated by their parents, and an average of one a week is killed by a parent or carer in England and Wales – these figures are from the NSPCC.

Good parents have nothing to worry about, but even they might agree that whatever is done to or for a child ought to be in his or her best interests, and that means that a child's rights take precedence over a parent's rights. Funny how, in all this hoo-ha, no one's mentioned parental responsibilities.

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Dec 2005

With all the fuss they've been making about pensions, you'd think it was news that we've got an ageing population. It isn't. There's been plenty of evidence for a long time that people like me, born during or soon after the war, are living longer, and that younger people are either not having children, or not having many. It doesn't take much imagination or arithmetic to work out that there are fewer people to pay tax and National Insurance contributions to keep us in reasonable comfort in our declining years. Guess we will have to go on working, if we can.

Not that I plan to do much declining if I can help it. I may grow old as disgracefully as I can manage – being disgraceful is exhausting at times – but I won't be responsible for my actions if anyone dares to refer to me as 'elderly', or an 'old dear' as I get even older. I don't object to being called 'old', if that's what I am, but elderly? What the heck is that supposed to mean?

And have you noticed that whenever they've been talking about so-called 'elderly' issues or the pensions 'problem' on TV, they've shown clips of old people in old people's homes or at lunch clubs, all tottering around in a sweetly geriatric fashion. I blame this on the fact that TV is mostly run by young people who have no idea what they're on about. I mean, very few people these days actually want to go into old people's homes if they can possibly avoid it, which is why local authorities are cutting back on places. Residential care homes are mainly for very old people who need care, not just shelter. I'm hoping I won't need anything like that for at least, oh, thirty years? By that time, the young people who make these ageist news items will be worrying about their pensions too.

A market researcher, himself over sixty, appeared surprised that I spent so much time on the Internet – not only that, but that I maintain several websites. He probably hadn't realised that there are so many so-called 'silver surfers' out there. Perhaps we ought to do something about shifting the balance on the Internet. I tried googling the words 'old people' last night, looking for senior role models like Sir David Attenbrough, and these were the first results I found (for the uninitiated, to 'google' means using the [Google](#) search engine, or asking a question, to find information).

Anyway, these were the results – I kid you not:

- [Grumpy old people.](#)
- [VOP – very old people.](#)
- Bored old people can be dangerous [I might agree with that one, but the story has since dropped off Google's list].
- [Drunken elks attack old people's home in Sweden.](#)
- [What old people do for fun.](#)
- [What are old people for? How elders will save the world.](#)

So you see, we've got our work cut out challenging all this ageist nonsense. Growing old's an attitude, and we need more attitude. You young whippersnappers have a lot to learn.

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Dec 2005
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In a few days, it will be New Year's Eve, when Scots like my mother's family celebrate [Hogmanay](#). The Scots seem to attach more importance to Hogmanay than they do to Christmas, but at one time both were celebrated at the same time – on [the shortest day](#), the 21st December. This was when ancient societies in the northern hemisphere performed rituals to ensure the rebirth of the sun because they depended on it for their survival.

January is named after the Roman two-faced god [Janus](#), who looks in two directions at the same time. He was the god of gates and doors, beginnings and endings. New Year is the end of the old year, the beginning of the new, when TV companies fill the schedules with programmes about the highlights of the past year and some of us make resolutions we'll probably forget within weeks.

Since those of us who are fortunate to live in the affluent developed world don't depend on nature to the same extent as those who live in the undeveloped world, the timing of these new beginnings and stocktakings is determined by tradition, not necessity. When we wake up on January 1st, nothing much will have changed except that some might have a bit of a sore head. But midwinter is a time to plan and renew, if only because the weather keeps us indoors.

2005 has been an eventful year. I haven't done much, but a family bereavement and my son's absence for most of the year have had a significant effect. Then there was the tsunami, the hurricanes and earthquakes that didn't affect most of us, but did move many to contribute to the relief efforts and to think about our own good fortune. Many people will be wondering, what's next? When something drastic's happened, like an unexpected death in the family, or a natural disaster, it's understandable to feel apprehensive about the future, but we might try to avoid it by remembering that sometimes we'll get a pleasant surprise tomorrow, not bad news. A few years ago there was a poem by [Sheenagh Pugh](#) on [London Underground trains](#) called 'Sometimes' that ended like this:

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

Happy New Year.