

Suffolk Humanists' 12th AGM, 2004

Our meeting at 7.30 pm on Wednesday 10th March is our AGM, but we aim to keep the boring business to a minimum so we can do what Humanists generally enjoy doing—talk a lot (see previous page)—so please come, and bring a friend.

AGENDA

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of the 2003 AGM (to be supplied at the meeting)
3. Matters arising
4. Reports:
Chairperson
Secretary/Treasurer (see p5)
Ceremonies
5. Election of officers & committee for 2004/2005
Chair, Vice-chair, Secretary, Treasurer, committee members.
6. Motions:
“Suffolk Humanists will affiliate to the National Secular Society”; “Suffolk Humanists will affiliate to Amnesty UK”
7. Plans for the future
8. AOB

NB: Subs must be paid before you vote.

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The Suffolk Humanist Group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association (BHA) and the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE)

SUFFOLK HUMANIST NEWS

March 2004



If parents send their kids to religious schools, rather than local community schools, who pays their bus fares?

We do! Suffolk council tax payers foot the bill for school buses to take Catholic children to Catholic schools, just as we do for all school transport. But if the Government gives the go-ahead, Suffolk parents may find themselves paying for school buses for the first time in sixty years, which has upset Cllr Stefan Oliver and other Catholics. They claim that some schools might be forced to close if parents won't pay.

I've asked to be included in the consultation about a change of policy but have yet to be sent any papers. I've written to the East Anglian Daily Times.

Cllr Oliver says that it's "discriminatory" to charge Catholic parents for school buses, and says that "parents chose to send their children to these schools, not only because they have high performance records, but because they still try to give to their pupils the high moral standards and the Christian ethos that used to be the norm in this country." My letter to the EADT pointed out that "high performance records" are the result of selection; religious schools take a higher proportion of children with ambitious parents (who may have been dishonest about their own religious beliefs to satisfy the entry criteria), and fewer children from deprived backgrounds. It's insulting to suggest that religious schools have a monopoly of higher "moral standards" or a more positive ethos than community schools.

If you live in a Suffolk village, it's likely that the nearest pri-

mary school is a Church voluntary-aided school. If you'd rather send your children to a secular county primary school further away, you have to pay their travel costs (that's if you can get a place). So who's being discriminated against?

It costs £14 million a year for Suffolk school transport. Local authorities are under increasing pressure to keep the council tax down, which is why SCC wants to charge for the buses. If you're a Suffolk County Council tax payer, contact your county councillor and let him or her know how you feel about the school transport issue and whether religious parents ought to get preferential treatment. Ask for a briefing paper (tel. 01473 658828) if you're not sure of your facts. You can get your councillor's contact details through the council website—<http://www.suffolkcc.gov.uk>—or by phoning councillor services on 01473 584160.

Suffolk Humanists are online again

Our website is back online, after a long absence. The school bus issue is featured on www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk. If you don't have a computer, you can access the internet at any public library where the staff will help novice surfers. We're also included in the Suffolk & Essex county libraries data bases and the Phone Book, under "H" for Humanism.

If anyone you know asks about Humanism and has a computer, point them in the direction of our website. Whether or not you're online, if you have any suggestions for website content, please let us know.

We are grateful to Nathan Nelson of Wizwow Ltd (www.wizwow.co.uk) who has helped us set up the website free of charge.



Humanism in the East Anglian

The East Anglian Daily Times may not be keen to publish our letters, but they did feature an article about Humanism on March 2nd as the last of a series by Alison Withers (who consulted me) about the Suffolk "faiths" in the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, though she made it clear that Humanism isn't a "faith".

MN

March meeting

We'll meet at 7.30 pm on 10th March at Castle Hill Community Centre. Phone 01473 890593/658828 for lifts or offers of lifts, or for directions. Please bring friends and raffle prizes.

After a short AGM, we'll break for refreshments, and then ...

"If I ruled the world" - If you could have your own way, what edict would you declare to make the world a better place? It can have local, national or international effect. Come prepared to explain what you'd do, if you could.

Apologies if you've heard this before, but it made me laugh...

The following is the transcript of an actual radio conversation in October 1995, between a US Navy ship and The British authorities, near the coast of England. The transcript was released by the MoD on 10/10/95.

BRITISH: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the South, to avoid collision.

US NAVY: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the North, to avoid a collision.

BRITISH: Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

US NAVY: This is the Captain of US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

BRITISH: Negative. I say again. You will have to divert your course.

US NAVY: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES' ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS, AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH. THAT'S 15 DEGREES NORTH, OR COUNTER MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP.

BRITISH: We are a lighthouse. (Expletive deleted) off!

months into the current year and would like to record my thanks to Barry Fowler for his work as our former treasurer.

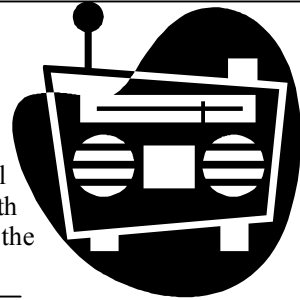
Our new banking arrangements allow for the receipt of subscriptions by standing order, something that would make life easier for everyone, including your treasurer who will not have to send out so many reminders! A mandate is being sent with the newsletter. Could I please ask that you complete it and return it with your membership renewal form?

A full breakdown of our financial transactions will be available at the AGM but last year we had a credit balance of £532.14 and as at the end of February 2004 that had dropped to £208.38. This can largely be accounted for by exceptional items such as the Cemeteries and Crematorium Open Day and an amount to be reimbursed by the celebrant's team in respect of printing and other sundry charges which has yet to be calculated. Once again I find myself thanking Michael Imison who kindly donated the fee from his first funeral towards the cost of our stand at the Open Day, which was a great success.

Thoughts for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk

95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm

The next Humanist 'thoughts' from Margaret Nelson and David Mitchell will be at about 7.20 am on 13th & 19th March, 2nd, 13th & 24th April, and the 5th, 10th & 27th May.



“Atheism to be taught in schools”, is the sort of headline guaranteed to get the religionists in a tizzy, and it did. It was about the proposed National Framework for RE being devised by the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA), which advises that children should be taught about atheism and Humanism and religions other than the six world faiths. The proposed framework will offer a model of good practice. It isn't proposed that children should be taught to *be* atheists, but that they should learn about atheism. I'm glad to report that children in Suffolk schools already learn about Humanism in RE.

MN

Amnesty

Michael Imison

Sue Harrington-Spier from Amnesty spoke at our January meeting. She began by saying that it's easy for westerners, especially white Christian westerners, to take human rights for granted. We may lose sleep over problems at work or even where to go for holidays or what to eat, but our privileges include freedom to vote, to protest and to receive state aid in case of need. Elsewhere, people are routinely imprisoned and tortured for claiming these rights.

Amnesty seeks to redress this balance. It is international and independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and has over a million members world wide. It has four main areas of activity:

- It works for the release of prisoners of conscience
- It asks for fair and prompt trials for political prisoners
- It campaigns to abolish the death penalty and other cruel and degrading punishment.
- It works to end extra-judicial executions and disappearances.

As an example of human rights abuses, Sue described the little known case of Uzbekistan under the ruthless dictatorship of Islam Karimov. Karimov was in place as the leader of the Communist party when Uzbekistan achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviets had provided the Uzbeks with the largest armed forces in Central Asia and had also moved strongly to suppress the growing Islamic opposition to the regime. In the presidential election that followed Karimov was returned by preventing most of the opposition groups from fielding candidates. In 1995 a referendum allowed him to extend his term of office until 2000 when he was re-elected unopposed. A further referendum in 2002 extended his new term from five to seven years. Western observers said this vote was neither free nor fair. In 2003 a decree was passed rendering the President immune from prosecution.



President Islam Karimov

Sue quoted Karimov as saying “Uzbekistan’s criminal policy on the application of the death penalty is fully in keeping with world processes and consistently reflects the principle of humanism embedded in the constitution of Uzbekistan and the traditions of our people that have at all times treated a human being and his life as the greatest treasure given by the Almighty.”

In contrast to this rhetoric, reports coming from Amnesty’s observers and even the British Ambassador describe the most horrific violations of human rights; summary execution, no legal representation, families tortured and prisoners boiled alive. The British Ambassador’s protests led to him being recalled to London because of the embarrassment caused to the US who, for strategic reasons, have long supported the regime. (Since Sue’s talk the Ambassador has returned to Uzbekistan and the US Senate has told Bush’s Government that it’s illegal to supply aid to a Government with such an appalling human rights record, so all aid has been cut).

Amnesty is now preparing an Uzbekistan action plan.

Sue showed a video from the 1980’s which related some of the early history of Amnesty and in particular its campaigns on behalf of individual prisoners. Of 42000 cases taken up, 38000 have been closed, a few because of the death of the prisoner but the vast majority because the prisoner had been released.

Questions followed and Margaret Nelson responded to Sue’s request to be told more about Humanism. It was agreed that the group would consider affiliating to Amnesty and, as is customary, Sue was given the proceeds of the evening’s raffle, together with a hearty vote of thanks.

For information about Amnesty, contact:

Amnesty International UK
99 - 119 Rosebery Avenue
London, EC1R 4RE

Tel: 020 7814 6200, E-mail: info@amnesty.org.uk

WANTED: EYES & EARS!

If you see or hear anything in the local media that demands a Humanist response (like the school bus issue) please let us know.

AGM Secretary/Treasurer’s Report, 2003/2004

David Mitchell

Once again this year I have been very busy, like Margaret, with ceremonies, which by their nature usually have to take precedence on demands for my time. This frequently means that work for the group is quite rushed and produced at the last minute. For that, I apologise.

Quite a high proportion of our members have difficulty getting to evening meetings in Ipswich because they don’t drive or live some distance away. This means that many members remain to me as a name on a list and I regret not being able to put a face to a name in so many cases. With our membership spread throughout the county and beyond, it would probably be impractical to try to arrange meetings in other centres. I do hope that everyone enjoys reading the regular newsletters which, I’m pleased to say, are distributed to many other groups across the country to frequent favourable comment.

Contributions to the newsletter are a good way of getting things off your chest and are always welcome. You never know who will read them! If you have access to the internet, the Suffolk Humanist’s Website is up and running again and is a good way of keeping up with developments and having your say.

Group meetings have included speakers from The Refugee Council and Amnesty International, both of whom were well received. The video shown by the Amnesty International speaker was one that no one present will readily forget.

On the social front, the Darwin Day gathering in February hosted in Woodbridge by Diana and John Ball and organised by Michael Imison was greatly enjoyed by all. I think that will definitely become an annual event. Any volunteers to host?

On the financial front; our decision last year to transfer our banking from the Ipswich Building Society to the Co-operative Bank eventually became a reality, although it took several weeks to convince them we would not be using the new account to launder millions for international terrorists. The use of a cheque book makes day to day transactions much simpler and accounts much easier to compile. I eventually took over the treasurer’s role a few