

Atheist Ireland

Agenda Notes for Meeting with Taoiseach and Minister for Education Tuesday 10 February 2015



1. Introduction

- Census: 270,000 'no religion', second-largest group after RC, plus 73,000 'not stated'.
- Might be half a million to 700,000 who do not believe in God, including 10% of Irish Catholics.
- Atheist Ireland founded 2008, run on a voluntary basis as unincorporated association.
- Regional groups around the country, strong online presence with 7,000 supporters.
- Promote atheism and reason through conferences, publications, debates and media.
- Preparing objective course about atheism for primary school pupils and parents.
- Brief TDs and Senators, attend and address Oireachtas hearings and committee meetings.
- Registered as a Third Party with the Standards in Public Office Commission.
- Advise people on human rights and liaise with State human rights monitoring bodies.
- Work with other rights-based groups including ESC Rights and Children's Rights Alliance.
- Met Presidents of European Commission, Parliament and Council in 2010.
- Hosted successful World Atheist Convention in Dublin in 2011.
- Affiliated to Atheist Alliance International, which was relaunched in Dublin in 2011.
- Briefed and attended sessions of OSCE Human Dimension in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014.
- Met Council of Europe delegations about human rights in Ireland in 2012.
- Hosted international Conference on Empowering Women Through Secularism in 2013.
- Briefed and attended session of United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2014.
- Founder member of International Coalition Against Blasphemy Laws in 2015.
- Will be attending UN sessions on ESC rights in 2015 and Rights of the Child in 2016.

2. Philosophy and aims of Atheist Ireland

- (1) We promote atheism, reason and ethical secularism. Our policies are based on a foundation of human rights law, including freedom of conscience, religion and belief; of expression; from discrimination; equality before the law; rights of the child; family and private life; positive state obligations; and an effective remedy.
- (2) Building on the foundation of human rights being vindicated equally for all, we promote a society based on natural ethical values such as empathy, compassion, cooperation, reciprocity, fairness, justice, reason and evidence-based decisions.
- (3) We promote integrity in public life, and an end to the nod-and-wink approach to Irish politics, where we are expected to ignore discrimination by pretending it doesn't exist, and where the law can be ignored or fudged to mean whatever people want it to mean.
- (4) **The European Convention protects secularism as a philosophical conviction just as equally as it protects religion. The State has a positive obligation to protect this, that goes beyond merely enabling opt-outs from religious practices.**
- (5) **Article 44.2.1 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion to all citizens. Article 42.1 protects the inalienable rights of all parents to respect for their beliefs and convictions in educating their children. This includes atheist and secular parents. The European Court has ruled this is an absolute right, not one to be balanced against rights of others, nor to be gradually achieved.**
- (6) **Under international treaties, the State has already committed to vindicate our human rights. The UN and Council of Europe have outlined specific breaches. On these issues, we should be discussing only timescales for implementation.**

3. Secular Constitution, Laws and Practices

The State has a positive obligation to respect the rights of atheists

- (1) Acknowledge that human rights apply to individuals, and cannot be denied by majority votes, as the Minister for Justice accepted at the UNHRC.
- (2) Provide effective remedies for people when their human rights are breached.
- (3) Amend Article 40.1 on equality before the law to include principle of non-discrimination.
- (4) Remove religious oaths (which includes Taoiseach and others), in a way that respects the right not to have to reveal your religion or belief in public, as required by UNHRC.
- (5) Remove or amend all Constitutional clauses that give preference to religious over nonreligious beliefs.
- (6) Repeal the eighth amendment to enable the Oireachtas to legislate for abortion.
- (7) Stop amending laws that discriminate against atheists, in ways that they discriminate against fewer people on other grounds, but still discriminate against atheists (e.g. Admission to Schools, Employment Equality, Civil Registration, age of President).
- (8) Amend the Defamation, Charities, Equal Status, Juries, Electoral, relevant healthcare and other laws. End State payments to chaplains, loaded census question, religious oaths and symbols in court, polling booths and councils, and daily Christian prayer in Oireachtas.
- (9) Human-rights-proof all planned legislation with the IHREC.
- (10) **Immediate First Steps: Campaign vigorously to ensure marriage equality is passed. Include removal of religious oaths for public office alongside Presidential age vote. Within lifetime of this Government, hold a referendum to remove blasphemy.**
- (11) **Amend Civil Registration Act, that discriminates against atheists in favour of religions and humanists. Until it is amended, enforce it with integrity, and ensure all nominating bodies are compliant with the law.**
- (12) **Finally, we request a structured input to pending legislation and operational decisions, to allow officials to consider secular issues in an informed way.**

4. Secular Education System

Why must our children leave their human rights at the school gates?

- (1) Vindicate inalienable right of atheist/secular parents to respect and protection for their philosophical convictions, in educating their children in publicly funded schools. (Art 42.1)
- (2) Vindicate right of parents to not have their conscience and lawful preference violated by being forced to send their children to certain types of school. (Art 42.3.1)
- (3) Vindicate right to a moral education for all children, separate from religion. (Art 42.3.2)
- (4) Acknowledge the State's direct responsibility to protect the human rights of children in schools, in accordance with the Louise O'Keeffe judgment at the European Court.
- (5) Increase access to secular education, by divesting religious patronage and establishing non-denominational (not multi-denominational) schools, as required by UNHRC.
- (6) Amend primary curriculum, and remove rule 68, to ensure a neutral education, even in denominational schools, outside of opt-out religion classes, as required by UNHRC.
- (7) Ensure that all schools comply with Toledo Guiding Principles by teaching about religion and beliefs in a objective, critical and pluralistic manner.
- (8) **Immediate First Steps: Lead by example. Make all changes to respect human rights in the Model Schools that Department of Education runs directly as Patron.**
- (9) **Amend Admissions to Schools Bill, to prohibit all discrimination in access to schools on the grounds of religion or belief, as required by UNHRC.**
- (10) **Amend Section 37 Employment Equality Bill to ban religious (and not just sexuality-based) discrimination in education and health, as required by UNHRC.**
- (11) **Remove Section 7.3(c) of the Equal Status Act.**