

Report on the NASACRE AGM held in London on 12 May

The meeting began with an address from Clare Short in which she spoke very positively about the role and importance of RE. Although the minutes of the meeting have not yet been approved, they are also my notes of the meeting as I took them so this is my record of Clare's address:

The title of her **keynote address** was : '**Religion, Politics and Community: SACREs' capacity to engage...**'

CS began by suggesting that we were meeting in interesting times and reflected that in China this is said to be a curse, adding that the truth of this will be up to us to determine. She said she had long been in favour of a hung parliament because under successive governments we have seen a greater concentration of power at the centre, together with associated arrogance, with parliament often little more than 'rubber stamping'. The pressure and power of 24 hour media coverage sucks politicians into its agenda. She observed that power had been increasingly concentrated in No 10, something she thinks should change. In her view it is the practice of our local committees made up of people who treat one another with respect and listen to each other that leads to better decisions because there is space for challenge, reflection and discussion.

There are going to be massive cuts and a difficult time ahead. There are big questions about who will bear the burden of these cuts. CS hopes for less bureaucracy over public services because current levels limit creativity and spontaneity amongst practitioners. She went on to acknowledge that the religious situation in this country is very different from what she experienced as a child at school, where in a Roman Catholic school there had been hockey matches played between English and Irish Roman Catholics. She reflected how there had been a time after WWII when people from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent were encouraged to come to Britain to take up jobs that needed to be filled. Deep racism was common, illustrated, for example, by the fight Sikhs had over their right to wear turbans. She reminded her listeners of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech and a 15% vote for the National Front. There was much turbulence in industrial relations and many violent clashes. She said in mentioning these things she was reminding us of the nastiness and the tensions that were common between people of different ethnicities and religions. The work of teachers of RE has massively shifted the position in Britain. Lots of people have now passed through a system in which they have learned about a diversity of religions and cultures. She highlighted that the white community in Birmingham will be a minority community in 10 years time and the city will be 'majority nothing'. She reflected that in the past people either were or, due to the pressures of the times, pretended to be part of the main stream culture which was understood to be the Church of England, whereas people can now be proud of their own heritages and affiliations. We are bigger people when we learn from others and their diverse traditions. The work of RE teachers and of SACREs has been key to taking Britain on this enormously valuable journey. Things are not perfect in Britain but we have done better than many other countries where there are silos of difference. We should take pride in this because we (ie those present) have been at the core of this journey.

Despite this improved situation, it is not good enough just to say we must all respect one another. CS reminded delegates of the much more enormous aspiration which is set out in the NASACRE booklet 'So you're joining...', quoting from the importance of RE statement reproduced page 18. Reminding delegates that teachers could not be political, she

highlighted the political nature of this statement. We have to engage young people with these questions but with great care.

CS went on to reflect further on the nature of the times in which we are living: we are richer than we have ever been. People of the past would be astonished by how unsatisfied people are with all the material wealth they have. Richard Layard's work on happiness has suggested that increased economic growth up to £10,000 per head does increase people's happiness but beyond that it doesn't work because levels of competitiveness and dissatisfaction increase. She recommended a book entitled *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett which studies happiness/unhappiness, crime, mental health etc across OECD countries, also comparing different states of the USA. It concludes that the more unequal the society, the more they are likely to have crime, high prison populations, teenage pregnancies, abuse of alcohol and drugs. In its analysis of different societies, Britain comes high up the list. Our kind of society is rich beyond belief but not happy in significant/deep ways. Instead we live in a hedonistic culture where people have little or no time for the people they love; a consuming, trample-on-others culture. However, maybe we are on the verge of change. She suggested that the situation she described clashes with the expressed aspirations of RE. She asked how we make ourselves more content and happy. Can there be real happiness without care for others? She suggested that the more altruistic people tend to be, the happier they are. Children need access to discussion about and reflection on these ideas but it's difficult because it's political and we cannot be political.

Increasingly effective communication and easy travel have profoundly changed the world in ways which most people would consider to be positive. However, there are massive threats. Global warming is a reality so we must respond to the need to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions. Water shortages mean many people don't have access to it not only for drinking but also to sustain agriculture. This is causing serious divisions.

CS expressed concern about the response of Europe to the numbers of asylum seekers and displaced people, a widespread hostility to these groups, and the growth of the right. She expressed the view that Britain spends a lot of money on treating asylum seekers badly and also that something ugly has burst out in Europe with a shift to the right in traditionally liberal countries. However, she also recognised the need to listen to people's concerns about asylum seekers. The Geneva Convention was drawn up based on an understanding of how we should have responded to fleeing Jews but now systems allow profiteers to benefit from trafficking in people, including criminals, seeking to flee from countries for better opportunities whilst genuinely poor people languish in camps etc. Regulations need to be rethought and rewritten.

CS stressed that global warming and resulting agricultural difficulties will lead to far more displaced people and people wanting to move to countries which have better conditions. Nasty situations are likely to arise. This is a huge issue comparable with some of the greatest times of change and upheaval in history. The way we live in the OECD countries is not sustainable and people in developing countries want the same as we have. We have the technology and information to ensure everyone has the basics. (90% of new births will be in the poorest countries). Religious leaders and moral philosophers have dreamt of a situation which would challenge us to create a fairer society. Even the most selfish people wanting to pass on their wealth to their children have to consider bigger issues. Even volcanic ash began to lead to food shortages in Britain. Systems could easily grind to a halt.

CS spoke about the growth of Islamophobia, recognising it to be the opposite of RE aspirations. Teachers are not supposed to have a political agenda but our work is affected by all these international situations. She suggested the world is not responding in an intelligent way to the Middle East situation. There is a great need for global cooperation and this will be more difficult if we do not stick to agreements achieved after WWII which are being breached in the Middle East. It is not good enough to respond superficially, there is a need to take seriously those aspirations she quoted from the NASACRE book. BNP tirades are now directed more specifically against Muslims and these feelings are expressed even by Sikh members of the BNP.

Issues of religion are being used as identities of conflict eg Jewish fanatics in Gaza, Christian fundamentalists supporting expansionist Israel because the Messiah will not return and the world will not end until this is achieved. They support this even though they don't believe Jews will be in heaven alongside themselves. Identities are now significantly linked with religion. This is an issue which it is difficult for us to deal with. We must share, and not just gloss over, how religious traditions contain ugliness and can be used for bad and for division. This is an enormous challenge for us and we need to think about the impact on curriculum and resources.

There will be great cuts soon and there will be contests about where these fall. In our work we try to hold the moral space and mutual respect – we have to avoid politics but all these political issues are on our agenda. CS said she was convinced that people long for something more than our hedonistic approach to life. As we go forward from where we are, either generosity and altruism will rise or nastiness and danger will prevail. She concluded by saying it is *we* who have the job of taking the next generation through these difficulties!

Business part of the meeting:

Key areas addressed:

- Treasurer – there will be a rise in the membership fee from £85 (unchanged for three years) to £95.
- Secretary – reported on the success of the recruitment training and talked the meeting through the new training CD ROM which we should look at in our next (autumn) meeting.
- A change in the constitution now allows for up to six co-options to the executive for the purpose of spreading the increasing workload.
- RE Celebration – the meeting was reminded that there is to be a national celebration of RE during March 2011. A website providing information is available: <http://www.celebratingre.org/> We should think about how our SACRE might like to respond to this. I will put something in newsletters between now and then.
- New members elected at the meeting to the executive: Graham Langtree (RE Adviser Devon), Khadijah Knight (Muslim RE teacher – her second term), Sharon Artley (RE Consultant and very much involved with the RE Trails initiative)

There was a time of questions and answers with members of QCDA, Ofsted and the RE Council. I can give more detail about this session if required.

Minutes of the meeting will be published on the NASACRE website.