

**Stephen Lloyd, MP**  
**Notes from keynote address**

Stephen began by emphasising his commitment to the importance of RE and said this was shared by many parliamentary colleagues. He spoke about the wide-ranging support for the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG). He went on to reflect on why he had started the APPG admitting that his reasons were quite complicated. As a school pupil he was a strong atheist but 26 years ago he discovered a faith which drives everything he does. Arriving in Westminster as an MP he learned about the RE issue and became chair of the APPG. He stressed that he is not doing this just because of his faith because his is a rather private faith and he also has an interest in other religions. So, he asked, why **is** he finding time for this? His answer to the question was that in today's modern globalised context if our children are not taught facts about the world's different religions by trained RE teachers then we will encounter and even create problems. There is such a lot of misinformation, misrepresentation about religions in all sorts of sources of information around us that he believes passionately we need people who have the right training to deal with this in schools. The Secretary of State is intelligent and has a clarity of vision but as an unintended consequence of current policies RE in schools has been under attack. It is essential that people who understand this should put the DfE under constant pressure in support of the RE cause.

Stephen praised the APPG reports: *RE: the Truth Unmasked* and *The contribution of RE to good community relations*. He recognised that SACREs and RE teachers have felt on the back foot but also that sometimes from a position like this strength is developed and he expressed a belief that this is the situation emerging for RE. He is convinced the situation for RE will continue to strengthen because the APPG will not go away even if he is not re-elected. The cause will continue to be fought.

Stephen went on to reflect about teachers of RE in schools. He spoke of having observed and been impressed by the passion of many of the RE teachers he has met in the last few years; teachers committed to fair and balanced teaching of world religions with respect. These teachers help pupils to make sense of who they are and of life and must be supported in their work. Many teachers have felt undervalued by the DfE and even their own schools and yet this is a subject that has guided the universe for years, the most important subject of all though people often find it difficult to understand this. RE learning gives power to control life, to understand what it's all about. It gives children a chance to be free- freedom is what's in our heads. It is important for pupils to develop values based on firm foundations because the alternative is problems for individuals and communities.

Stephen expressed pride in being Chair of the APPG even though it's not seen as a vote winner. He sees a big advantage in having come into politics has been the chance it's given him to influence things that he thinks are important and RE is high up that list. He advised that as a time of election

approaches politicians take notice of lobbying groups. It is important to make the best use this time and colleagues in the APPG will lobby to influence manifestos.

Stephen expressed enormous appreciation for everyone present and reported that he and colleagues on the APPG recognise and value the commitment and determination of everyone contributing to the fight in support of RE. The APPG could not have been successful without people like those gathered for this AGM. He hopes people understand this and how committed he is to the APPG and to ensuring that RE is taught by trained subject specialists. Imagine a world where the only source of information about religions comes through the media. This is what it's like in many parts of the world. This must not happen here in Britain. Children here should have a grounding in good lessons about the world's religions. He is confident we will win. Hopefully when the tide turns and the DfE understands the unintended consequences of current policies then and only then can we allow ourselves a small breather; but only a small one because then we need to spread the message wider, globally in an effort to combat the widespread inaccurate understanding/knowledge of religions.

Stephen concluded by saying that his commitment to the importance of RE is so strong that even though today is election day, attendance at this AGM had been his highest priority.

Lesley Prior thanked Stephen for his positive address and expressed enthusiasm for having him as our champion. She reminded delegates of NASACRE's past, present and future involvement in the APPG.

## Questions

**Nasr Emam, North Yorkshire:** Are there any media strategies Stephen would recommend in response to the negative representations of religions?

**SL:** This is something that SACREs and the APPG need to discuss. It would be a good subject for the next APPG meeting. It is important to use political expertise to communicate messages. There is a resource/capacity issue, however.

**Joy Buckley, Isle of Wight:** A studio school and a free school are opening and both have stated they will not be doing RE. This means over a 1000 children not studying this important subject. What can APPG do to address this issue?

**SL:** acknowledged the importance of this and the case for arguing against a system which allows for this. The APPG needs to start putting together issues that need to be highlighted with all parties as they develop their election manifestos. It is important to focus on specific issues and get parties to commit to address them after election. He is convinced that it will not be difficult to convince people because of an obvious growing concern.

**Paul Smith, Milton Keynes:** I had a slight concern when listening to you about your emphasis on children learning about facts in relation to religion. It is important to acknowledge RE is about more than facts but also about how to handle the facts to make informed choices ie phenomenological and affective approaches or *learning about* and *learning from* religions

**SL:** agreed and was using short hand in his address but acknowledges RE is much more than facts. He had emphasised the importance of sharing accurate information but had not intended to overlook the affective element.

**Dinah Griffiths, Lewisham:** Reported having had no SACRE clerk for over six months because there is no real local authority interest in SACRE. She thanked Stephen for his enthusiasm and commitment. There has been a fight to get a budget and an adviser. Others will find themselves in the same situation. Has Stephen any thoughts about recommending a minimum level of support for SACREs so they can continue to be effective.

**SL:** this needs to be added to the APPG agenda in order to influence manifestos. SACREs should lobby their MPs about the APPG and suggest they should get in touch with Stephen so he can convince them, if they have not already been convinced, about the importance of this work. Informed MPs they can lobby their local councils.

**Jonathan Marshall, Plymouth:** Thanked Stephen. At end of last year Ofsted, REC and APPG reports were published. Whilst sharing Stephen's enthusiasm if these reports don't make the necessary differences, if not now – when? Stepping down as Plymouth's RE adviser he will not be replaced, a situation replicated elsewhere

**SL:** We are in a different place with the DfE than last year and that was different from the year before. We have had a defensive battle but the battle is being won in Westminster. This will always be a year or two ahead of what is happening on the ground. The influence may not yet have reached school leaders but the influence in Westminster is trickling down to the regions though this is a disappointingly slow process. It will be difficult to get back schools that have stepped away from RE. The unravelling of the situation has stopped in Westminster. Delegates and their SACREs need to lobby MPs. They are busy people but we need to keep on the case. What MPs can do is they have access to people with power even though they don't have unlimited power themselves. It is a bit like sticking a finger in a dyke at present but it is a step in the right direction.

**Janet Scott, Cambridgeshire:** Very concerned about the supply of properly trained teachers. There are now no bursaries for trainees so this is a discouragement to training. Few schools invest in RE training for staff. Another thing for the APPG to consider is how performance related pay (PRP) might impact on RE teachers teach more classes, more pupils in less time than other colleagues etc. What criteria will be used to make judgments?

**SL:** The APPG is working on the bursary issue. PRP is a new issue and the APPG, REC and SACREs need to get involved and help the DfE come up with criteria and help schools manage this. It's unlikely the PRP initiative will change if Labour wins the next election. As we approach the general election we need to come up with some bite-sized solutions to present to the DfE. Stephen went on to link this potential unfairness with his other passion: apprenticeships and how they are about the dignity of work but schools don't reward teachers who get pupils into apprenticeships – it's all about getting into university.

**Ernell Watson, Hackney:** Thanked Stephen. Two areas of concern are the voice of the child –children should be part of the process so we capture the views of children and understand if RE is meaningful to them. We also need to have an idea about how we can measure success.

**SL:** Some of my meetings have been with children who have been impressive. This was because they had good RE teaching from well-trained RE teachers. The way we will know we have won will be that our young people are well-informed. Young people are angered when they know inaccurate information is spread about religions, politics etc. If we do not have good RE we will have a country with a dangerous level of ignorance about religions. Society will be our measure of success – the way people behave with each other. The recent APPG report on community relations is excellent. Community cohesion is based on how much we know and understand of others.

**Pat Hannam, Hampshire:** Thanks again. Hampshire is a local authority committed to education and RE and has a very well supported SACRE including young people's voices. However the success of RE is dependent on a good supply of well-trained RE teachers. Vacancies remain unfilled and headteachers then have to make difficult decisions. How do we put a finger in this dyke? Undergraduates are not thinking of RE teaching as a brilliant career. How can we work together to support initiatives associated with *the Truth Unmasked* report?

**SL:** There are two answers: 1) we have to keep up the pressure with the DfE. The next few months will be crucial and the APPG, REC and SACREs need to identify points to influence manifestos. 2) we should think about what can we do as a RE community with our limited funds to establish a scheme which very publically rewards young people who want to be RE teachers. The REQM may prove to be something to work with in this regard. Stephen drew a comparison with his efforts to establish a royal college of apprenticeships to place value on this way forward. We are a hierarchical country so we need to give value to apprenticeships and RE teachers.

**Roger Bristow, Bromley:** You mentioned the law of unintended consequences which has been illustrated in Bromley because it is becoming a commissioning authority and all its schools are becoming academies as soon as possible. The consequence is funding for SACRE has been cut and there will be a question about the survival and funding of SACREs. In the academies, especially primaries, RE is taught by teaching assistants rather than specialist teachers though some are doing a very good job. Roger thanked Stephen but urged him, through the APPG, to press for local authorities to recognise the importance of SACREs.

**SL:** Agreed. It will be difficult to pull back this situation and its spread across the country. Encourage your MP to have a conversation with me because he has not so far been involved with the APPG and will not be aware of some of these issues. There needs to be an adjournment debate about academies and free schools in relation to RE to address the unintended consequences and a need to press MPs to attend the debate if it happens. NASACRE get all relevant information.

Lesley Prior closed the session recognising the value of the APPG and Stephen's commitment to it. She expressed the thanks of the meeting to him and NASACRE's enthusiasm for continuing to work with him. Lesley also thanked delegates for their contributions.