



## Making Blair History?

At his Mansion House speech on Monday the 14th November the Prime Minister articulated in the clearest terms yet the case for greater global movement on fairer and not just freer trade. Some might argue that it has simply become fashionable for the political elite in the United Kingdom to include *Make Poverty History's* goals in their rhetoric. However others might suggest that when such issues become 'compulsory political rhetoric', it merely demonstrates that the political world is witnessing a profound change of attitudes. It is to be hoped that the result will be substantive progress on trade justice at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Hong Kong in December.

It is interesting to apply this to wider debate about Mr Blair's legacy and the apparent stalling of his third term agenda. The Mansion House speech was seen by some as an attempt to wrest back success and momentum from the UK presidency of the G8 and the EU. The other side of the legacy coin is the question of the Prime Minister's legislative programme. The most dramatic evidence of trouble had come from defeat of the 90 day detention provision in the Government's Terrorism Bill in the House of Commons. This represents the first defeat Mr Blair has suffered since becoming Prime Minister.

In the debates and media interviews before the vote the Prime Minister admitted he might lose but argued: "Sometimes it is better to lose and do the right thing than to win and do the wrong thing." It seemed that Mr Blair wanted to make a point out of the issue itself and to stake his authority on a point of principle.

In a sign of the importance given to the vote, Chancellor Gordon Brown was called back home within minutes of arriving in Israel for a high profile visit; meanwhile

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw also flew back early from EU-Russia talks in Moscow.

The Government was defeated by 322 votes to 291 specifically on the matter of 90-day detention. A Labour backbench amendment to extend detention to only 28 days was passed instead. Liberal Democrat President, Simon Hughes, responded to the result by stating that "Governments cannot afford to be defeated on the main issue of the day".

Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, was in ebullient mood when he claimed that it was "the day Blair fell off the high wire". Iain Duncan Smith commented that "we didn't need to create this crisis"; the

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argument being that a compromise could have been found, but that the Prime Minister had wanted to make his point. To his critics this smacked of arrogant Government and questionable judgment; to Tony Blair's supporters, it was the firm hand required at a time when new forms of terrorism are a tragically proven reality.

The debate on the anti-terror proposals represents the first defeat in a long list of potentially contentious legislative items including controversial reforms to incapacity benefit, health proposals to boost the role of private provision as well as controversial education legislation, not to mention the issue of ID cards.

At Prime Minister's Questions on the 16th of November Michael Howard

claimed that Mr Blair was losing his grip on power and that he "does not have much time left" as Prime Minister. Mr Howard told a boisterous House of Commons that "He and I are both on our way out."

Yet despite the protestations of the Opposition and the huge amount of column inches devoted to speculation about the Prime Minister's future in the wake of the anti-terror Bill setback this cannot yet be considered a fatal blow to him.

Even when John Major's Government had suffered many defeats and "everything he touched turned to mush", he was nevertheless able to carry on. The Prime Minister is in much more formidable shape than that. Given the storm clouds gathering, however, it might make sense for the Prime Minister to look elsewhere for securing a lasting legacy.

In this regard, a statesmanship role in single-mindedly championing the issues of international justice and fair trade could represent an excellent challenge for the Prime Minister's undoubted skills when he decides to leave office. After all, it seems that on the really controversial issues of the day, such as climate change and international justice, public opinion needs to move before the politicians. So holding political office may not be the most effective place from which seek to 'Make Poverty History'. Arguably, there is precedent here. Mr Blair's close friend, former President Bill Clinton, has been most successful at raising justice issues in a statesman-like way since leaving office. The work of the Clinton foundation on AIDS has been much praised. Mr Blair's place in political history is assured but it seems he is in a unique position to help Make Poverty History.

## Religious Hatred and Equality

Last week the Government responded to rejection by the House of Lords of the essence of its Racial & Religious Hatred Bill by agreeing to fundamentally amend the framework of the Bill in line with an amendment tabled by Lord Lester during its Committee stage that was supported by a wide coalition of religious and secular groups.

During the Report stage of the Bill, the Government accepted that race and religion should effectively be separated in the proposed legislation and promised to consult with Opposition parties to find a 'middle road' whereby an acceptable format for contentious aspects of the Bill, such as freedom of speech, criminal intentionality and thresholds of offensive behaviour could hopefully be arrived at by consensus. The Government acknowledged that a solution had to be found that made the Bill effective and workable whilst removing evident confusion about what the Bill would and would not do, and the widespread fear of investigation for malicious and trivial complaints, as well as preserving, crucially, freedom of speech. Provided the Government is prepared to move significantly in these areas, the prospect of Government and Opposition working together to achieve an outcome that gets this legislation right to the satisfaction of the public generally and religious groups in particular is to be welcomed.

Although the House of Lords voted to reject the potentially restrictive crime of religious harassment in the Equality Bill on Wednesday, it is likely that the Government will reinstate it in the Commons. The Equality Bill represents yet another piece of Government legislation that has been rushed in without proper

consultation. Aimed at protecting people and groups against religious discrimination, in practice, many Christian and other religious community and voluntary organisations could find themselves at risk of having public funding withdrawn and their work closed down if, for example, they display religious symbols, pray, or speak about God. The Lords sensibly rejected that part of the Bill that could criminalise organisations that 'offended peoples' dignity' or made them feel 'intimidated or humiliated' as being so broad as likely to encourage malicious and trivial complaints. But it remains crucial that the Government, instead of merely reversing the decision in the Commons, consults with

The scenario has now shifted completely

religious bodies to find a robust way of protecting the reasonable expression of religious belief in the public sphere as soon as possible.

The Government also gave way at the last moment to pressure to introduce sexual orientation discrimination in the areas of goods, services and premises into the Bill in the form of secondary legislation. Whilst unlawful discrimination against any individuals or groups is to be resisted, introducing these proposals by way of secondary legislation means that the usual democratic methods of full parliamentary scrutiny will be by-passed. The Government previously promised a full pre-legislative consultation exercise to ensure that the evident concerns of religious groups were taken account of before moving to legislate in this complex area. The scenario has now shifted completely and it is vital that the Government engages fully with religious groups and others to ensure that appropriate protections are built in that guarantee that nothing in the proposed regulations will criminalise peoples' faith.

## UK's Children bear the cost of Sunday Trading

Despite constant warnings that family and social life in the UK is being seriously damaged by pressure on parents of school-age children to work at weekends, the Government has decided to investigate the possibility of further deregulation of shopping hours.

Trade Secretary, Alan Johnson, announced this week that the Government would be inviting independent researchers to carry out a thorough assessment of the effects of liberalising Sunday trading in whole or in part.

The announcement was not a surprise. Four big stores – Tesco, the Kingfisher Group (who own B&Q and Woolworths), Swedish multinational IKEA and US giant Walmart who owns ASDA – have claimed that in the name of consumer choice a decisive move towards a 24/7 society is their intention.

But there is division in the retail camp. A variety of stores have voiced the view that there is no need for more shopping hours. Small stores in particular will fight any attempt to increase the number of shopping hours allowed on a Sunday because already thousands have had to close because of supermarket competition. The big stores are claiming that it is the consumer who wants more time to shop, even though in some towns it is already possible to shop for anything up to 150 hours a week. In reality, consumers seem to be saying something quite different. Earlier this year *Keep Sunday Special* commissioned an NOP survey when interviewees were asked which lifestyle question they thought

was most important.

More than 75 per cent said they would rather be assured of one day a week to spend with family and friends than to have extra hours to shop on a Sunday.

The Chairman of *Keep Sunday Special*, Dr Michael Schluter, is determined to fight this latest move with all the energy the campaign mustered in the build-up to the Sunday Trading Act in 1994. Mrs Thatcher suffered one of her rare defeats over the issue and Mr Blair may well find that he faces even sterner opposition.

He said: "The Government seems to pay scant regard to relationships. Weekends are the only time when children are not at school.

"It seems that – as with the introduction of 24-hour drinking – the Government is bowing to the interests of major commercial groups. How do you expect marriages to survive if people are working rather than spending time together at weekends? Time is the currency of relationships," he added.

Will you help *Keep Sunday Special* fight longer hours? Join us today – become a member at [www.keepsundayspecial.net](http://www.keepsundayspecial.net) or call us on 01223 566319.

Nicola Templeton  
Communications Advisor, *Keep Sunday Special*

## Jerry Springer – now Paul!

A new play, *Paul*, by Howard Brenton, has apparently already prompted 200 letters of complaint even before its first performance at the National Theatre at the beginning of October 2005. I viewed it at the first opportunity.

Howard Brenton has been a significant and provocative voice in British post-war political theatre. He has written or co-written more than 40 plays, perhaps the most memorable being *The Romans In Britain* (1980). He has now turned his attention to dramatising the life of St. Paul and what is the most famous conversion in history – when Saul became Paul on the road to Damascus. Describing it as ‘a play about the nature of faith’ and a ‘secular reading of the story of Christ’s resurrection’, the National Theatre’s director, Nicholas Hytner, admits it is ‘irreverent’, ‘provocative’ and ‘sceptical’, though ‘not intended to be controversial or shocking’.

The play is certainly not gratuitously offensive, unlike *Jerry Springer – the Opera*, and does not contain anything that should provoke Christians, or indeed anyone else, to protest. It is well acted, contains several moments of humour, and presents no morally questionable scenes. However, the re-telling of the Paul and Jesus story, though imaginative and ingenious, is completely fanciful and far-fetched. It probably says more about the playwright’s own need to subvert what he plainly dislikes about historical orthodox Christianity than anything else. The play is surprisingly modern rather than post-modern in its look and feel. Whilst a degree of existential angst plainly pervades the play, it is something of an exaggeration to describe this as ‘an exploration of the nature of faith’ – rather it is a determined attempt to explain faith away and undermine its bases. Inevitably, it ends up as a hotchpotch of half-baked hypotheses endeavouring to prove a point.

The approach is rather crude and well-worn, founded on an assumption that the first believers were necessarily deluded, and invites overtones of *The Life of Brian*, with snatches picked up from sceptical pseudo-academic New Testament critics. Brenton also cannot resist jumping on *The Da Vinci Code* bandwagon by having Jesus marry Mary Magdalene. The rather tortuous plot is based on the revelation of the risen Christ to Paul on the Damascus road actually being a trick. Not having died on the cross as traditionally supposed, it is the real Jesus who appears to Paul on the road. Jesus apparently was ‘purchased’ from the Romans by Joseph of Aramathea before he was dead and sheltered in private by Jesus’ brother James and by the apostle Peter. Portrayed as a rambling and half-mad, self-styled prophet, Jesus unfortunately ‘escapes’ his minders whilst James and Peter are journeying with Jesus to Damascus at the same time as Paul. Paul’s unplanned nighttime encounter with Jesus coincides with an epileptic fit suffered by Paul (his ‘thorn in the flesh’) that implacably convinces Paul that Jesus has risen from the dead. Despite being horrified that the story of the ‘resurrection’ is getting out of hand, James and Peter, who know the ‘truth’, prefer to keep Paul in the dark because, although he is mistakenly preaching that Christ rose again, at least it keeps him from revealing where Jesus really is, and Paul’s dissemination of the Christian message is very ‘useful’ for bringing in cash! This is the ‘real’ reason for the well-known controversy between Paul and the Jewish church! So it appears that the church is born out of the need to maintain a

lie created by the disciples of Jesus and as a money-making scheme! Finally, imprisoned together by Nero, Peter finally tells Paul the truth before they go to their deaths as the first Christian martyrs.

There are one or two concessions made by Brenton to acknowledge the undoubted flights of magnificent poetry and theological depths for which Paul is universally acclaimed. There is a particularly good scene located in the chaos of the Corinthian church in which Paul soars to the sublime heights of 1 Corinthians 12 on the theme of love. One cannot help but feel that even the sceptical and bitter playwright is actually moved to wistful admiration at this point! It is a pity that the audience is subsequently reduced to being forced to view this as the musings of an epileptic, trance-inspired visionary who sometimes comes out with profound utterances amidst the delusional rantings of this driven and fixated former teacher of Jewish law. It is surely asking a lot to expect a rational audience to accept both Paul and Jesus as poor deceived souls mirroring each other’s mental wanderings and self-delusion whilst simultaneously venturing an explanation of the origins of one of the world’s great religions. However, Brenton clearly has no other means of accounting for the incredible power that brought the church to birth and changed the world in such explosive fashion. It is here that the play founders through its sheer lack of plausibility and evident antipathetic agenda.

The characters are largely caricatures, designed on the one hand to appear filled with unshakeable faith, but necessarily ‘off the wall’ mentally, or on the other hand determinedly sane but necessarily sceptical. Evidently scepticism is to be understood as the norm, whilst the classical Christian tradition and those who sustain it are plainly to be seen as absurd and ‘wacky’. The ending, where Paul manages to convince the hitherto thoroughly sceptical Peter to embrace faith simply by endlessly repeating an early church creed in the face of certain death, is tragic-comic. Paul in the playwright’s hands faintly takes on the form of a ‘won’t take no for an answer’ stereotypical TV Anglican vicar. He is irritatingly sanctimonious, self-confident and verging on the ‘happy-clappy’, prompted and driven by epileptic fits, trances and obsessions. Faith is just obdurate self-delusion – even when confronted with the facts Paul refuses to budge from his obsession that Christ is somehow going to ‘return’. Peter is a problematic schizophrenic character, apparently unashamedly bearing no resemblance to the New Testament picture of him but rather the tool of the playwright who presumably wants Peter to exemplify what he regards as the ‘paradox of faith’!

Brenton’s *Paul* is not offensive to the Christian faith. It is not provocatively blasphemous and denigratory of God. But the overwhelming impression is of something ingeniously devised though wildly speculative and far-fetched. Like *The Da Vinci Code*, it should stimulate debate and the search for truth, and Christians should see it as an opportunity not for clamour or censoriousness, but for seeking genuine rights of reply and the chance to tell the true story which offers the world much more hope than this bleak contribution.

Don Horrocks

For the full article see

[www.eauk.org/CONTENTMANAGER/Content/press/articles/paul.cfm](http://www.eauk.org/CONTENTMANAGER/Content/press/articles/paul.cfm)

## Political Credibility at Stake

Scotland

The Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament pride themselves on their consultation process. Before any piece of legislation is introduced a public consultation is held with groups and individuals encouraged to respond. The same is true for the Parliament with the Committees seeking responses before any legislation is passed.

This openness has been welcomed by civic society and can only be good for democracy. Before any new laws are enacted it is

important to find out what the experts think and also the public in general. Most consultations go unnoticed, but on more controversial issues the process does stir public debate.

The process will only work, however, if people believe their views are being listened to. If the expectation is that legislation will be changed if enough people disagree or agree with something then this must actually happen. The evidence shows that this rarely is the case.

For example, recently a MSP consulted on the issue of assisted suicide. The consultation generated lots of

responses from groups and individuals. The problem was the way in which the responses were analysed. Group responses representing many individuals were treated in the same way as if it were one person responding. By doing this the MSP obtained the result he wanted! This is what discourages professional bodies from responding.

A second perceived danger is that the Executive or the

Parliament is simply going through the motions. Too often after a consultation nothing changes. Even where the majority take a

different view the proposals remain unaltered. In one case a Bill was presented to Parliament within weeks of the consultation ending. Were any of the responses even looked at?

As a lobbyist this may sound like sour grapes, but there is a principle here. People will become even more cynical of politicians if their views never make a difference. People will stop engaging in the process and that is bad for society. You can't listen to everyone and sometimes hard decisions need to be made, but if you are going to consult it must be done with integrity.

Were any of the responses even looked at?

## Ground to be Re-taken

Call it Welsh spin if you want, but Wales' recent mauling by the All Blacks and narrowest of wins over lowly Fiji did not signal yet another false dawn in the annals of Welsh rugby, euphoric after their all-conquering Grand Slam of eight months ago.

The truth is, we just did not have strength in depth, and without six influential stars who were central to the recent Lions tour of New Zealand, we were not at our best. Yes, we could put out a strong 15 to arguably match the best in the world but we couldn't field 40 strong players like New Zealand can!

And so it is, in some ways, with the church in the voluntary sector. From being very involved in politics and social action in the 19th century, the church began to focus more and more on preaching in the last century (with some notable exceptions). Despite a fresh emphasis on social and political involvement in the past 30 years, the percentage of faith-based works in the voluntary sector in Wales has currently fallen to a mere 9% of the whole.

Despite the held opinion that the figure ought actually to be at least double that, there is still much ground to be re-taken. We need to both allow ourselves to be positioned by God into community work, and to persevere in our pursuit of government funding.

Recent years have seen some encouraging stories of churches making successful applications for funding. Last

month alone, for example, saw two churches in Swansea and one church in Cardiff receive grants of £300K, £140K & £300K respectively.

Praise God for the Auntie Doris's of this world who selflessly slave away making homemade jam for church jumble sales in order to raise money for the church extension. But there is often a better way!

We need to persevere because many of us have not been this way before! The church pastor who received £140K

had never previously received government funding. He will be both wiser in the future regarding any subsequent applications and also able to advise other churches in his sphere of influence.

Last week, a colleague and I talked with a local pastor, whose church has a vision to build a community centre with facilities including a church and health centre, costing around £2,000,000. Another contact has a

heart to open up what would be the only charity shop in her valley's community. Her vision is to offer inexpensive clothes, to connect the church with the community and to generate money for missions.

As God plants vision in people's hearts, let's be like Barnabas and encourage them to go for it! Here at Evangelical Alliance Wales we can advise churches and Christians how best to access public funding sources to support their visions.

We need to allow ourselves to be positioned by God into community work and to persevere in our pursuit of government funding

Wales

## What price peace?

Northern Ireland

The irony could almost have been tangible in the House of Commons last week. On the one hand the Government worked feverishly to persuade MPs to support its plans to introduce 90-day detention for suspected terrorists. On the other, new legislation was introduced, effectively giving an amnesty to those who have been involved in terrorist activities in Northern Ireland. Sir Reg Empey, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, has accused the Government of facing two ways at once.

The Northern Ireland Offences Bill, introduced to the House of Commons on Wednesday 9 November, will allow for about 150 so called 'on-the-runs' (OTRs) to return to Northern Ireland without facing imprisonment for terrorist crimes committed.

Once the legislation has commenced individuals wishing to avail themselves of the scheme can apply to the Certification Commissioner. From the point at which the applicant is granted a certificate they will be exempt from certain police powers in relation to the offences detailed. However, the case relating to the offences may come before a Special Tribunal – a hearing in which the offender is not obliged to appear. Those subsequently convicted and sentenced to imprisonment will become eligible for release on licence – similar to those released on licence following the signing of the Belfast Agreement. Critics, including Foyle MP and leader of the SDLP Mark Durkan, point out that with no imposed time limit there is little incentive for OTRs to come forward.

Many of those who supported the Belfast Agreement in 1998 viewed the early prisoner release scheme as one of the less palatable consequences of the new arrangements. If that was the price of peace then they were prepared to take the risk. This effective amnesty, however, is perhaps too bitter a pill to swallow.

Some 1,800 murders over the period of the Troubles remain unsolved. Recently the Secretary of State, Peter Hain, announced a review of all these cases, but with these new proposals some question the merit of spending time and effort resolving cases for which no one will serve time in prison.

Similarly, as the legislation also covers those who have committed offences in the course of efforts to combat terrorism, will this mean that Sinn Fein no longer request protracted inquiries relating to alleged state offences? The cost of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry currently stands at £155 million and we continue to wait for the outcome.

There has been much discussion surrounding the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission in Northern Ireland to help us deal with the past. The Northern Ireland Offences Bill is attempting to bring us into the future. Of course, truth and reconciliation, justice and grace, are Christian principles which we long to see more of in society. However, history shows that political expediency does not create the right conditions for such values to grow.

## Troubled by Totalitarianism?

Fourteen years ago it seemed as though communism in Eastern Europe was dead. Yet since then it has become obvious that although Article 13 of the Bulgarian Constitution should provide for freedom of religion, this is not the case in practice. The Constitution designates Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity as the 'traditional' religion, and other religious groups are required to apply for registration at the Sofia City Court before they can practice their beliefs in public. For this registration there are general criteria in the law that is borrowed from international law. However, these international criteria have never been added to Bulgarian domestic law, an oversight that has given rise to room for arbitrary decisions about the acceptability of a group's request for registration. If a congregation is not registered, then the state has not recognised it, which makes it an illegal sect. The situation is so severe that according to Mr. K. Kanev, director of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Professor of Sociology and Human Rights at the State Universities of Plovdiv and Sofia, the Bulgarian legal system is in contradiction with the EU standard of religious freedom by discriminating between the various religious groups.

According to Mr. T. Angelov, secretary of the European Baptist Union in Bulgaria, local government opposition is highest when a church wishes to build a place of worship. This opposition is implicit in the procedures a church must follow to obtain a building license and the procedure is complicated and extensive. It is this same local government that creates problems for those attempting to proselytize. The national government is not opposed to this, but local governments can and do place restrictions on these activities. For example, in Plovdiv a church only has the

right to preach in their own place of worship, and to engage in these activities elsewhere they risk sanctions.

In the media too, rights are only granted to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as they are the only group given broadcast time and opportunities. Mr. I. Hazarbasanov, pastor of the Christian Centre in Sofia, states that "Protestant Christians are often used as scapegoats in the press. Seeing as stories about 'sects' within Bulgarian society are good for circulation the media often portray Protestant Christians and other non-traditional religious groups as such." This portrayal of non-Orthodox Christians as scapegoats may be contributing to violence towards them, such as the attack on two Christians by a group of Muslims as they spread invitations for a Christian film in southern Bulgaria in October this year.

In addition to the restrictions placed on them by external forces, Bulgarian evangelical Christians seem to be "stuck in a wounded culture, church leaders tend to multiply hurt and deny liberty, as if they took lessons from communist leaders...their church leadership style is a mix of control and fear" says Viktor Kostov founder of the Balkan Centre for Law and Freedom, a religious-liberty lawyer, and a missionary. Such totalitarian harshness among evangelicals is not only a Bulgarian phenomenon, since many churches in post-communist countries practice a legalism could seem to contradict their message. Let us pray for Bulgarian Christians that they would not only be spurred on to greater zeal for Christ by external pressures, but also that they would be able to move their leadership style away from the context of totalitarian culture that they have lived in for so long.

Religious Liberty

# Prayer, Action and Breaking News...

## Prayer points: Peter Luff MP



Peter Luff has been working for Worcestershire since 1992 when he became Conservative MP for Worcester. He was elected MP for the new Mid Worcestershire seat in 1997 and was re-elected in 2001. Peter is a member of the executive committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and he is Chair of Worcester Cathedral Council. Peter lives in Worcestershire with his wife, Julia, and their two children. He asks PQ readers to pray:

- ▶ That globalisation in the world economy provides an opportunity for the reduction of inequalities and opportunities for the poorest to flourish, not to be exploited
- ▶ That reform of the rules governing agricultural production provides opportunities for developing the rural economies of the poorest nations without unnecessary damage to the fabric of rural Britain
- ▶ That the growth necessary to eradicate world poverty in the developing world can be achieved in a way that does not threaten still more damage to the global climate
- ▶ That Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and other faith communities in the UK, Europe and the wider world can develop a dialogue of trust and understanding that inhibits the growth of extremism, but encourages the Christian churches to speak with confidence about the revelation of God's love through Jesus
- ▶ That government policy in the UK can be directed towards an improvement in the moral condition of all our people and that the worrying growth in anti-social behaviour and drunkenness is tackled thoughtfully and prayerfully by all public sector and voluntary bodies involved in the issues
- ▶ That MPs, local councillors and all those involved in developing laws, regulations, and services that shape and help our society, find time in their lives prayerfully and peacefully to reflect on the implications of their words and deeds

### The Fifth Annual Temple Address

The Evangelical Alliance recently hosted the fifth Temple Address. The event highlights a Christian perspective on key issues that affect and influence UK society.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, spoke on the subject "Becoming Trustworthy: Respect and Self-Respect. The theme for this year's event was based on the issue of respect related to young people. Christian youth organisations Youth for Christ, Crusaders and JUMP (Jesus Use My Potential) worked with the Alliance to produce a multi-media presentation.

Alongside the event the Alliance ran the first national Champions of Respect competition to find young people who demonstrate what respect means through their positive actions. There were three Champions of Respect in the under 11, under 16 and under 25 age categories and an overall winner who received the Anthony Walker Memorial Prize, which was presented by Anthony's mother, Mrs Gee Walker.

For more details please visit [www.championsofrespect.org](http://www.championsofrespect.org)

### Content of Civil Marriage Ceremonies

The General Registry Office Report following its consultation on the content of Civil Marriage Ceremonies was published on 16th November. The Government is keen to allow some inclusion of religious language and references in the supposedly strictly secular Civil Marriage Ceremony. The Evangelical Alliance responded to the consultation back in October.

In the conclusion of its response the Alliance said that the potential problem with the civil marriage system was that registrars were now under pressure to introduce forms of so-called 'folk religion' and 'quasi-religious' elements into the civil ceremony. Meanwhile registrars were reluctant to enforce the present law. Hence, we are faced with what appear to be well meaning and sincere proposals to allow for what might be termed greater 'choice' in civil marriage ceremonies. The Alliance maintained that couples are free to get married in a church if they wish to have a religious element to the service and that the two ceremonies should not be confused.

The Alliance stated that it had grave concerns that the proposals would water down the uniqueness, clarity and definition of Christian marriage, and felt that the present definition of "religious service" should be "unambiguously maintained".

The GRO has now announced that whilst hymns will still be banned, pop songs with religious lyrics will not. Robbie Williams is in, *All things Bright and Beautiful* remains banned!

your chance to get involved...

## information

For information on these and any other political issues, please contact our information line on: 020 7207 2129  
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uniting to change society

