

SOUTH HAMPSHIRE HUMANISTS NESLETTER 146
MARCH/APRIL 2019



SHH A PARTNER OF HUMANISTS UK

WHAT'S COMING UP

SUNDAY MARCH 17TH 2PM, THE PAVILION, RESIDENTS GARDENS, 13
ABBOTTS WAY, SO17 1QU

AGM and SOAPBOX and FREE CAKE!

The business part of this meeting will be as fast and painless as possible. The present members of the committee are willing to carry on for another year but if you would like to shake things up please submit your name or that of another nominee to the sender of this newsletter by the beginning of March. Similarly submit any business motions.

But if you want to get something off your chest about anything at all, whether related to humanism, politics (should that exclude *x**?) or the state of the potholes in your road, or tell us about your fascination with whatever, PLEASE let the editor know and come and talk for 5 minutes IN THE SOAP BOX SESSION and be prepared for heckling**



WEDNESDAY MARCH 27TH 7.30PM, HOME OF MIZONS, 18 BROOKALE RD,
SO17 1QP

DISCUSSION GROUP-

ARE PUNISHMENT AND REHABILITATION FOR CRIMINALS RECONCILABLE?

APRIL

BOOK GROUP,

INAUGURAL MEETING, ANDREW COPSON'S "SECULARISM"

Those who have expressed interested will be contacted. Anyone else who would like to come along please contact Chris Rolles on tonirolles@yahoo.com

RECENT EVENTS

JAN 20TH SUKI SITARAM

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY. REFLECTING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Having been originally a community worker Suki saw the important role that local councils can play in supporting communities and so became a council worker. Though other opportunities arose she chose to stay with Southampton City Council taking on strategic responsibilities at the corporate level in 2009. She retired from the role of Assistant Chief Executive of Southampton City Council having been a council officer for 33 years, which she said had been an enriching experience. She confessed that she is a big fan of local government.

The role of council workers is to advise councillors but then to implement their decisions. When Suki first became a council worker Southampton was a District Council within the Hampshire County Council. Later Southampton became a Unitary Authority which meant that the City was responsible for the provision of many services within its boundaries. The elected city councillors of the Unitary Authority set policy and take the decisions, via a cabinet system, with the largest party of elected councillors forming the administration as in Westminster.

Sure Start was introduced by Central Government in 1998 as a scheme to provide support for families with children aged under 5. Suki had worked hard for many years trying to find funding for play groups in Weston, and was delighted when government funding became available in 1998 to set up Sure Start. Suki led this scheme for Southampton Council for 7 years and found it very rewarding. It is important that schemes like these are run by local councils which have the relevant local knowledge and details, whereas civil servants from central government may not have. Indeed it was the local council that was aware of the need in Millbrook and provided the money for the scheme there. It was a surprise that this scheme specifically concerned with helping

children under 5 years also had very positive effects on parents.

Another area where Suki worked was in the “toxic trio” of mental health, domestic abuse, and substance abuse. Domestic abuse affects 1 in 3 children, and 40% of child protection cases have an element of abuse involved. A government funded programme providing £49 million for the Thornhill estate, involved 9 months of consultation from which it appeared that unemployment did not seem to be a key issue for people living there. However, it was clear to officers that unemployment was prevalent in the area, and that the finding in the consultation arose from people being too uncomfortable to mention it. Hence the council had to bring this into the deliberations.

Technological changes over the last 20 years have affected the lives of all people, including the ways of working of council employees. The development of email with the possibility to attach documents transformed working life – since response was immediate rather than delayed by days or even weeks by the postal system. This resulted in an enormous increase in work pressure. The development of the World Wide Web also quickly led to easy access to information from many sources.

In addition to the changes in working patterns induced by new technology, there has been major consequences of the government’s financial austerity programme. There have been major cuts to services and jobs resulting from severe loss of income e.g. 50% reduction for housing benefit and schools; 29% for adult care; and 14% for child care. As a result many local authorities have adapted by sharing services. In addition, council staff no longer have their own offices but rather hot desks. There has also been an increase of the reliance on externally provided evidence rather than on collecting it internally. There has also

been greater use of external consultants and outsourcing services to private companies. Whilst there is a role for consultants - for example they may have skills that council staff do not have – Suki mentioned that during one consultant’s presentation it was claimed that slides contained information relating to Southampton but she recognised them as being those for a different authority.

Given the changes just mentioned and others such as the influx of economic migrants and the preparations for Brexit, Suki thinks the future will be very different. One issue to be dealt with is the low turnout for elections e.g. 30% for local elections and 11% for the election of police commissioners. The availability of digital technology to process huge data bases should yield a better understanding of the nature of the City and its needs. Also there will be a need to develop new avenues of income generation to replace the income lost from national government, thus commercial acumen will be at a premium. There is a need for a City Vision that aims to make a positive difference, but this must be based on evidence rather than ideology.

The overall impression gained from Suki’s presentation and her response to the many questions that were raised, was that she is enormously enthusiastic about the role that the local council have to play in the life of the City, and that ultimately its role is to provide effective services efficiently to its citizens. Finally when asked which area of Council responsibility in her opinion is most likely to improve the City’s prospects, Suki replied it is the provision and improvement of education.

Grayham Mizon

JAN 30TH DISCUSSION GROUP SHOULD RELIGION BE PART OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM?

Liz started off the discussion (with a small-4- but select group!) by defining religion as the belief in and worship of a superhuman, controlling power, especially a personal God or Gods. She

pointed out that it is still compulsory to teach religion in state schools, from nursery level to higher education, although optional in academies, giving pupils a basis for spiritual and moral development as preparation for later life. However 20% of state schools do not offer RE and there is a lack of qualified teachers.

The curriculum for RE and direction for communal acts of worship in schools in any area, is set by SACRE-Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education- a statutory local authority based body, and must be followed by state schools but not by faith schools or academies. Parents can exclude their children from RE and pupils over 18 can exclude themselves. The ethos of existing practice is predominantly Christian. We are, after all, nominally a Christian state with an established church. The recent report by the Religious Education Council “**Religion and the Way Forward**” recommends, among other things - a complete overhaul of RE with an emphasis, in the future, on religion and **worldviews**, including humanism; teaching in **all** state schools **including academies** and a review of parental rights of withdrawal.

The group felt that such an approach would be extremely valuable, particularly given our multicultural society. The history of religion, its variation linked with time and geography, associated differences in accepted norms of morality and knowledge of philosophies such as communism and fascism were fundamental for a world view and better understanding between peoples. Would this be the curriculum which challenged pupils to look at personal values, ways of living, sexuality and so on, or are these issues to be dealt with elsewhere? Clearly they would be addressed to some

extent while looking at different faiths' differing attitudes to certain moral issues eg abortion. Looking at religion and world views could be really fascinating and allow pupils to develop analytical skills and to make decisions about the way they wanted to live their lives However teaching such a broadly based course could be very difficult, and to do it without bias, even more so.

We felt that religion has been fundamental to man's development and world history and continues to be so. It should be taught in schools but in a radically different form.
Toni Rolles

DARWIN DAY

21 of us gathered at the Blue Keys Hotel in Southampton to hear, with great interest, Norman MacClean talking about the relationship between Darwin and Alfred Wallace. Their backgrounds, later lives and approach to study were very different, but Wallace was a great naturalist and, in fact, independently from Darwin came up with the idea of Natural Selection. They jointly broke the concept to the world but Wallace has tended to be forgotten in the popular mind.

Afterwards we had a delicious lunch and a very pleasant social mingling, so pleasant we needed to be reminded gently to leave at 2.30!

Thanks Norman and Blue Keys.

Remembering Audrey Hotten and SHH visit to Berlin

We are sad to report the death of Audrey Hotten, one of the founding members of this group 26 years ago. Edwin and Audrey Hotten were active members for many years, joining in all our meetings and outings. They took part in our most adventurous expedition when a small group of us visited humanists in Berlin in 1999.

On our first day we attended a humanist 'Coming of Age' ceremony for about 240 14-year-olds (each with about 10 relatives in the audience). There was music, dance, singing, skits, with projected images, laser light patterns and some speeches, celebrating the young people and welcoming them into adulthood. It was a most impressive occasion, held in a huge theatre, and we felt privileged to be there.

Just 10 years after the fall of the wall, it was a fascinating time to visit Berlin, to learn more about its history and see all the rebuilding, said at that time to be the biggest inner-city construction site in Europe. In addition to several days general sight-seeing, we visited the Humanist Centre to hear about the education system organized by Berlin humanists and went on to a humanist counselling centre for pregnant women. Thanks to our German humanist contact, who also visited us here in Southampton, it was a most interesting, instructive and enjoyable expedition, and we were impressed by all the enterprising activities being undertaken by humanists there.

What about South Hampshire Humanists making contact with fellow humanists, say, in Holland or France?

David Bothwell



- HUK has co-founded a coalition to campaign for **assisted dying** for those with terminal and incurable disease. HUK joins H Soc Scotland, Friends at the End, Death by Decision, End of Life choices Jersey and MDMD- My Death My Decision. They welcome support.
- Perhaps you know a lot about **Humanism** but **Transhumanism**? This is a slightly scary social movement “predicated on the idea that it is possible and desirable to use technology to push the boundaries of what it means to be human and to transcend our biological condition up to, and including,

mortality” Think merging people and machines, cryopreservation, massive secretive research programmes. Mark O’Connell’s “ To Be a Machine”, winner of the 2018 Wellcome Book Prize, examines the movement sceptically deciding that it is “**the very fact we are here for so brief a time that makes life so intensely beautiful and terrifying and strange**”.

- **HUMANIST CONVENTION 2019**, 21-23 June in Leicester. Tickets available online. Includes celebration of **World Humanist Day** on June 21st (The summer solstice- us and the druids)





Humanists UK Celebrants

Trained and Accredited by Humanists UK

W = Weddings; N = Namings; F = Funerals

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The website is in the process of revision