

LSS AGM 2022 – President's Report

It is fair to say that the past year has been a challenge Leicester Secular Society. We are still facing the knock on effects of the pandemic, this has affected our attendances at meetings, our income from the lettings of the hall and the size of our membership. As we have seen, we have also lost some of our most stalwart members.

Although last year's AGM was held in the Hall, we continued to have lectures on line via zoom until February this year. So really 2022 has been the year of transition from Covid lockdown. It has been a process of gradual recovery and we have seen in the last few months that attendances at lectures that have been slowly building.

For years we have warning that the growth of Faith Schools in Leicester could only foster division and hatred. Last month we saw our predictions came true when there were riots in the City fuelled by religious hatred. We have seen those divisions spill over into local politics when the Tories had a rare victory, when the Labour candidate was seen as being partisan in the religious divide.

Religious hatred has trashed Leicester's reputation as an inclusive and tolerant city. Never has the case against faith schools been stronger and never has there been such a need for a strong and healthy Secular Society.

LSS Board

The Secular Society's board has the job of overseeing the management of the Hall and our finances, as well as to promote Secularism. The board has met each month initially by zoom and more recently face to face with some board members joining on line.

Festivals

LSS took part in 3 festivals and gave out stacks of leaflets. Riverside in June , Mela in August and Pride in September. It was an excellent opportunity to give the Society a little more public exposure.

Publicity

We produced leaflets to give out at the festivals and have also produced a leaflet about the Hall for people when they come and visit.

We have also produced Debatism Certificates which raise some interest.

Lecture programme flyers are sent to members and placed in KR3 Tourist centre.

Once upon a time LSS publicity consisted of a programme to its members and when there were sufficient funds – an advert in the Leicester Mercury. With the demise of the Mercury's circulation, things have now got more complicated.

Facebook 326 followers – top post was seen by 800, but more usually between 100-300.

Twitter: 270 followers Frank Friedman tweets on behalf of the society.

Email 437 subscribers -about 200-230 unique views. This is managed by John Catt who sends the weekly email.

We do not have any recent videos on YouTube

The Heritage Open day in September was a success despite the Secular Hall not being included in the printed leaflet. I have to say that this omission was not of our making and culprit has profusely apologised to us. It was a good day & plenty of people came

As president I have given talks on the Secular Society to some local groups – Rotary Club and a couple of Historical societies. Evington, Cosby. John has given talks on Humanism and Secularism in some Schools too.

Secularist

There have been two editions since the last AGM. Its frequency depends entirely on the number of articles submitted. If there are more contributions it will come out more often.

There were 1,141 views of the last edition and of these 392 were Unique Views Possible 392 separate people. 150 hard copies printed

Hall

The day to day management of the Hall, taking bookings, opening the building for meetings and events, and clearing up has been undertaken by Mike Burden who was also assisted by Gillian Lighton. It was only when Mike went into hospital for a short time that we realised that we have been taking him for granted for far too long. It has been Mike's hard work has kept this Hall afloat and now, having lost Gillian, I hope that the new Board can give some attention to ensuring that there is a team of people who can give Mike support that he needs.

The Board has agreed to refurbish the signage for the shop front window to the Harriet Law room. We now have an internet connection there so it is now possible to have a display monitor/screen in the window

In the longer term, we also need to restart the refurbishment of the Hall, with a grant application to BIFFA for the stained glass window and front façade. Kate Housden has agreed to take this on. To do this we need to restart the sub Committee to oversee this work. We need volunteers to assist.

Leicester Rationalists Trust

Following the death of Rupert Halfide, the LSS Board nominated Kate Housden to replace him on the Trust which owns this Hall. However, the LRT refused to accept Kate and replaced Rupert without any reference to the Board or this AGM. The Trust replied to us saying that they considered having a member of the Board on the Trust would be a 'conflict of interest.' Since there can be no financial interests involved and both entities are bound by the same aims, one can only speculate as to the real reason. I have reiterated Board's view that appointments to the LRT should be accountable to this AGM as they were for many years in the past.

Audio Visual

Last December the Board agreed to update our AV to create a simpler system which could be used by the technically incompetent and also to enable hybrid meetings to take place. Gush did the work in drawing up a spec as to what is needed and he also oversaw much of the technical work that was needed to improve our wi-fi network and to set up a functioning system. We now have much better sound and a much simplified AV system that works. There have been a lot of hiccups and malfunctions along the way and it has been more a complicated process than was originally envisaged. However it is working and we are now in a position to go to the next stage which is to be able to stream or record some of our meetings to make them available to a wider audience. I should like to thank Gush Bhumbra for his hard work.

Religious discrimination in Leicester schools

The Board has done its best to support some parents who, having sent their children to a religious primary school, then found that they were locked into having to send them to a religious secondary school. The outcome was not ideal, but it did garner some national publicity and exposed the hold that the religious authorities have in the curriculum and management of faith schools.

Lecture programme

There is usually a separate item on the AGM agenda to cover the Lecture Programme, however with the loss of Gillian I will do my best to report on the past year's lecture programme.

I have to say that Gillian has managed to give us a hugely varied programme with a wide range of lectures. Her programme (with one exception) ends next

month and the responsibility for the 2023 lecture programme now rests with Helen Everett, who has just arranged the Human Rights lecture for December. Helen will be grateful for any suggestions that you may have for future talks and events.

Thanks

In the course of the year there have been many people who have contributed time and effort to keep the Society going. I have already mentioned Mike, Gush and of course Gillian. John Catt has been a tower of financial strength and we will hear from him shortly, Frank Friedman has managed our presence on Twitter and where would we be without those who have got the tea ready at the end of the lectures – notable Denise, Veronica, Caroline, Helen and Ed.

We are also going to be losing Umesh and Bill who are standing down from the Board. Both of whom during their membership of the Board have provided wise counsel. The Society needs volunteers to keep it going and the Board needs new blood. I hope everyone here can give some consideration as to how they can help. If you would like to put your name forward for election to the Board it is not too late. If you cannot decide today, then if there are still vacancies, it is possible for you to be co-opted.

Leicester Riots

For years we have warned that the growth of Faith Schools in Leicester would foster division and hatred. Unfortunately our predictions have been proved correct. We have also seen riots on the street of Leicester, fuelled by religious rivalry. Communities which have co-existed for decades have now becoming fearful of each other. It has to be said that there are strands within both religions that are fostering these divisions. In many instances they seem to be driven by factors and ideologies which are far removed from Leicester. Whilst I fully understand that people want to remain connected to their roots, the politics of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh should stay in those countries.

On line platforms have promoted a barrage of misinformation about what happened in Leicester to hundreds of thousands of people around the world and those half truths and lies have not helped the local people in Leicester.

We do not want to see Leicester divided like Belfast, we do not want a 'peace wall' running along Green Lane Road dividing so called Hindu areas from Muslim ones. But if we do not tackle the growth in intolerance, that is what could happen.

We have also seen the religious rivalry spill over into local politics. At the height of the Tories unpopularity under Liz Truss, the Conservatives managed to win a Council bye election and double their representation on the City Council. This was because the electors made an emphatic rejection of a

Labour candidate who, rightly or wrongly, was perceived to be a partisan advocate of one religious grouping.

We do not want elections determined, as they were in the 19th century, by religious allegiances. We want voters to make up their minds on the basis of the policies presented to them by the different parties. We should also urge parties not to adopt candidates who are only acceptable to one religious group and that uphold secular values.