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## It has been a busy time and there is much to do

There is much positive news to report. Although we are saddened at the passing of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, we can be thankful that the abortion law was not further liberalised. The prayers of many were answered.

We are delighted to see that Government proposals to return cannabis to Class B status have been approved by Parliament. Weakening the law was a mistake which has damaged countless people.

We are also pleased that a bid by MPs to ban smacking failed. A smacking ban is wrong and opposed by a

clear majority of parents.

But there is also some bad news. We regret that Islington Council has appealed the decision of the employment tribunal in the Lillian Ladele case.

We are also gravely concerned that the Government plans to make sex education in England compulsory – even in primary schools.

The Scottish Government plans to legalise some forms of sexual activity for children as young as 13.

You can read about all these issues, and more, in this newsletter.

## Islington appeals against Ladele ruling

A tribunal has considered an appeal from Islington Council in the case of Lillian Ladele, a Christian registrar who was bullied and threatened with the sack over her beliefs about marriage.

The Employment Appeals Tribunal considered the matter on Wednesday, 10 December. A decision has not yet been reached.

Miss Ladele's legal costs are being financed by The Christian Institute's Legal Defence Fund.

In July an employment tribunal ruled that Miss Ladele had suffered harassment and religious discrimination at the hands of her employer, Islington

Council. The Council denies any wrongdoing and has appealed on all grounds. It believes it handled Miss Ladele's situation in an acceptable way.

Islington faces an uphill task to overturn what many consider to be a sound ruling by the original tribunal.

The Civil Partnership Act requires local councils to provide registrations for same-sex couples but does not require all registrars to do so.

Miss Ladele – who has worked

at Islington Council for many years – had explained her religious belief that marriage is between one man and one woman, and asked for her beliefs to be accommodated.

She offered to swap shifts with other registrars who had no religious objection to facilitating same-sex unions – an arrangement which several other councils have found acceptable.

But Islington refused to allow that arrangement and proceeded to discipline Miss Ladele, labelling her as 'homophobic' and threatening her with dismissal.



# Queen's Speech: the coming Parliamentary year

The Government's legislative programme has been outlined by the Queen in the state opening of Parliament, with a promise to introduce a new Equality Bill.

The Bill will apply to England, Wales and Scotland. It will place a duty on public bodies – like the police and local councils – to promote

homosexual, religious and transsexual equality.

The Bill's progress through Parliament could give some backbench MPs an opportunity to attempt to limit the religious liberty and free speech of Christians and others.



A Policing and Crime Bill was also promised. It aims, in part, to tighten control of lap dancing clubs. The Bill will also crack down on cheap alcohol sales amid concerns that binge drinking is getting out of hand.

The Queen's Speech made reference to a new Coroners

and Justice Bill. The Government says it will include "simplifying and modernising the offence of assisting suicide".

The Bill does not apply in Scotland, but in a separate development Margo MacDonald MSP has lodged a proposal to legalise assisted suicide north of the border.

## Embryos Bill passed, but abortion law is unchanged

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill has completed its passage through Parliament without any change to abortion law.

Attempts by pro-abortion MPs to use the Bill to significantly liberalise the existing law were thwarted at the House of Commons' Report Stage. After further brief consideration by the House of Lords, the Bill became the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 when it received Royal Assent on 13 November.

The House of Commons had already voted on some of the Bill's key ethical issues in May, so abortion law was set to dominate the debate at Commons Report Stage on 22 October.

Pro-abortion MPs had tabled a raft of liberalising amendments including:

- Removing the requirement for two doctors to authorise abortions, effectively creating a regime of abortion on-demand up to 24 weeks.
- Allowing nurses and midwives to perform abortions.

- Allowing abortions to be carried out in GPs' surgeries and family planning clinics.
- Extending the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

However, in the event MPs used up the scheduled time debating other details of the controversial Bill and the abortion amendments failed to reach a vote.

Letters from constituents and the vigorous campaigning of pro-life organisations like The Christian Institute left MPs in no doubt as to the level of public opposition to the abortion proposals.

Christians' prayers were answered when the Government, already facing sustained political pressure due to the financial crisis, sidestepped further potential controversy by limiting the Report Stage debate to just one day and imposing a motion which forced abortion amendments to the back of the 'queue' for consideration.

Attitudes to abortion within the House of Commons became clear in May when MPs rejected a



series of opportunities to reduce the upper gestational time limit for abortion. They also voted to permit the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos for research, and so-called 'saviour siblings', as well as removing a previous legal requirement to consider an IVF child's need for a father. Had there been opportunity to vote on the pro-abortion amendments in October it seems likely some at least would have passed.

After the debate one leading pro-abortion MP lamented that pro-lifers had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. We praise God for this remarkable deliverance.

## Cannabis returns to tougher classification

The law on cannabis will be strengthened after Parliament voted to support Government plans to upgrade the drug from Class C to Class B.

The reclassification will take effect on 26 January 2009, reversing former Home Secretary David Blunkett's controversial downgrading in 2004. It means the maximum jail sentence for possession will be five years.

The U-turn was announced earlier this year by current Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, who pointed to the vast evidence of the drug's harmful effects.

During the Lords debate, former Home Secretary Lord Waddington supported the Government's decision but pointed out that ministers had been reckless by weakening the law in the first place.

In 2002 The Christian Institute published a booklet which highlighted key evidence against 15 popular arguments for downgrading cannabis to Class C, the same category as sleeping pills. Much of that evidence is now widely accepted.

## Compulsory sex education for primary school children

The Government has pledged to make sex lessons compulsory in primary and secondary schools in England.

It is also reconsidering parents' right to withdraw their children from such lessons. The Government has said it will consult before new guidance, which will specify which topics are to be covered with each age group, is produced.

At present, primary schools are not required to provide sex and relationships education. The science national curriculum for primary schools covers basic biological facts such as life cycles.

Current guidance states that where sex education is provided it must teach about the importance of marriage and should not promote any particular sexual orientation.

However, inclusiveness of sexuality has been identified as a key principle for the new guidance, while the Government has failed to mention marriage.

Currently parents can contribute to developing their school's sex education policy



'Daddy's Roommate' is a book recommended by the Government for primary schools.

and be informed about lesson content. Parents should make the most of this freedom, and make active enquiries into which resources are being used with their children.

The Christian Institute website ([christian.org.uk](http://christian.org.uk)) contains information about some commonly used materials, the content of which many parents would consider highly inappropriate for use with their children.

## MPs bid for smacking ban fails

An attempt to ban parental smacking in England and Wales was foiled in October by a lack of Parliamentary time.

The anti-smacking amendment was tabled to the Children and Young Persons Bill but debate was restricted and the amendment was not reached.

Government research carried out in 2007 found that 70 per cent of parents oppose an

outright smacking ban. Children's Secretary Ed Balls said in September that the Government would not support the move. He said it would be difficult to police and "the wrong thing to do for children".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Children and Young People Now*, 24 September 2008, see <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/ByDiscipline/Social-Care/848285/Labour-Party-Conference-MPs-oppose-smacking-ban/as> at 4 December 2008

# Visit [christian.org.uk](http://christian.org.uk) regularly for the latest news

Visiting our website ([christian.org.uk](http://christian.org.uk)) regularly is the best way to keep informed about the issues the Institute is involved in.

The site is updated as news breaks throughout the working day on topics like religious liberty, family values and the sanctity of life.



Our articles also include links to resources which help people understand the Christian reasons for the positions we take.

Every Friday, we send an email with the week's headlines – so you get a snapshot of what's happening on the issues you care about. You can click on a headline for the full article.

If you have an email address and want to receive this weekly news alert, you can subscribe via our site or send an email to:

[info@christian.org.uk](mailto:info@christian.org.uk)

Our site has doubled its audience since the start of the year. It is now read by over 30,000 unique readers each month – and that number is growing.

The site contains much more than news. Our resources section can offer you handy guides on subjects like religious liberty in the workplace. Theological publications are also available, together with an archive of over 100 audio recordings of Christian teaching.

Bookmark our site ([christian.org.uk](http://christian.org.uk)) in your web browser and visit us regularly.

## Plans to weaken the age of consent law in Scotland

The Scottish Government is proposing to liberalise the age of consent for young people. If passed the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Bill would legalise many underage sexual activities. Oral sex between children aged 13 to 15 would be legalised although full sexual intercourse between under-16s would still be criminal.

The Bill also includes a so-called 'proximity of age defence'. This would allow a young person aged 16 or over to engage in sexual activity with a child under 16 where there is no more than two years between them.

Sexual activities other than intercourse carry many risks. A whole range of infections such as herpes, syphilis, HIV and gonorrhoea, can be spread through oral sex.<sup>1</sup> Rates of acute STIs diagnosed at Scottish genitourinary clinics have more

than doubled since 1996.<sup>2</sup> Legalising oral sex will encourage children and young people to further underestimate the risks of these behaviours.

The Scottish Law Commission, supported by the Children's Commissioner, Kathleen Marshall, originally proposed legalising all sexual activity between 13 and 15-year-olds. Evidence against the suggestion was provided by The Christian Institute and other organisations. The Scottish Government rejected the Commission's proposal, replacing it with the current plans.

<sup>1</sup> HIV/AIDS Update: What You Should Know about Oral Sex, CDC, December 2000

<sup>2</sup> Statistical Publication Notice, *Genitourinary Medicine Statistics, year ending December 2007*, ISD Scotland, 29 July 2008, see <http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/5709.html> as at 04 December 2008



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