Defending Christian freedoms

Over the summer we have continued to stand against attempts to erode the rights of Christians in the public arena. Our Legal Defence Fund (LDF) maintains a vital role defending religious liberty in the UK. The LDF has been assisting Ashers Baking Company in Northern Ireland which has been threatened with legal action following the owners’ refusal to compromise their religious beliefs.

We now face having to take legal action against the UK Government over their plans to compel English schools to actively promote political correctness under the banner of ‘fundamental British values’.

We have news of how the Government is pressing on with GM babies in defiance of responses to its consultation.

Looking ahead, there is the prospect of momentum building to introduce assisted suicide, despite opposition in the House of Lords.

Meanwhile, we prayerfully await the results of our legal challenge to the Named Person plans in Scotland.

Christian bakers face court over gay marriage campaign cake

A Christian-run bakery in Northern Ireland is still under threat of legal action after declining to produce a pro-gay marriage campaign cake.

The McArthur family, who own Ashers Baking Company, said they could not fulfil the order because of their conviction that marriage is between a man and a woman.

The bakery’s case, supported through our Legal Defence Fund, demonstrates the need for the law to reasonably accommodate family-run businesses with firmly-held beliefs.

Institute Director Colin Hart said: “No one should be forced to use their creative skills to promote a cause which goes against their conscience. Imbalanced equality laws are making it increasingly hard for people, especially Christians.”

“The Government must take urgent action to address this injustice by bringing in legislation that would introduce reasonable accommodation”.

In May, a volunteer LGBT activist asked for a cake to be decorated with the slogan “Support Gay Marriage” and a logo of his campaign group.

When the order came through to the firm’s head office, the directors and manager Daniel McArthur decided to decline the request on conscience grounds and offered a full refund.

The taxpayer-funded Equality Commission later sent a letter claiming that the company had acted unlawfully.
Since the McArthurs’ story broke in July, it has been reported as far afield as the US and New Zealand. Newspaper columnists have backed the bakery and a survey of over 2,000 people found that most believed the Christians had been treated unfairly.

Columnist Amanda Platell said that “too often today Christians are soft targets, denied the ‘tolerance’ that in our increasingly politically-correct age is so slavishly offered to minority groups”.

Janet Street-Porter questioned whether “aggressively targeting Christians will ultimately backfire on the gay community”.

And Ann Widdecombe commented: “Surely it is an elementary feature of true democracy that nobody should be obliged by law to affirm that which he or she does not believe.”

A poll commissioned by The Christian Institute found that 60 per cent of British adults agree it was “disproportionately heavy-handed” for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to seek to take the bakery to court. It also showed that most people agree there should be protection in law so that people are not forced to provide goods or services that violate their sincerely-held beliefs.

Over half think David Cameron was wrong when he reassured the public that same-sex marriage would not cause discrimination against supporters of traditional marriage.


**Support rolls in for Ashers Baking Co**

**B&B judge calls for ‘conscience clause’ rethink**

Baroness Hale has said the law needs to work out “how far it should allow for a ‘conscience clause’” for service providers or employees.

The Supreme Court judge called for a rethink six months after rejecting an appeal by Christian B&B owners Peter and Hazelmary Bull who had been successfully sued over their double bed policy.

**Peers push to introduce sweeping parenting law**

Supporters of a broad parenting law are expected to try to hijack the Government’s modernisation of child cruelty legislation in the House of Lords this autumn.

Peers considered the proposals in the Serious Crime Bill in July, and several called for more wide-ranging and imprecise provisions that could affect the right of parents to teach their children biblical principles.

The Government has said it believes its proposed clarification of the law is all that is necessary. Unless ministers change their minds, Peers are likely to push for votes to extend the scope of the law to criminalise harm to a child’s “physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development”.
Rushed and flawed school plans prompt legal challenge

The Christian Institute has threatened the Government with legal action over regulations compelling schools in England to “actively promote” the rights defined in the Equality Act 2010.

Schools are already required not to discriminate, but these badly written plans now open the door to schools being sued over the content of their curriculum. Parents can also be challenged if they disagree with the Government-imposed values.

The invasive new powers, which would be applied to more than 6,000 independent schools, free schools and academies, could result in removing gender specific terms such as ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ from the curriculum, and the downgrading of religious festivals.

Institute Director Colin Hart said the new standards threaten to “undermine the ethos of independent schools”.

Head teachers have also raised concerns, describing the plans as a “knee-jerk response” to the recent ‘Trojan Horse’ scandal in Birmingham.

Lawyers acting for The Christian Institute wrote to the Department for Education in August to warn that we would launch a judicial review unless the six-week consultation period was extended.

Peers speak out against assisted suicide Bill in the House of Lords

Dozens of Peers spoke out against Lord Falconer’s Assisted Dying Bill when it was discussed for the first time in the House of Lords in July.

Disabled Peer Baroness Campbell of Surbiton described the Bill as “a runaway train” that “frightens” her.

Several members of the Lords referred to the huge amount of correspondence they had received about the issue, with some reading from letters opposed to assisted suicide during the Second Reading debate.

Speaking in the House of Lords debate, Baroness Campbell described the Bill as “a runaway train”.

The Bill passed to its next stage in the Lords without a vote. It is not likely to become law, but may be revisited in the next Parliament.

Proposals to allow three-parent babies will be pushed forward, despite 62 per cent of consultation responses being opposed, the Government announced in July.

Dr David King, director of Human Genetics Alert, criticised the Government’s actions saying: “A precautionary approach would demand much more evidence and the government would wait for that rather than rushing legislation through.”

Further criticism followed the Department of Health’s announcement that it was adopting a “working definition” of genetic modification that excludes the controversial techniques being used.

Several prominent scientists, including fertility expert Professor Lord Robert Winston, accused the Government of misleading the public over the GM baby plans. Lord Winston said: “Of course mitochondrial transfer is genetic modification and this modification is handed down the generations. It is totally wrong to compare it with a blood transfusion”.

Both Houses of Parliament must pass regulations to implement the proposals.

A separate debate has been scheduled in the House of Commons for 1 September.
Legal challenge launched to stop Named Person scheme

The Christian Institute, alongside concerned groups and parents, has launched a judicial review against plans to appoint a state ‘Named Person’ for every child in Scotland.

The initiative will see a state guardian assigned to every child between birth and 18-years-old. They will be able to share information with a wide range of public authorities and may intervene without parental consent.

Speaking out against the plans, Institute Director Colin Hart said: “This marks the beginning of a landmark case which has implications for every family in Scotland.”

“We are not prepared to stand by and watch as the roles of parents and their rights to a family life are diminished and trampled over by an authoritarian big brother initiative designed to make its presence felt in every living room in the land”.

“We hope the court will rule in our favour when the arguments are debated in detail and it is clearly shown the extent to which European rules are being breached by this proposal”, he concluded.

In front of the national media, legal papers were lodged in July at Scotland’s supreme civil court by The Christian Institute, Christian charity CARE, Tymes (The Young ME Sufferers) Trust, and the Family Education Trust.

PM criticised for gay rights focus as Christians flee persecution

The Christian Institute has criticised David Cameron for prioritising international homosexual rights while doing little about Christian persecution abroad.

The Prime Minister praised same-sex marriage in an online video, saying Britain should “encourage the rest of our world to take our lead”. But his upbeat message was released on the same day the BBC reported that 300,000 of Iraq’s Christians had fled for their lives from Islamist militants.

Local Conservative Party chiefs also warned Mr Cameron that introducing gay marriage is causing a decline in Tory membership. Annual reports for some local associations showed an average drop of ten per cent across constituencies in 2013. At least 15 associations attributed the fall to gay marriage or unhappiness with national decisions.

Faith is a “virus”, claims Tory Peer

Belief in God is a “virus”, and evangelical Christianity one of the more “virulent infections” according to Conservative Peer and humanist Matt Ridley. In an attack on faith schools, he said “secular, free-thinking” should be adopted to “combat the rise of radical Islam and radical Christianity”.

Concerned parent Rhianwen McIntosh helped to lodge legal papers against ‘Named Person’ plans.