

## **Farewell letter**

Today I am resigning as Secretary and a member of the Lawyers' Secular Society, with immediate effect. As I mentioned to you on 31 July and 9 August, I feel now is the right time for me to leave the LSS, for three reasons.

Firstly, and most significantly, the security consequences of being one of only three people in this country publicly associated with the Sharia Watch UK / *Vive Charlie* Mohammed cartoon exhibition have been far too severe for my own personal threshold. It has been a thoroughly unpleasant and scary experience, and one I hope I can forget in the shortest possible timeframe by leaving the LSS immediately.

Secondly, I need to focus on my commitments away from secularism. Like all of you, I have done all my LSS activities in my spare time. Unfortunately, I no longer have any spare time.

And thirdly, after almost three years leading the LSS I believe now is the right time for fresh leadership and fresh ideas.

I have already given you the details of the LSS member who has very kindly offered to serve as a point of contact for you while the LSS now takes as long as it needs to consider its future direction.

After the terrible events only this year in [Paris](#), [Copenhagen](#) and [Texas](#), we should be proud that the LSS was the only secularist organisation to publicly support this exhibition and to be publicly associated with it, even though [it was eventually cancelled for security reasons](#). My only regret is that after the LSS membership had voted to send a speaker to this exhibition we were ultimately unable to do so. I'm so sorry I had to pull out of speaking for personal reasons.

Without free speech we are not free, and the life of a slave is not an appealing one. If freedom dies in the free world there is nowhere to go. The LSS's public support of the cartoon exhibition and our willingness to swim against a very strong current demonstrated just how seriously we take free speech, and just how seriously we take secularism. There were [good reasons for our decision](#).

We were not naïve. We knew our decision would not be popular but we made an honest and democratic decision in that knowledge. That is something to be proud of, not ashamed. We prioritised the challenging of murderous blasphemous codes – something that goes to the very heart of secularism – above absolutely everything else, including criticism we knew we would receive on Twitter and the blogosphere. Others were more preoccupied with criticising the LSS than challenging those blasphemy codes. We had our priorities and our detractors had theirs.

Serving as LSS Secretary for just less than three years has been an extraordinary privilege. Lawyers love lists, so here are my highlights:

- Re-launching the LSS in October 2012 after it had lapsed, and quadrupling the membership
- Leading the LSS and being its public face, through the good times and the bad

- Establishing the LSS on the secularism scene and beyond, and raising our public profile with press coverage, media activity, speaking engagements and campaign victories
- We were the first organisation to [raise the alarm at the Law Society's decision to issue formal guidance on sharia](#); we were the first organisation to [challenge them publicly](#); and of course they finally [withdrew their guidance](#) and issued a clear and unequivocal [public apology](#)
- We were also the first organisation to report that [the Solicitors Regulation Authority had endorsed the Law Society's guidance](#); we were the first organisation to [challenge the SRA publicly](#); and the SRA [withdrew their endorsement](#) and [acknowledged our concerns](#)
- We were the only group of lawyers (so far as we are aware) to challenge the SRA or the Law Society on the sharia guidance, and certainly publicly. This is a sobering fact
- Through my efforts, my MP Charles Walker of the Conservative Party was the only parliamentarian to question the Law Society's guidance in Parliament ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#))
- Appearing on BBC's *The Big Questions* in January 2014 when an image of Mohammed was shown on British television for the very first time, and [unequivocally supporting co-panellist Maajid Nawaz](#) when he received death threats and calls to stand down as a parliamentary candidate for tweeting one of the images. We were proud to help "spread the risk" for Maajid
- [Unequivocally supporting the LSE students Chris Moos and Abhishek Phadnis](#) over their appalling treatment by LSE for wearing "Jesus and Mo" t-shirts at their Freshers Fair; [receiving some wonderful recognition from them](#) for our unbending support of their free expression rights in their hour of need (Abhishek was even kind enough to describe me as ["probably our most loyal and tireless ally"](#) (4m18sec); and seeing them eventually obtain a ["half-apology" from LSE](#). Again, we were proud to help spread the risk for Chris and Abhishek
- Playing our part in the campaign that saw [Universities UK withdraw their guidance allowing gender segregation on campus](#), which culminated in the Equalities and Human Rights Commission stating [their view that gender segregation on campus was unlawful](#)
- [Speaking in the House of Lords](#) at the launch of *Sharia Watch UK* alongside my brave friend Anne Marie Waters and the amazing Baroness Cox, and contributing to SWUK's launch report ["Sharia Law: Britain's Blind Spot"](#), which was sent to all parliamentarians in the UK
- Establishing political neutrality as a core principle of secularism, something the National Secular Society subsequently stated as their policy at their 2014 AGM when they said they would now treat Ukip like any other political party by assessing the merits and demerits of its policies insofar as they related to secularism. They have since expressed that neutrality publicly ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). I don't believe the NSS would have taken their position had it not been for the LSS. (Interestingly, the NSS subsequently even wrote about [demographics, birth rates and the "free movement of people" \(a polite term for immigration\) in the context of Islam](#). I shudder to think what names the LSS would have been called if we had done such a blog post, but I have learnt that secularists can be very selective in their outrage, especially when they need funding.) I believe political neutrality – not just in words and tweets but

also in visible deeds such as the sharing of platforms – will become increasingly vital if secularism is to gain the firmest possible traction and flourish as a movement that actually interests let alone excites the public, rather than remain perceived as an aloof *Mastermind* contestant's specialist subject or an eccentric hobby for political anoraks. I am very proud the LSS educated our fellow secularists on the importance of political neutrality even though this came at some cost to us: with hindsight I must conclude that the LSS's standing within the secularism movement was irreversibly damaged the second we shared a platform with a member of Ukip. Perhaps secularists might take some time to reflect on that and wonder whether such immaturity represents a sustainable approach for the secularism movement

- Applying rigorous lawyerly independence and lawyerly precision to guard against “mission creep” or the “Christmas Tree effect”, whereby secularists often pin their favourite political decorations on to secularism – be it legal aid; challenging austerity; blaming Islamic State on “neo-conservatism”; the fanatical quest for a borderless world; and lazy, *Mock the Week*-style Tory-bashing, Ukip-bashing, *Daily Mail*-bashing or whatever else is fashionable and gets a few easy laughs. This makes the public even more confused about secularism. Rather than separate what is and is not secularism the public understandably just zones out of trying to understand it altogether. If secularists can't articulate secularism we can hardly get snobby or angry when outsiders look at us with blank faces every time we say the word
- Watching in admiration from the sidelines as the dogged yet mild-mannered campaigning of LSS stalwarts Peter Fisher MBE and John Butcher blew open the heavily reinforced doors of the annual judges' church service to the press for the first time
- Successfully challenging formal Companies House regulations concerning company names, and in the process helping to challenge the perceived authority of the Muslim Council of Britain, by formally registering as a company name the “*Council of ex-Muslims of Britain*”. Companies House had previously refused to register this name and so that organisation had been forced up to that point to have as its registered name the confusing and less powerful “*Committee of ex-Muslims in Britain*”
- Successfully challenging PayPal so that they restored the Council of ex-Muslims' account and returned money they were refusing to release, enabling that important organisation to carry on doing its vital work
- Connecting individual LSS members to the public and to other campaigning groups so that LSS members could provide legal advice in their personal capacity on secularism issues, sometimes on highly sensitive matters
- Establishing a no-frills but good quality website with regular original content and popular pieces
- And last but certainly not least, meeting so many wonderful LSS members – young and old; law student and QC; trainee, sole practitioner and big-shot corporate partner; male and female; religious and non-religious; gay and straight; left-wing, right-wing and no wing – who are fiercely committed to secularism

Aside from our external successes such as the Law Society campaign, we have also achieved what is very rare for any campaigners: we have moved the debate onwards within our own movement rather than remain comatose in an echo-chamber, too petrified to think differently.

We have successfully challenged some of the damaging group-think and herd mentality within our movement, which is something that affects campaigners of all stripes – even those within the secularism movement who arrogantly assume they're immune from it by calling themselves "freethinkers" or "skeptics" or "rationalists", with no sense of irony, and who stress the need for calm, evidence-based reasoning, again without irony.

You should all be very proud of our accomplishments over the last few years. They are reasonable accomplishments for a small voluntary organisation with zero staff, zero money and, at times, virtually zero allies.

I will not bad-mouth the LSS or LSS members, and any discussions I might ever have in the public domain about secularism will only ever be calm and well-reasoned. I very much hope this spirit might be reciprocated. Having received unpleasant public smears from Maryam Namazie in the past – simply for the crime of sharing a platform with a member of Ukip and despite giving so much of my time and energy to her projects – I do not wish to subject others to the same humiliating treatment or to receive further nasty attacks now from additional battlefronts.

Thank you so much for making the last few years such an enjoyable ride, albeit occasionally a white-knuckle one. The LSS has moved on leaps and bounds. I have learnt so much about secularism, about politics and activism generally, and, most unexpectedly and a little selfishly, I have also learnt a good deal about myself. I had never been involved in any kind of campaigning before and nor have I had any kind of leadership role in my legal career, so I have basically been making everything up as I have gone along. I just hope this hasn't been glaringly obvious to you and that overall you have been reasonably satisfied with my leadership, give or take the odd minor quibble that is inevitable from working with other human beings. For what it's worth, my assessment is that the hardest thing about leadership is having nobody to blame. Or perhaps that's just my inexperience showing.

In case you're wondering: I have no immediate plans to get involved in other campaigning projects, be that in the field of secularism or otherwise.

If you're ever thinking of getting in touch for a large glass of something cold and beer-flavoured, please work on the assumption that my answer won't be no – especially if you're buying.

I am so grateful for every single second any of you has ever given to the LSS. Even if you consider your own personal contribution to the LSS to have been small, it doesn't matter. It is very true what they say: even the small things mean so much.

That's it. I wish you all the very best for the future. Long live secularism and long live the Lawyers' Secular Society.



Charlie Klendjian  
LSS Secretary and LSS member, Oct 2012 to Aug 2015