

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SACREs MEETING
12th May 2010 at BMA House**

Keynote Address by Clare Short

Title: Religion, Politics and Community: SACREs capacity to engage

Clare Short started by suggesting we live in “interesting times” which is, apparently, an old Chinese curse! She suggested that we are in a time of a new beginning and that she was in favour of a hung parliament. However, power is concentrated and driven by 24 hour media. She felt that the current sense of disillusionment is going to change in this new era.

She suggested that SACREs are a model of consensus except that they reach better decisions! She believed that secularisation/bureaucracy/heavyweight management has squashed creativity at the coal face of education. She felt that SACREs have pioneered (and should be the proof of) religious cohesion where the work of RE teaching has “massively” shifted our communities. She believed that RE teaching had taken Britain by the hand and led the country into a more open understanding community. She drew the conference’s attention to the NASACRE handbook, page 18, which invites children to consider the given issues outlined and suggested that this task was massive (did she mean impossible) and went on to suggest we live in a different world. She quoted Richard Layard (The Landmark Report for the Children’s Society 2009) which suggests that increased income growth does increase happiness – but only up to a point. After that it has no effect and, whilst we are rich beyond belief, as a society we are not happy. In the report “The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone” Wilkinson & Pickett suggest that inequality within society is a large issue across OECD countries and that GB is high up on the list of countries with inequality (second only to USA). We live in a hedonistic society whereby the means of getting to the top are different, hopefully, from the means set out in good RE.

In seeking the “meaning of life” she felt there was no good product to that task without love and care. We live in a global community and live with massive threats such as global warming and increased fuel and food prices. She believed that this can only lead to increased human displacement where Britain, for example, spends £2 billion a year badly treating immigrants. She quoted the Geneva Convention that ascertains that anyone fleeing for religious reasons should be accepted in the first country they come to. She expressed her concern that we allow criminal gangs to run our immigration policies so, therefore, all this is going to generate mass immigration with a future that either generates good solutions or nasty political segregation.

She also went on to express her concern that OECD wealth is not sustainable since there are insufficient basic resources such as oil and food. Although we have technology and capacity to respond on our own, segregation is inevitable, she warns, if our society can live on “sufficient” and not on “more”. She felt that the qualities set out in NASACREs mission for RE need to be nurtured with big questions of faith and belief.

She also believes that global co-operation is an essential requirement and it is not enough to have “smaller aims”. She felt that global realities are not wise in the who and/or how they support, certainly regimes. She quoted the Middle East and the thought that issues in Gaza are driving a bigger hatred. She noted that the BNP’s increased percentage of the vote was driven by Muslim rhetoric.

So she wonders if it is too big a task to challenge the inequalities that governments sustain.

She noted that the language of religion is unquestioningly the platform for fundamentalists of all backgrounds and she was concerned at the dividing lines that exist around the identity that religion demarcates. If the principles of religious education is seen as “good”, then we need to refine our curriculum to explore the dangers of segregation. She worried that in an age or season of cutbacks, unsavoury groups could flourish as unfair policies are implemented.

She concluded by saying that people are looking for something finer than the current hedonistic mode. However, SACREs can be a force for good and are needed more now than before. However, the job is harder than before if we are to “take the next generation by the hand”.