

NEWS RELEASE

ENGLISH PEN URGES SUPPORT FOR AMENDMENTS TO PRESERVE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

October 20, 2005: English PEN, the writers' organisation, urges Parliament to support the amendments to the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill tabled by Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Lord Hunt of Wirral, Lord Plant of Highfield and Lord Carey of Clifton. Amongst these is the important PEN AMENDMENT which safeguards the vital democratic right to free expression.

Many writers, actors, comedians, as well as the Society of Authors, the Writers Guild, and Index on Censorship, have been concerned that the new Bill will limit freedom of expression. English PEN believes these important all-party amendments will preserve that freedom. It also believes that the PEN Amendment should have the support of the Government, since the Home Secretary has already said he is committed to preserving freedom of expression. On December 7, 2004, the Home Secretary said of the Bill:

"The Government are committed to the preservation of the right to legitimate freedom of speech and freedom of religion. This includes the right to engage in free and vigorous debate about religion, including the right to criticise religious beliefs and practices."

The PEN Amendment merely enshrines in law what the Government says it also wants.

Lisa Appignanesi, Chair of PEN'S No Offence campaign, said: "Our concern about the Bill was the threat to freedom of expression; our confusion was always that the Government said it, too, wanted to preserve freedom of expression.. The PEN Amendment is a sensible way of allaying widespread concern and clearing up the Government's confusion. As such, I am confident it will collect support from all sides of the House and become a central part of the Bill, together with the other important Lester -Hunt-Plant-Carey amendments."

The tablers of the amendments say: 'We greatly hope that the Government will accept our amendments as striking a fair balance between their aims in introducing this Bill and the need to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of equality, free expression and the prevention of serious disorder and crime.'

The PEN Amendment for the **Protection of freedom of expression** reads as follows:

Nothing in the Racial or Religious Hatred Bill
'shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system.'

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