

Dear xxxx,

Religious Hatred Bill

As the Lords debate on the Religious Hatred Bill approaches, we urge you to take into account the objections of Britain's writers. The English Branch of PEN, the world association of writers, has been campaigning against the bill both in its earlier and present form since last year. We have now joined with all the other groupings of writers in Britain – the Society of Authors and the Writers Guild – as well as Index on Censorship in what is an ever mounting chorus of protest against the criminalization of Religious Hatred.

Although we understand the sensitivities of Muslims in these difficult times, we feel that the present bill is far too broadly drawn and will only itself serve to incite the faith communities against each other.

It will also and inevitably increase tension in our society as a whole as the police and legal advisors are kept busy with preparing cases which may indeed never come to trial – under the present Attorney General; these however, will garner publicity and thus enflame the public imagination. There will also be what opposition politicians have called 'a chilling factor' in our creative industries, so crucial to Britain's status in the world and its economic success. 'Chill' is simply censorship by other means. If a publisher, production house, theatre or comedy venue has to have recourse to lawyers every time a religious term is used which might offend the sensitive, it is clear to all of us who know the arts sector that the book or play will simply not be put on in its present form. Knowing this, many writers will inevitably self-censor. The open society for which we have so long battled will be eroded.

Since the 7th of July, many Muslims have attempted to disaffiliate themselves from the more authoritarian and mostly self-appointed representatives of their faith. We hope the House of Lords will stand up for them in defending the right to express views which may be critical of some of the excesses of faith. A significant proportion of British writers are themselves of Muslim origin and have been much concerned that the government, in its haste to show its good intentions, will in fact pave the road to a society no one wants. In countries like Australia where religious hatred legislation has been enacted, the very groups who called for it would now wish it repealed. Then, too, we are all aware that in no country where free expression is curtailed is there, in fact, the freedom for a plurality of religions to co-exist.

May we call on you in the House of Lords, that current bastion of our hard-won liberties, to speak against this bill? There is a good amendment to the Public Order Act – the Lester Amendment – which will protect Muslims from hatred which pretends to be religious when it is in fact aimed at their colour. Alternately we would need an amendment that robustly defends our

freedom of expression. If our legislators are wise, these are the paths we urge you to follow on 11 October.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Appignanesi , Deputy President, English PEN, Chair, Free Expression is No Offence campaign

Alastair Niven, OBE, President, English PEN

Mark LeFanu, Director, Society of Authors

Lydia Rivlin, Writer's Guild, Head of Anti-Censorship Campaign

Monica Ali Free Expression is No Offence Steering Group

Hanif Kureishi

Salman Rushdie

Julian Evans

Gillian Slovo