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Birmingham University Lights Up Red For the Persecuted

by Professor Francis Davis

Published in *The Catholic Times* on December 3, 2016.

Lord Alton renewed his leadership of the national community working to mitigate abuses on the grounds of freedom and belief this week. It was wonderful to see his old friends Baroness Patricia Scotland (Commonwealth Secretary General), and Archbishop Justin Welby on board to support the initiative and significant swathes of the English North West rise up. The idea behind 'Red Wednesday' was to persuade a number of iconic buildings to light up red in solidarity with the persecuted. And what was initiated by Alton as a trustee of Aid to the Church In Need rolled out – as campaigns will do – in such a manner that it became owned by a diverse network of allies who shared a fundamental solidarity. Parliament lit up red to name its rejection of hate crimes, Bolton Town Hall and various synagogues were on board and I was delighted to work with Pro Vice Chancellor Professor Michael Whitby to facilitate the lighting up of the Old Joe Clock at the University of Birmingham, the Catholic City Centre parish in Southampton (who used banners) and Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral. Indeed even within what outsiders often see as a unitary Catholicism 'red Wednesdays' supporters included works of the British Jesuits such as Stonyhurst College and the increasingly neo-traditionalist Blackfriars Hall at Oxford University as well as mainstream ecumenical collaborations such as that at St Catherine's Church in Lowton near Wigan. Notably the Prince of Wales welcomed a delegation from Aid to the Church In Need – the Prince who has previously strongly supported religious freedom.

The cause of religious freedom was well established in the face of European Communism before 1989. The mixed messages emerging from mainland China, Cuba on Castro's death and North Korea though – along with the cack handed way that some in the UK parliamentarians discount persecution of 'dalits' as not being a religious freedom question – suggests however that it may have been returned to a marginal concern. That is to say that politically it is an 'early stage' cause like the environmental movement once was. As such a broad based public engagement such as 'red Wednesday' is among the early signs of the movement moving out of the realm of private meetings and elite networks of crackpots and the desperate political fellow travellers of those without a platform and towards the mainstream through which environmentalism had to pass. The Green movement started only with communes and the hard-core, in the hands of the pioneering Des Wilson and Friends of the Earth landed lead fee petrol as a systemic environmental change, and today not only has its own party (actually co-led by a protégé of Alton's) but is core business in every party.

There are conceivably lessons here for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief in parliament. The Group has no former senior ministers in its membership. Many parliamentarians have openly moved away because of its lack of a political focus, tendency to be erratic and they have also openly articulated concerns about governance. The Archbishop of Canterbury has withdrawn, Muslim groups have hardly engaged, and the Jewish community is represented by the excellent but tiny Renee Cassin human rights organisation in its networks rather than by the larger communal charities that attract the bulk of Jewish philanthropy. Ironically, while most of the leadership of the group is evangelical it does not yet have a single one of the very largest evangelical organisations named as among the group's coalition of support.

Consequently, while Alton's coalition is broader – and getting broader and deeper still – that journey has not yet begun for the All Party Group. Meanwhile, a raft of other parliamentarians is getting on with freedom of religion and belief campaigns to protect religious minorities in Pakistan, Burma, and across the planet. One can only be impressed by the activities of the All Party Group on anti-Semitism, the reach of the anti-Islamophobia charity *Tell Mama*, and a variety of foreign affairs specialists not necessarily for the positions they take but for quality and multiplicity of their political strategies. The days of gathering those already on board, having a seminar, doing a chat, being in relationship with all those that might ally oneself with an action are over for the pressures on religious freedom are too great for it to remain homespun and within the purview of single offices. These other groups point towards religious freedom working towards the mainstream again, towards the mainstream that the environmentalists have already secured for freedom of belief is as generic a human need and right as the absence of environmental degradation. And the tipping point for the environment was not even necessarily that any elected representatives agreed with the green position but more importantly that it had become politically difficult – even impossible – to do so. Many are the green voting records of parliamentarians who are not that green just as in the future one expects many will have to be the number of pro-religious freedom voting records of a good number who have ambiguous feelings as to whether total freedom of belief is always judicious for social harmony.

The baton Lord Alton has raised needs now to be seized by new generations of activists as part of a key portfolio of political interests. Large NGO's such as the global Aid to the Church In Need must collaborate with broader and broader civic coalitions.

But for now we should simply be thankful that Lord Alton has begun to set a higher bar – or to return it now to the level which we would have expected in the face of the Shoah, Soviet persecutions, the evil of apartheid and the genocides in Armenia, Darfur, Bosnia, Cambodia and so many more. Will your work or church or club be lighting up next 'Red Wednesday'? I hope so.