

To whom it may concern,

The Natural Death Centre is recognised and praised by The Department of Health, local authorities and organisations dealing with the bereaved for its work in challenging the taboos around death and dying, opening up the way for environmentally friendly funerals, green coffins, natural burial grounds, empowerment of the bereaved and ceremonies centered around the individual. The NDC is a recognised driver of change in both the funeral industry and British society at large.

The NDC offers an independent funeral advice service, and receives over two and a half thousand telephone calls a year to our helpline from the British public requesting advice on all matters relating to death, dying and funerals.

We are uniquely placed to gauge the mood of the public on matters such as the one that faces the court today, and we find them far from thinking this idea “abhorrent”. On the contrary; we are asked whether it is legal and possible at least once a week. As a funeral director myself, the most common response from people on hearing what I do is for them to say they would like a “Viking” funeral. Two families have genuinely requested this of me.

We fully support the Anglo-Asian Society’s attempts to re-legalise outdoor funeral pyres which we believe would bring significant rewards, environmentally, socially and spiritually.

It is a mistake to see this legal challenge as coming from a minority group seeking a religious right that is alien to us, it is actually part of a wider demand for social change and as the recent excavations at Stonehenge are revealing, a part of our own indigenous cultural heritage. Rituals involving fire for purification, celebration and seasonal marking abound all over this country. The revived Beltane celebrations in Edinburgh are attended by over 12 thousand people. Up Helly Aa, the Viking fire festival in Lerwick in Shetland is the largest such ritual in Europe. The town of Lewes in Sussex has retained an extraordinary and enviable continuation of culture and identity based entirely around the bonfire celebrations of November The 5th, and let us not forget the public outdoor burning of the druid Dr Price in front of a crowd of twenty thousand, whose challenge was influential in legalising cremation in the first place.

This challenge by Davender Ghai and The Anglo-Asian Friendship society was inevitable, but the fact that it was brought by a British Hindu is not; it could have come from any corner of the country, and any part of our society.

This is because we are not alone in believing that the traditional British funeral of the past thirty years has become unfulfilling. Unsure of its purpose or meaning, styled with faux Victoriana and filled with increasingly comfortless platitudes it has created an emotional distance that has left people feeling an audience instead of a congregation.

This collective losing of our way led to the birth of the natural death movement, the need to return to the authentic, to leave behind the false comfort of artificiality and to involve ourselves in facing the reality of death as much as our grandparents and every generation before them had been.

More and more people in this country are reclaiming the experience from professionals, choosing to die at home or participating in the practicalities of a funeral such as carrying the coffin, filling in the grave, creating and delivering the ceremony themselves.

This is not a secular response, but a social one, and the message is powerful and clear; what we had will not do anymore.

The decline in the influence of religious institutions aside, much of this dissatisfaction can be traced to the industrially grim style of our crematoriums, yet an astonishing seventy two

percent of us still end up in one. The service they offer is often perfunctory, the designing despondent and bland, and the reduction of a person's life to twenty minutes climaxing with a ritual farewell that has all the gravitas of the Generation Game soundtracked by piped music is a collective shame on us all.

Whatever your beliefs about an afterlife, these places are crossing points, symbolic thresholds, and deserve to be created and managed with awe. They are or should be places where we confront the mystery of death, instead of which we have a poor, unconvincing substitute for a genuine ritual space.

This campaign is showing us just how different it could be for both the religious and the non-religious, with such a slight but profound change of attitude.

The practicalities are simple. New build crematoria, of which several have recently been granted planning permission could incorporate a discretely located area in which these outdoor cremations could take place. This would involve a sea change in attitude toward design, but it is a change that is much needed. If necessary the outdoor cremations could be done on a Saturday and Sunday, days which crematorium are traditionally but inexplicably shut. Environmentally, the removal of mercury fillings and traditional coffins would reduce nearly all of the emissions that are harmful, and the burning of wood is now accepted as being as close to carbon neutral as possible. The wood used could be from woodland that has hazel which is common, fast growing, easily coppiced and burns with a tremendous heat. A small but not insignificant rural industry could be established to supply the need. All of the health and safety aspects could be met, as could the universal need for dignity and respect.

Or these places could be on private land, and many landowners have come forward to offer such space in places remote enough to ensure that people are not easily offended. The idea that this would open the floodgates to random funeral pyres on wasteland is disingenuous,--the state would have as much control as it does now. To invoke the catch all of "offended public decency" is also manipulative but predictable, but the feedback we receive as a charity is that public decency is being offended every day by our current practice.

As we become a more multi-cultural but secular country, our need for meaningful collective rituals becomes even stronger. Our shared truths are always stronger than our perceived differences, and the truth we have in common is that death separates us from this life, and that separation is the most painful thing we experience and should be marked in a way which is both honest and helpful. An outdoor cremation, witnessed by those who loved that person would have an instinctive dignity and a spiritual relevance that can't be replicated by the playing of My Way and the automated drawing of a curtain, however dry and warm it may be inside.

British culture is evolving again. This is part of it.

Rupert Callender. Funeral director with The Green Funeral Company and trustee of The Natural Death Centre