

Atheist Ireland



To colleagues in atheist/secular advocacy who are or were members of Atheist Alliance International

24 July 2021

Re: Update on the Crisis at Atheist Alliance International

Dear Colleague,

We wrote to you ten weeks ago on 15 May about the crisis at Atheist Alliance International, which is run by a board with no legitimate mandate. We are now ceasing to engage with AAI, as we have concluded that its legitimacy and credibility are beyond rescue. This letter is an overview of recent developments, to help you to decide your relationship with AAI.

Since we last wrote to you, we have met online with the AAI board, and they have accepted that key parts of our analysis are correct. The President has twice committed in writing to resign, but has failed to keep his word. The Secretary has failed to honour a commitment to arrange a follow-up meeting with us. Both were officers of AAI when the board unlawfully removed democracy from AAI. Both are standing again for election at an invalid AGM this weekend.

In the interests of fairness, we want to stress that some members of the AAI board have been acting with complete integrity, and have been trying to resolve these problems honourably. We thank them for doing this under difficult circumstances. However, those who in practice control the board seem to have prevented such a resolution from happening.

Atheist Ireland met the AAI board online on 6 June, after the AAI President committed in writing to resign before or at the meeting. We thought that we had made progress at that meeting, as there was broad agreement that key aspects of our analysis were correct.

1. The board accepted that in 2018 the then board decided to change the bylaws permanently, in order to create a permanent top-down structure without AGMs of members, where the board took all decisions including choosing its own successors. This means the current board was misled when it wrote that the purpose was to “temporarily change the balance of power between affiliates and the board” in order to “turn the organisation around.”
2. The board accepted that the meeting in 2018 that endorsed these changes was not a validly constituted AGM. Atheist Ireland was then a member of AAI, and was proposing a democratic reform plan. The evidence supports the conclusion that Atheist Ireland was deliberately misled about and excluded from this meeting. The board suggested that this was the work of only the then President, who is no longer a member of AAI. We find this implausible.
3. The board accepted that AAI reinstated AGMs in 2019 after Atheist Ireland informed the Executive Director that, without democratic accountability, AAI would lose its status at the UN. This means that the current board was misled when it wrote that this had happened “once we had made the necessary operational changes to guarantee AAI’s future.”
4. The board accepted that the AAI Secretary said that the board does not allow members to decide on policy at AGMs, in case feminists took over AAI. The board said this was not the reason, and the Secretary said that when he said feminists, he meant ‘woke’ people. However, we are concerned that he thinks that these two words can be used interchangeably.

5. A transparency issue also emerged at the meeting. AAI is registered as a Domestic Nonprofit in California. The California Secretary of State website lists its status as “Suspended,” and the California Franchise Tax Board website lists it on an “Exempt Revocation List” since 2017. The AAI board acknowledged that this was a problem, and told us that they had an Attorney addressing it. This issue may have since been resolved, but AAI has not been transparent about it, and the suspension is still listed on the Secretary of State website. ¹

We did not agree at the meeting how the behaviour listed above affects the legitimacy of the current board, or how best to correct the consequences of the behaviour. Some board members were reluctant to say publicly anything that would harm the reputation of AAI. We argued that correcting wrong behaviour would help the reputation of AAI. It is what we call on religious groups to do, and we should be able to do so ourselves.

We did not have time at the meeting to address the harmful AAI policy that promotes the false idea that there is no recognised human right to be secular. This remains a major concern for us. We will continue to defend the right to be secular, which already exists, from such misinformation, whether it comes from theocratic or secular sources.

The AAI President and Secretary both said they would resign when we sent our original report. We were concerned when the President did not keep his extra written commitment to resign at this meeting. We asked him about that by email after the meeting, and he replied by email that he would be resigning soon, after he had signed some tax papers.

As the meeting ended, the AAI Secretary committed to contact us to arrange a follow-up meeting, with the possible aim of agreeing a joint statement. We then heard nothing from AAI for six weeks, so we wrote to them again this week. We outlined possible wording for a joint statement, and we said that we wanted to address this issue before the invalid AGM this weekend.

The President responded without addressing the substance of our proposed joint statement. He said they would contact us again in August. He also said that he and the Secretary would be standing again for election this weekend, despite both having committed to resign. Regardless of the substantive issues, we now have no confidence that AAI will do what it commits to do.

Atheist Ireland will not be engaging further with Atheist Alliance International.

We are sad that things have reached this stage, as we spent years helping to build AAI as a democratically accountable alliance of atheist groups. However, we got involved in secular activism to improve society, not to repeatedly rescue any specific organisation.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Nugent
Chairperson
Atheist Ireland

¹ Link to California Secretary of State website listing the status of AAI as “Suspended.”
<https://businesssearch.sos.ca.gov/CBS/SearchResults?filing=&SearchType=NUMBER&SearchCriteria=C3398233>