



AAI Response

1 message

President, Atheist Alliance International <president@atheistalliance.org>

The AAI board notes that John Hamill (an ex-member of Atheist Ireland) wrote to some of our Advisory Council members to make complaints about the conduct of the AAI board. The board asked me to write to you to give you a balanced view of the events he discussed.

First, we note John's use of depreciatory language which serves not to inform but to create an emotional reaction. For example, he refers to a "small cabal" who "perpetrated a coup". Such words are not only factually incorrect but insulting.

Some of the things he says are true and have been acknowledged by the board but John's tendentious email does not explain any of the background. For example, it is true that the bylaws were changed in 2018 and those changes did:

- remove the requirement that the Board must be elected by the Members.
- remove the requirement that the Board must arrange AGMs at which Members could propose and vote on motions that would be binding on the Board.

Those changes also gave the board the power to make changes to the Bylaws without reference to the Members but these powers were not awarded personally to a fictitious "cabal", as John alleges, but to the board as a whole.

What John does not say is why these changes were made and how the By-laws were again changed in 2019 to restore powers from the board to AAI members.

In 2017, AAI was in crisis. AAI's success peaked in 2013. Then the organization began to decline with individual members and affiliates falling away. By 2016-2017, AAI was virtually in free-fall. It had become financially unviable with costs exceeding income by a significant margin. There were several reasons this happened, including:

- The introduction of a very expensive, complex and difficult-to-use membership system.
- Poor control of expenses, such as bank charges.
- A hacked and broken website that had not been updated for two years and did not work on mobiles.
- The board had become dysfunctional. It lacked both discipline and work ethic and largely focussed on minor issues whilst ignoring the big, existential issues.
- Importantly, affiliates had, in most cases, lost interest in AAI. AAI was designed to be an organization of affiliates but most affiliates had opted out either by not paying fees or by ignoring correspondence or both.

AAI needed new core systems, a new website and new management systems and processes, and a revitalized work ethic. The few board members who were passionate about AAI succeeding were confronted with a dilemma—to wash their hands of the problem and leave or to attempt to turn the organization around. There was a huge amount of work to be done and really only two or three board members willing to do the work. All board members then were unpaid volunteers, as they still are.

One thing was clear, business as usual would not solve the problem, business as usual got AAI into that mess! We concluded we would have to change the balance of power between affiliates and the board. The decision to take that drastic step was not made by a "small cabal" but by the entire board after much heart-searching. The entire board accepted the argument that leaving things as they were would lead to the demise of AAI.

So in 2018, we held an AGM and asked affiliates to vote on revised bylaws. They did and the revised bylaws that John complains about were passed by a vote of affiliates with 10 votes in favor and 1 vote against.

John says the 2018 AGM was "bogus", another emotive word! It was certainly not. However, the board accepts that a mistake was made when invitations to the 2018 AGM were sent to affiliated organizations. The then Secretary sent invitations to all affiliates shown on our systems as paid-up but this excluded 14 affiliates, almost all of whom had been inactive and had not paid fees for many months or many years. Technically though, these organizations remain as members until the board formally terminates their membership.

Once the board was aware of this mistake, steps were taken to correct the situation. All organizations that might have been omitted from the 2018 AGM, were invited to rejoin AAI. They were guaranteed that their application would be accepted and would have to pay no fees for 12 months. These organizations would be welcomed at this year's AGM (held two days ago), and could vote in our board elections and on all motions presented to the AGM.

Moreover, the only two current board members who served on the AAI board at the time of this mistake (the current President, Howard Burman, and Vice President, Bill Flavell), put their board seats up for re-election this year, one year before they were due for re-election. This gave affiliates the opportunity to remove these two individuals if they were dissatisfied with them.

Finally, at the AGM two days ago, a resolution was passed to set up a committee of affiliates and board members to review our By-laws to make them fully fit for our organization in 2021 and beyond. This motion was proposed by the board, not by affiliates and demonstrates the board's confidence that the troubles of 2017/18 are now behind us and we can face the future with all members and the board working together.

Since 2017, AAI has grown its income and has grown its membership by multiple times and has achieved important campaign successes. It works as a professional organization that is far removed from the chaos that engulfed it in those days. We believe the drastic measures taken three years ago were fully justified and the steps taken to correct any errors made are adequate, proportionate and fair.

Now we need to put this behind us and press on with the work that we all joined AAI to do."

I hope this context helps you to understand how AAI has changed, and improved, over the past four years. If you have any further concerns or questions, please let me know.

Kind regards

Dr. Howard Burman

President

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Atheist Alliance International

UN consultative status - Council of Europe status

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Atheist Alliance International's vision is a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality and evidence, and where individuals who lack religious beliefs enjoy liberty, free speech, freedom of association and freedom to participate openly in public life.