

The reason for his visit: Dr. Death Penalty's message

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Body

The severity of the topic is reason enough to again mention a visitor who came through the state recently. He is Dr. Philip Alston, an Australian fellow, professor of law at New York University and the U.N. Human Rights Council special envoy on executions.

Wanna guess why Alston took time out of his busy schedule to drop in on the Yellowhammer State?

It wasn't because of our beautiful beaches, our Southern mountains, or our barbecue ribs. It was because Alabama has the highest per-capita rate of executions in the country. Yes, Texas executes more people a year and has more on death row, but our state has the highest per-capita.

There's happy news to spread around. Read all about it: U.N. envoy visits Alabama to ... explore why the state executes so many.

Spread, it did.

Reuters pushed the news to the far corners of the earth, to France, to Japan, to Korea, to Germany, to the U.K. - nations with which Alabama would like to do business. And nations our state government would like to see set up some kind of shop - any shop, in fact - in Alabama.

Not the sort of headline, you might say, that helps the seller.

But the Reuters story and others didn't focus only on the raw numbers; they noted that Alston found officials in Alabama to be fairly cavalier about the whole situation. In case you missed it, The Star published portions of his U.N. report last Sunday.

"In Alabama, the situation remains highly problematic," Alston said at a press conference upon his return to New York. "Government officials seem strikingly indifferent to the risk of executing innocent people and have a range of standard responses, most of which are characterized by a refusal to engage with the facts."

You don't say, Dr. Alston! Officials in Alabama refusing to engage with the facts? How outrageous.

Troy King, Alabama's take-no-prisoners attorney general, promptly proved his point.

In comments to The Birmingham News, King spoke of the United Nations attending to the injustices in its own building before worrying about a speck in the eye of Alabama.

Oh, yes, it is always a good idea when faced with a tough question to quote the New Testament.

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Biblical contradictions aside, there are some issues Alston brought up that this page has often highlighted and should be addressed.

They include the fact that judges can overrule a jury on the question of whether a convicted person should be sent to prison for life without parole or be put to death. They also include the fact that the same elected judges are sometimes under political pressure to overrule, and that the entire system often provides for an inadequate defense.

Thus, it wouldn't hurt to talk about these issues. But Alabama's attorney general seems to think it better to throw rocks at the United Nations and its Australian law-professor type, quote selected passages of the Bible, and act as though everything is hunky-dory.

Meanwhile, as the American Bar Association is urging a nationwide moratorium on executions, and other states, including Texas, are beginning to take a closer look at their systems, the nation and the world read of the stubbornness and indifference in Alabama.

Notes

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