# Humanist Manifesto

## Local Council Elections 2009

**Humanists want a society that values cooperation and compassion at least as much as competition. It must be fair, inclusive and secular – that is, giving no privilege to any particular religion or belief, including Humanism. We call it an 'open society'; one that is "based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth."[1]**

### We want:

**A council that will give equal recognition to religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs (such as Humanism) as defined in the Human Rights Act and Equality Act 2006.**

At the moment, despite equality legislation, many councils fail to engage fully with humanists and other non-religious people in the same way as they do with religious people. They often consult with local religious leaders and 'faith communities' but do not involve local humanist groups. They particularly target local religious leaders for membership on the Local Strategic Partnership and take special steps to consult the local 'inter-faith' forum on policy that will affect everybody, not just the religious.

**A council that will end privileges for 'religion or belief.'**

This bias towards religious organisations and individuals is seen not just in consultations but in other areas of local policy as well. For example, there may be a specific staff member or councillor dedicated to working with 'faith communities' who may be located in the equalities or community cohesion team. The council may be funding an 'inter faith' forum which does not include humanists and may also be funding projects which are only for 'faith communities' with little evidence that such specific work is needed.

**A council that will uphold freedom of conscience and religion and oppose bullying by religious groups.**

The Human Rights Act states that "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others." It is very important that the beliefs of one group of people should not infringe the rights of others. This should be paramount to a council's work on equalities and community cohesion and should be taken into account when working with 'religion or belief' groups.

**A council that will keep religious privilege and discrimination out of delivery of statutory public services.**

The government is currently looking for ways to contract out statutory public services to the voluntary and community sector. They particularly favour giving contracts to faith–based organisations. But such organisations have wide exemptions from equality and human rights laws that could put staff and service users at risk of discrimination. Councils must therefore be aware of this and take the necessary deliberate steps to ensure that all public services are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

**A council that will remove the pro-religious bias in schools and the education system more generally.**

The RE syllabus for local schools is written by the council's Agreed Syllabus Conference and RE is overseen by the council's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. These groups rarely have humanist representatives yet have huge influence on what is taught in local schools and over how problems are handled such as those arising from the legal requirement for collective worship and from bullying based on 'religion or belief.'

**A council that will support local community schools and stop the expansion of faith-based and sectarian schools.**

The arguments against faith schools are overwhelming and widely accepted. They give public money to the promotion of particular religions and run contrary to the community cohesion agenda. They give parents and pupils less choice of schools to go to and can be socially, religiously and ethnically divisive. They segregate children by the religious beliefs of their parents and are legally allowed to discriminate on grounds of 'religion or belief' in selecting pupils and employing staff. Councils must be aware of such problems and we argue they should make sure any new school is inclusive and takes into account the needs of the whole community.

[1] George Soros: appendix to The Bubble of American Supremacy (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

**You can find out more about the above issues at www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns**

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BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION
*for the one life we have*

# Handy Doorstep Questions

We suggest asking candidates for local council elections the following questions, in person or in writing, as neutrally as possible, to extract answers that will help you make a rational decision about how to vote. Afterwards, tell the candidates what you thought of the answers – that way you may influence future policy!

1. Is it right for local councils to treat humanist organisations and representatives on a par with religious groups and representatives (e.g. in consultations)?
2. Do you in principle favour the council contracting with faith groups to deliver public services?
3. What are your views on faith schools?
4. Should anti-discrimination legislation make exceptions to cater for the religious beliefs of faith organisations and faith schools?
5. Do you think that the Human Rights Act helps or hinders an inclusive, cohesive society?
6. Should local faith leaders be targeted for inclusion on Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Authority Agreement panels? Who else from the community should be included?
7. Do you think that local community cohesion initiatives should include representatives of non-believers such as humanists?

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