

United Nations Human Rights Council, 36th Session (11 – 29 September 2017)

Item 6 – United Kingdom UPR

Thursday 21 September 2017

Speaker: Humanists UK representative¹, Jay Harman

Thank you, Mr President.

Whilst we welcome many of the observations and recommendations within the UK UPR, particularly those related to abortion in Northern Ireland, it is disappointing to note the absence of any criticism of the UK Government's position on the religious discrimination practiced by state-funded faith schools.

In deciding which children to admit, state-funded schools designated with a religious character² are able to discriminate against children on the basis of their own or, more commonly, their parents' religious beliefs.³ This violates the Article 2 rights of children under both the UDHR and the UNCRC, but it also severely limits the rights of young people to be autonomous and hold different beliefs to their parents - as indeed does the existence of faith schools more generally - as enshrined in Article 18 of the UDHR and Article 14 of the UNCRC.

Unfortunately, these violations are only set to intensify in the coming years. In September 2016 the UK Government proposed to end the requirement that all new and existing religious 'free schools' in England⁴ keep at least half of their places open to *all* local children, irrespective of religion or belief.⁵ If this goes ahead, the Government will in effect be giving a 'green light' to a new generation of fully segregated religious schools, undermining equal access to education and extending religious discrimination in the education system.

If children are to be free both to form their own beliefs and to understand those with beliefs different to their own, they must not be defined and divided at the start of their lives. We therefore call on the UK Government not simply to keep current limits on religious selection at 'free schools', but to extend them to all state-funded religious schools, with a view to ultimately ending such discrimination altogether.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association.

² Faith schools make up a third of all state-funded English schools.

³ Schedule 11(5) Equality Act 2010: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/schedule/11/paragraph/5>

⁴ Free schools have been the main type of new state school over the last seven years, and virtually all new state schools are free schools by default.

⁵ Schools that work for everyone, *New faith schools*, HM Government, September 2016: <https://engage.number10.gov.uk/good-school-places/new-faith-schools/>