



BHA Briefing 2010: Role of Government and communities in shaping society

House of Lords Debate, Wednesday 16th June

The Lord Bishop of Leicester to call attention to the role of partnerships between government and civil society in shaping social policy; and to move for papers.

Our position

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity supporting and representing non-religious people who seek to lead ethical lives without supernatural or superstitious beliefs. Committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect, the BHA works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech, and for an end to the privileged position of religion – the established church in particular – in law, education, broadcasting and wherever else it occurs.

The BHA has undertaken a great deal of work in the area of communities and government. Our general position is that we want the Government to recognise the value of communities as a whole and the contributions that humanists, as well as religious people, make to their communities. We want communities where people of all different backgrounds and beliefs engage and work with each other for the benefit of the whole community. Only in this context can people be positively empowered to make choices about their lives.

Role of Government and communities in shaping society

Subjects of particular interest which you may wish to raise/ react to during the debate include:

The 'Big Society' approach

The BHA believes that empowering people to take more control over decisions which affect their lives is a positive one that should be welcomed, if it increases well-being and autonomy and so on. Ideally, we would like to see a change in policy focus which celebrates the strength of local action as a whole and does not identify religious groups as a particular target for support to the exclusion and detriment of secular (neutral) third sector groups. We want policy to empower many people in local communities to take action on shared issues that affect all citizens, regardless of their religions or beliefs.

Importance of recognising the value of whole communities

We know from research that the level of volunteering in the population who are non-religious is similar to that of religious individuals.¹ In addition, there are thousands of secular organisations who work tirelessly to improve peoples' lives at all levels of society. Non-religious people are often taking part in this activity but do not feel the need to do it in the name of being non-religious, and this can add to the myth that non-religious people do less community work, simply because it is less visible.

¹ E.g. *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, Office of the Third Sector, 2007, showed that the level of volunteering for non-religious people was 55% and 58% for religious people.

We know that humanists take an active interest in community activity, evidenced by the over 90 humanist community groups affiliated to the BHA, the high number of BHA members who take part in the local provision of education in a voluntary capacity and the large numbers of people taking part in community cohesion initiatives on behalf of the BHA. Indeed, humanist beliefs may inspire an individual to become involved in community action or social change due to the belief that this is the only life we have and that, through social cooperation, quality of life can be improved for everyone.

We would like all political parties to support all people to make valuable contributions to their communities on an equal basis, with social action based on shared values and principles of co-operation.

Importance of secular spaces

There is growing evidence that a focus on “faith” to the exclusion of secular organisations in terms of government policy can damage social cohesion and increase the divide between religious and non-religious people, and can also lead to the loss of secular spaces – spaces which can benefit whole communities and create safe spaces for various minority groups.²

We are becoming increasingly aware that the support and encouragement that the previous government targeted at religious organisations has meant an increase in the number of organisations identifying as religious and the decrease of inclusive secular organisations.

By ensuring the survival of secular, inclusive and shared public services, the government can increase choice in service delivery whilst ensuring that no-one is being denied a safe space that is appropriate to their needs. In particular, vulnerable women would benefit from increased support from secular organisations which operate in a neutral and sensitive environment.

Role of third sector in public services

The new government has pledged to increase the diversity of service providers in many areas of service delivery previously controlled by the state.

Increasing the involvement of independent, voluntary and community providers of public services inevitably means that public services will increasingly be delivered by religious organisations – a continuation of the previous government’s policy.

Our main concerns in this area are the continued exemptions from various aspects of equality law which religious groups enjoy, which allow them to discriminate in employment and in service provision, even when they are delivering a publicly funded service.

We want inclusive, accessible, secular public services with no discrimination in employment or service delivery, and human rights protection for service users.

In order to safeguard equal access to public services, the government can use the involvement of voluntary and community providers of public services to raise standards and encourage organisations to act in a non-discriminatory way when delivering services. This can be done via changes in legislation to ensure that all providers of services are held to the same equality and human rights standards so that services users are protected.

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² http://www.womenagainstofundamentalism.org.uk/WAF_SBS_report.doc