

BHA BRIEFING 2009: Lords debate open society

Lord Harrison's 'Debate on progress made in making the UK a more tolerant, democratic and open society'. House of Lords, Thursday 14th January 2010. *Briefing from the British Humanist Association.*

This briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA) aims to give a snapshot¹ of the ways in which the BHA and its members and supporters promote Humanism and work towards, and contribute to, a more tolerant, democratic and open society.

About the BHA

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. **The BHA is committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect; the BHA works for an open, inclusive and tolerant society.**

The BHA is also renowned for its humanist funerals, weddings, baby namings and other non-religious ceremonies. These meet a very real need in the community and the rapidly growing demand for high quality ceremonies keeps our network of trained and accredited celebrants extremely busy.

Part of our core work involves the promotion of Humanism which helps humanists and other non-religious people to gain confidence in their beliefs and build a foundation from which to live their lives with integrity. The BHA supports networks for families, teachers and others to share ideas and experience and provide mutual support. Local, student and special interest Humanist Groups provide opportunities for humanists to meet like-minded people for lectures, discussions and social activities. To increase understanding about Humanism we lobby for the inclusion of Humanist beliefs in the school curriculum so that all pupils have the opportunity to learn about this worldview and we provide educational resources for schools and students of all ages. Our contribution to improvements in Religious Education is widely recognised.

BHA policies are based on humanist principles and informed by our members and supporters, who include eminent authorities in many fields. With the support of Humanist Philosophers, scientists and other experts, the BHA contributes to debate on a wide range of ethical issues from sex education to gene therapy and acts as a unique watchdog and lobbying organisation.

The All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group has flourished in recent years, with members from all Parties and across both Houses. Members of the group provide invaluable ethical, humanist perspectives on legislation, debates, and matters of deep political and social concern, from issues of science, human rights and public statistics, to faith schools, public service reform and issues concerning diverse and complex communities.

The open society

By 'open society', we mean one that is inclusive, open to people of all persuasions, 'based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth'².

In such a society, the government, other public authorities and social institutions have the task of reconciling guarantees of individual freedom with maintenance of social coherence.

¹ This briefing is in no way comprehensive. For more information about the BHA and Humanism, please visit our website www.humanism.org.uk.

² George Soros: appendix to *The Bubble of American Supremacy*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004.

Differences of opinion may be stark, but they must not be allowed to prevent their adherents from peaceably living together in the community. The answer is to entrench human rights and the freedoms (not least of belief and speech) that they guarantee, but simultaneously to build on common interests and work to promote dialogue and cooperation so as to reduce conflict. Thus people may live together constructively despite their differences – indeed, their differences will add to the strength of the society.

In an open society it is therefore necessary that the government and shared institutions must be neutral as between the rival religions and beliefs of its citizens. Only then can their freedom of conscience not be prejudiced. An open society is necessarily therefore secular, in this sense of neutrality. There must be no established religion or dogma, no institutionalised or legal privilege. But 'secular' does mean 'neutral' and not 'atheist'.

Humanists working for a better world

By reason of their belief that this world is the only one we have and that human problems must be solved by human effort, humanists have often been very active social reformers. Compassion and a sense of justice are not unique to religious people. Most humanists believe in democracy, open government and human rights, and support action on world poverty and the environment. Early humanists campaigned for wider access to contraception and for the legal acceptance of non-religious oaths. Before the state took over much social and charitable work from the churches, humanists helped non-religious people who needed these services by setting up: housing and education projects for young workers (1890s); an adoption agency (1950s), a housing association (1960s), a humanist counselling service (1960s); directly funded overseas aid projects (1960s). These services were necessary, because many services and employment opportunities were exclusive and restricted to specific religious groups. Once they became generally available to all without discrimination, such services were reintegrated with the mainstream.

Humanism Today

In the UK today, many people have beliefs and values which are broadly humanist. In addition, there is a growing number of people who explicitly use the term 'humanist' of themselves. In doing so they refer to their positive affirmation of life and nature and our place within it.

The BHA actively works with others towards shared aims and the promotion of shared values. We are also a member of a number of coalitions, all of which bring together a diverse range of people and groups, religious and non-religious, to work towards the promotion of social justice and reforming society to be more open and inclusive.

In the past year, the BHA has encouraged debate and exchange of ideas with activities such as the hosting of a conference on community cohesion during inter-faith week. In March 2008 the BHA received funding from the Equality and Human Rights Commission to run a project exploring issues regarding 'religion or belief' equality and human rights work. The project had the stated aim of 'increasing understanding of issues of "religion or belief" in the context of equalities and human rights within the voluntary sector, media and general public.'

The BHA has contacts throughout the UK working within their localities to create cohesive and strong local communities. Working as equality volunteers, representatives on Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education and school speakers, such people spend their time working with others to improve their local area and make local democracy accessible to all.

The BHA's work is supported and improved by thousands of members and supporters, as well as many local humanist groups throughout the country.