

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Queen's Speech Debate and Constitutional Reform

Monday 7th June

Briefing from the British Humanist Association on constitutional reform, Bishops in the Lords, and a British Bill of Rights

Constitutional Reform

"Proposals will be brought forward for a reformed second House that is wholly or mainly elected on the basis of proportional representation." The Queen's Speech, 25th May 2010

The Government will establish a committee to provide specific recommendations on the details by the end of the year.

Our position

We want a secular state. By this we mean a state where public institutions are separate from religious institutions and treat all citizens impartially regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs. This would include, for example, a separation of church and state so that the Head of State was not also Head of the Church of England and an end to Bishops sitting as of right in the House of Lords.

Bishops & House of Lords Reform

The UK is the only democratic country to give seats in its legislature to religious representatives as of right. We want a reformed chamber so that Bishops no longer sit as of right in the House of Lords. The presence of the Church of England in the House of Lords entrenches a privileged position for one particular branch of one particular religion that cannot be justified in today's society, which is not only multi-faith but increasingly non-religious. **It is at odds with the aspiration of a more legitimate and representative second chamber.**

In a reformed House of Lords, there must be no reserved seats or special privileges retained for Church of England Bishops, or any other religious representatives.

The BHA's new briefing 'Religious Representatives in the House of Lords' provides a background to the issue, and sets out the arguments made for and against retaining the Bishops and those for increasing and diversifying religious representation. The briefing also provides information on the wider context of secularism and disestablishment, and sets out what can be done about the present situation. You can download that briefing: <http://tinyurl.com/BishopsinLords2010>.

Bill of Rights

In the Coalition Agreement, the Government set out plans to establish:

A Commission to investigate the creation of a British Bill of Rights that incorporates and builds on all our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, ensures that these rights continue to be enshrined in British law, and protects and extends British liberties. We will seek to promote a better understanding of the true scope of these obligations and liberties.

Our position

The BHA strongly supports the inclusion of the European Convention on Human Rights in UK law through the Human Rights Act, and would oppose any attempt to repeal the Act, wholly or partly. We support moves to increase understanding of the Act, in a way that positively promotes it.

About us

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting the non-religious and campaigning for an end to religious privilege and discrimination based on religion or belief.

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