

BHA BRIEFING 2010: *Third Sector and Government Working Together to Help Communities, Debate in Westminster Hall*

2.30pm - 5pm, 11th March 2010

Briefing from the British Humanist Association.

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 works on several issues relevant to the debate. As part of the wider third sector, the organisation works on issues which affect the sector generally and equality groups within the sector more specifically. Subjects of particular interest which you may wish to raise/ react to during the debate include:

Composition of the third sector

The third sector is made up of organisations of various sizes, backgrounds and compositions. Some focus on service delivery, others on equality and representation, others on support networks and others on campaigning for change. They also work at many different levels, be it grassroots or frontline level, infrastructure level which supplies support to grassroots groups, or high level strategic organisations. It is this mix of resources which gives the third sector its vibrant and independent character.

However, some voices are starting to suggest that the third sector should be split into the 'faith sector' and community sector. At local level we are already seeing local third sector agreements such as local compacts (agreements between the third sector and local authority) and local strategic partnerships (organisations that bring together the local authority, private and voluntary sectors in the area) which speak of the 'Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector.' The BHA believes that this practice should be questioned on the grounds of fairness and equality and that moves to create this 'sector within a sector' be firmly resisted.

Government and faith communities

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.

Increasingly, the Government is offering strong encouragement to religious groups to take on a role in local communities and to local government to welcome such religious groups as "partners". Insofar as these arrangements are no more than what would be offered to any local group with strong links with the local community, such moves may be acceptable.

However, there is strong evidence that the government is treating religious organisations differently in its third sector policy making. For example, the government document *Face to Face and Side by Side* (2008)¹ sets out a number of commitments to celebrate work done in the third sector by religious organisations over and above work done by others. It is also notable that the Department for Communities and Local Government have a *Cohesion and Faiths Division* which undertakes work which specifically excludes non-religious people.

There is also worrying evidence² that this focus on faith is not only damaging social cohesion and increasing the divide between religious and non-religious people, but also leading to the loss of secular spaces – spaces which can benefit whole communities and create safe spaces for various minority groups. In particular, vulnerable women can be negatively affected by such policies.

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/898668.pdf>

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

Community and voluntary work and faith

Much good work is undertaken within the third sector by places of worship and organisations with a religious character. Where these organisations do not discriminate in service provision or employment or use service provision as a means to proselytise to the vulnerable, this is to be welcomed.

Unfortunately, it is a common myth that the existence of such organisations, and the lack of equivalent humanist organisations, means that non-religious people do not undertake social or community action.

We know from various research sources³ that the level of volunteering in the population who are non – religious is similar to that of religious individuals. In addition, there are thousands of secular (i.e. not affiliated to any particular religion or non-religious belief) 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. Secular organisations delivering services will be inclusive, and will not ask or require people to pray or attend religious worship in order to access services.

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.

Public services

The BHA is concerned that a particular focus on religious groups within the third sector may be affecting people’s rights when accessing public services. Across the board, publicly-funded, comprehensive and statutory public services, to which all citizens have an entitlement, are in the process of extensive and significant reform. The Government is introducing new suppliers of public services and this is being done by placing contracts with private (‘second sector’) and voluntary (‘third sector’) organisations.

Religious organisations have important exemptions from the Equality Act 2006 and from the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and from the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, which allow them to discriminate in employment and in the provision of public services, even when working under contract to provide those services on behalf of the State. These exemptions have been brought forward into the new Equality Bill, which also has a new duty on public authorities to advance equality of opportunity on grounds of religion or belief – a duty which we believe could actually increase discrimination and lead to the undesirable situation of having parallel secular and religious services.⁴

We believe that the current policy to promote the inclusion of third sector religious groups in the provision of public services, without legislation to protect against discrimination by such groups, could be deeply damaging and divisive.

For more detail and evidence on our position, please contact us:

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³ 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.

⁴ See our briefings available at <http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/equalities/single-equality-act/single-equality-act-publications> for details.