

British Humanist Association

Hustings Guide

For UK General Election 2010

About the BHA:

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity supporting and representing people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Our vision is of a world without religious privilege or discrimination. We promote Humanism, campaign for an open society and a secular state, and work with others of different beliefs for the common good.

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Preamble

Support for Human Rights, Equality and Democracy is not a major contentious issue in the election. All the main parties have given their support (albeit some qualified) to these issues. What is important is to get as many candidates as possible to publicly commit to our main objectives –pledging themselves to the support of a secular government, Human Rights and Equality before Law of all citizens regardless of their religion or belief and not providing any privileges or concessions to the religious organizations, and if we can get candidates to take an interest in other aspects of the BHA work – such as removal of Bishops from the House of Lords, law reform for death with dignity, recognition of humanist views in a varieties of governmental and public organizations, end to any discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, whether in marriage law, the workplace, or the provision of public services such as official marriage, inclusive schools, impartial, fair and balanced education about religion and beliefs and school assemblies without religious worship – that will help greatly towards our objectives after the new Parliament assembles.

Introduction

This publication is designed to help BHA members place Humanist issues on the agenda during the forthcoming general election campaign. It gives step-by-step tips on how to go about organizing a hustings meeting, looks at what a hustings can achieve, and considers what else members can do to raise Humanist issues at this important time.

Holding a hustings is not only a fantastic way to raise key issues and find out where candidates stand on them, it also provides a great opportunity to publicize the activities of BHA and appeal for new members. Make sure you have plenty of BHA literature to distribute, including copies of the new membership and BHA leaflets. If you would like extra copies, please contact Pepper Harow on pepper@humanism.org.uk or call 020 7462 4992.

The BHA is a charity and is entirely neutral regarding party politics. We do not advocate on behalf of or campaign for any political party and do not recommend that BHA affiliated groups do this either. In an open society, ideas that relate to Humanism specifically are best discussed with an inclusive cross party approach. The BHA does not give financial or other assistance to any political party, and recommends that affiliated groups remain similarly independent.

In an election period, rules regarding political activity by charities become particularly relevant. Although it is true that affiliated groups are entirely separate to the BHA and that our connection is only one of affiliation, we believe that it is good practice for affiliated groups to abide by these rules despite not being charities themselves. This will help to ensure independence and an open debate.

The Charity Commission has issues guidance regarding charities during the election period which is available at <http://tinyurl.com/ybo9c2s>

BHA Manifestos and information about our work on the election can be found here: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/what-you-can-do-to-help/Election2010>

Acknowledgement

This hustings briefing would not have been possible without the help of a number of dedicated BHA members, to whom we extend our thanks.

Available BHA leaflets for hustings events

- Membership leaflet
- Campaigns leaflet
- Summary of Public Services report
- 3 x Ceremonies leaflet (Weddings, Funerals and Baby Naming)

BHA and Parliament

BHA is active and present at the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG) – a cross-party group of parliamentarians supporting the aims and ideals of Humanism, and has also submitted evidence to a wide range of Parliamentary structures including the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR). The primary objective of the APPHG is to raise awareness of the work of the BHA among MPs and Peers by highlighting its myriad contributions across the areas of human rights, equality, democracy, and education. Members of the APPHG recently supported a debate on BHA publications in the House of Lords and have raised BHA campaigns objectives in Parliament on issues such as the Equality Bill and education. The BHA also has active affiliated groups within four main political parties in the UK. They cover the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Green parties. These are made up of members of the parties who are humanist or agree with our aims. More information is available at:

www.humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups/political-special-interest

BHA Priorities

BHA carries out targeted actions in many policy areas, including:

- Religion and schools
- Equalities
- Public Services
- Constitutional Reform
- Ethical Issues
- Broadcasting
- Marriage Law
- Human Rights
- Government and ‘Faith Communities’

- Free Speech

You can find out more about all of these issues at www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns

Election 2010

It is anticipated that the 2010 general election will result in an unprecedented turnover of MPs in the House of Commons, which will present an important opportunity for BHA to increase engagement with British parliamentarians.

The election will be held on 6 May 2010, to coincide with the local elections being held in some areas, which does not leave much time, so the sooner you start planning your hustings the better.

What are hustings?

Hustings (noun, pl. or sing.) – a meeting at which candidates in an election address potential voters (The Oxford Compact English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Revised, OUP 2003).

A hustings is a public meeting where people can listen to and ask questions of the Prospective Parliamentary Candidates standing for election in their constituency. They provide a valuable opportunity for political debate on neutral territory, and a forum where members of the public can raise important issues. Hustings are non-partisan and do not constitute an official, regulated part of an election, therefore there is no limit to the number of hustings held and no standard form for hustings.

What can a hustings achieve?

The primary objective of a hustings is to identify where a candidate stands on certain issues. International or foreign policy and Humanist issues can be overlooked during general election campaigns, so a hustings meeting focused on objectives of Humanism can prove a valuable way in which to raise such issues. While it is unlikely that you will change the mind of a candidate at a hustings event, these meetings give our organizations and individuals an opportunity to influence the future thinking of both the candidates and the other members of the audience who, by virtue of their presence at the meeting, are likely to be politically conscious.

Hustings therefore present an invaluable opportunity to place an issue on the local agenda and to engage people in the work of BHA. BHA affiliated groups can also use hustings to renew their relationship with their existing Member of Parliament or initiate dialogue with a potential new MP, and to find out where s/he stands on Humanist issues.

Some issues of interest of Humanism can be overlooked during general election campaigns, so a hustings meeting focused on Humanism can prove very valuable.

How to organize a hustings

Contact the candidates.

First you need to find out who the candidates in your constituency are. You will find full listings of the Party Parliamentary Candidates on each of the party websites – web addresses for the six largest national parties are given below:

Conservative Party

www.conservatives.com/People/Prospective_Parliamentary_Candidates.aspx

Tel: 020 7222 9000

Green Party

www.greenparty.org.uk/contact.html

Tel: 020 7272 4474

Labour Party

www.labour.org.uk/ppc/constituencies/

Tel: 08705 900 200

Liberal Democrat Party

www.libdems.org.uk/in_your_area.aspx

Tel: 020 7222 7999

Plaid Cymru

www.plaidcymru.org

Tel: 029 20 472272

Scottish National Party

www.snp.org/people/candidates/westminster

Tel: 0800 633 5432

Contact the Returning Officer at your local council for details of any other candidates once nominations have closed.

Planning

As with the organization of any event, planning in advance is very important. Ideally you should pencil in a date for the meeting and provisionally book a venue before the election is called. You can then write to the candidates informing them that you are planning to hold a hustings event, explaining the aims of the meeting, giving them the provisional date, time, and potential location, and inviting them to participate.. It is particularly important to act quickly now that the election has actually been called, as candidates and their election agents will quickly become very busy.

It might also help to give your hustings meeting a title or a theme, for example:

- Human Rights
- Ending discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.
- Religious courts
- Education and religion or belief

Make sure you give the title and full details of the event (including which other candidates are being invited) to the candidates well in advance to give them time to prepare. Hustings events usually focus on domestic policy issues so candidates will often welcome the opportunity to discuss local Humanist issues and policies.

It is also important to decide well in advance who will chair the meeting. It is crucial that the Chair is not involved or identified with any particular political party. It is also important that they will be able to chair the meeting effectively and firmly, ensuring that speakers stick to time limits and focus on the questions asked.

Who to invite?

You are not obliged by law to invite all candidates to a hustings but in the interests of freedom of speech and impartiality, it should be encouraged. However, consideration should be given to the following factors:

- If there are a large number of candidates standing in your constituency, it may be wise to invite only the candidates representing the main political parties, otherwise the meeting could become unmanageable and time for questions limited.
- The impact that the participation of extremist candidates may have on the meeting, such as discouraging other candidates from attending, or the potential for disruption during the meeting. If a candidate refuses or is unable to attend, you may wish to offer them the opportunity to provide a short statement to be read out at the beginning of the meeting.

More tips

- Sunday evening is a popular time to hold a hustings, ideally during the three weeks immediately preceding the election.
- Make sure you choose a suitable venue with full disability access. A public address system and roving microphones can also be of benefit (but make sure there is a hearing loop in place).
- It can be helpful to have a couple of ‘stewards’ on standby during the meeting to offer any assistance required, such as passing around the roving microphones for questions.
- Check if any other hustings meetings are being held in the constituency so that you can avoid a scheduling clash. Any of the campaign offices of the main political parties should be able to provide you with this information.

Publicity

Now that the election has been called, try to publicize the meeting as widely as possible. Act fast – make some posters in advance, and draw up a list of all the public places where details of the hustings can be advertised. This will enable you to act as quickly as possible once you confirm your speakers. When you also confirm the date of the hustings with the candidates, let them know how and where you have publicized the meeting. They may also wish to publicize it themselves through their campaign office.

Send a brief notice about the hustings to local newspapers and radio stations, giving as much notice as possible and including contact numbers and email addresses for further details.

Format

It is important to decide the format of the meeting in advance. Some points to consider are:

- How will you handle questions? You may wish to ask for questions to be submitted in writing before the meeting or, alternatively, you may be happy to take questions from the floor on the day.
- If submitted in advance, will you group the questions according to topic?
- If you decide to take questions from the floor, will you line up the first question in advance to get things moving?
- Will you apply a time limit to each question, and to each speaker? If so, how long will you allow? How will you time each contribution?
- Will you ask candidates to respond in the same order for every question? If not, ensure you rotate the order fairly.

However you decide to run your meeting, brief the candidates on the format beforehand.

Suggested format

- Welcome by Chair and brief explanation of how the meeting will run (including 'housekeeping' announcements such as the location of fire exits)
- Brief introduction of each candidate by Chair
- Short opening statement by each candidate (3 – 4 minutes)
- Questions from the floor – allowing each candidate to answer (a maximum of 2 minutes for each question)
- Brief closing remarks from each candidate (3 – 4 minutes)
- Closing remarks by Chair (thanking the candidates and the audience for their participation)

Ideas for places to publicize your hustings

- Public libraries
- Post offices
- Places of worship
- Community centers/notice boards
- Shop windows/supermarkets
- Doctors'/dentists' surgeries
- Local newspaper listings
- Local internet bulletin boards and websites such as Facebook, Meetup, Twitters, Nings etc.

When making his or her welcoming remarks, it is also advisable for the Chair to explain to the audience how the meeting will run.

In addition to answering questions posed by the audience, each candidate should also be given the opportunity to make brief introductory and closing remarks.

What to ask?

First and foremost, it is important to ensure that your question is clear and concise. Each question should focus on one issue only – a short introductory statement can help to set the scene. It is also important to remember that, while candidates can be expected to have a general understanding of Humanist issues; elections are usually fought and won on domestic issues. It is unfair to expect them to have detailed knowledge of complex equalities issues! You can download a copy of our general and local manifestos here:

www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/what-you-can-do-to-help/Election2010

These include questions for candidates which could be used at hustings events.

Follow-up

If a candidate is evasive and does not really answer the question, do not be afraid to seek further clarification. If you remain unsatisfied, ask the candidate if s/he would be willing to send you a written response after the meeting.

Let us know how your meeting went, especially if a candidate makes a firm commitment to a particular issue or to joining the APHG, as this will enable us to follow-up with them, should they be elected.

What else can you do?

If your group does not have the capacity to organize a hustings on its own, it may be possible to band together with other local, like-minded civil society organizations. Local Amnesty International, Oxfam, or Friends of the Earth groups can make excellent partners. You could even look into the possibility of working with local religious groups to hold a more generic meeting on issues of religion or belief.

Alternatively, you and other members of your group could participate in a hustings meeting that is already taking place. Local newspapers normally carry listings of hustings events, as will community notice boards and local libraries. Churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues sometimes host hustings events so it is worth checking their websites or notice boards. The local campaign offices of the candidates should also be able to provide you with this information.

If you attend an ‘external’ hustings meeting, it can sometimes be helpful to make contact with the organizers in advance to discuss the question you plan to ask. This way you can reassure them that your question is relevant and will add value to the meeting, and you are more likely to get called to speak.

General election campaigns are a great time to engage with the public, as people are more receptive during these periods. However, holding or attending a hustings meeting is not the only way to get BHA’s messages across during the election campaign.

You can also:

- Write to your local candidates and publish their responses on websites or in newsletters.
- Write to the local press – letters pages are one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper. Politicians monitor them closely to get a feel for local opinion, and to gain an understanding of which issues are of particular concern to their constituents.
- Air your views on one of the many websites set up specifically for the election.
- Contribute to debate through local radio phone-ins.

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Other resources

BHA's website: www.bha.org.uk

EHF website: <http://www.humanistfederation.eu/>

IHEU website: <http://www.iheu.org/>

More information

Pepper Harrow
British Humanist Association
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HD
02074624992
pepper@humanism.org.uk