

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Queen's Speech Debates & Education

Wednesday 2nd June

Briefing from the British Humanist Association on education, new religious Academies and "faith schools"

Academies

"Legislation will be introduced to enable more schools to achieve academy status, give teachers greater freedoms over the curriculum." The Queen's Speech, 25th May 2010

The purpose of the Bill is to enable more schools to become Academies and give them the freedoms and flexibilities they need to continue to drive up standards. The Coalition Government has announced that 2,000 Academies will be created.

Our position

Some of the discriminatory and counter-educational practices permitted to state-funded religious Academies are also permitted to state-funded religious schools, such as discrimination in admissions and employment, or the ability to teach a curriculum of RE different from that taught in schools without a religious character. There is also the additional risk that a religious Academy may use public money for the promotion of religion.

In addition, the BHA was in the forefront, in early 2002, of bringing the teaching of creationism in Academies to public attention. We have continued to have serious concerns about the extreme religious agenda of some religious organisations in control of state-funded Academies, and the lower level discrimination operated by the less extreme religious organisations.

We want additional protections in law to ensure that religious Academies' admissions and employment policies will not discriminate on religious ground. The Government must also ensure that the curriculum is protected and that new Academies will not be able to teach creationism, unbalanced religious education, and flawed sex and relationships education.

Faith schools

"Legislation will be introduced to...give teachers greater freedom over the curriculum and allow new providers to run state schools." The Queen's Speech, 25th May 2010

The purpose of the Bill is to give full effect to the range of programmes envisaged in the Coalition agreement, which states that the Government will 'work with faith groups to enable more faith schools'.

Our position

In seeking to increase the number and diversity of state-funded religious schools, the Government is continuing one of the previous government's most unpopular policies. Unlike other state-funded schools, faith schools have wide exceptions from law to allow them to discriminate in various ways against their staff and their pupils, segregating communities along religious, socio-economic and often ethnic grounds. Many also teach narrow, unbalanced curricula. Evidence shows that state-funded religious schools are exclusive, divisive and counterintuitive to social cohesion.

We are concerned that the Government is seeking to increase the number and variety of state-funded religious schools and would urge them to reconsider.

Admissions

In its coalition agreement, the Government states that it wants to 'facilitate inclusive admissions policies in as many [faith] schools as possible.'

Here we believe the Government's proposals are a step in the right direction. However, if state-funded faith schools are still permitted to discriminate against children on the basis of their parents' professed beliefs, the policy would at best only mitigate the deep educational and social problems caused by that practice.

We have the strongest objections to the ability of faith schools to operate selective admissions policies. These schools are state-funded in the same way as community schools are and yet are permitted to discriminate in a way that community schools are totally forbidden from doing.

For an inclusive and fair school system, religious discrimination in admissions in all *new* schools and academies completely must be ruled out completely, and discrimination in *existing* faith schools in the state sector should be phased out.

Curriculum

In its more general education programme, the Government has announced that it will ensure 'all schools have greater freedom over the curriculum'.

In recent years the national curriculum has been reduced in size and restrictiveness to a great extent, such that we are actually concerned about what it leaves out, including sex and relationships education, evolution, and a proper study of non-religious philosophies.

One area where the law is a straightjacket on good educational practice is in still requiring all schools to hold daily Christian acts of religious worship. In addition to the incongruity of compulsory worship in a pluralistic, modern liberal society, there are convincing human rights arguments to be made against forcing children to pray in school. There is also a need to abolish restrictive local syllabuses of Religious Education.

We look forward to seeing what positive ideas the government has for curriculum development along these lines but are concerned that the best of the previous government's proposed reforms should be retained.

Some facts and stats

For a summary of recent research and surveys, see [the Accord Coalition's dossier of evidence on faith schools](#), which covers: The impact of religious admissions on social segregation (sometimes called "cream skimming" or social selection); Faith schools and school standards / attainment; Faith schools and community cohesion; The number of new faith schools; Faith schools and homophobia; Faith schools and recruitment; The number of schools of different types, and their denominations.

[In a YouGov/Accord poll of June 2009:](#)

- 57% believed that state funded schools that selected students according to their religion harm community cohesion.
- 72% agreed or strongly agreed that all schools should implement recruitment and employment policies that do not discriminate on grounds of religion or belief.
- 74% held the view that all state schools should teach an objective and balanced syllabus for education about a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs.

In an [ICM faith schools poll](#) (2005) 64% of people agree that "the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind", fearing their impact on social cohesion.

An [ippr report](#) found that faith schools which are their own admission authorities are ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than faith schools where the local authority is the admission authority.

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. Committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect, the BHA works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech.

The BHA is a founder member of Accord. Accord is a wide coalition of organisations which includes religious groups, humanists, trade unions and human rights campaigners, which works for reform of the state-funded faith schools system, promoting inclusive schools and broad and balanced curricula.

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

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