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22 March 2007

You will recall that at the 'Role of faith-based groups in welfare provision' seminar in Manchester on 19 February, I outlined some of the British Humanist Association's concerns about contracting public services out to faith-based organisations, and asked for some assurances from you.

I was disappointed and very concerned that your answer did not address any of the points I made and that you gave me no assurances at all.

I am therefore now writing to explain the main issues as we see them and to request a meeting with you.

1. My first point, responding to your remarks that 'Most of what we now call public services was once the preserve of charities, many of which were faith based', was that many of those faith-based organisations discriminated on grounds of faith, not only in their employment and volunteering practices, but also their delivery of their services. When Christian organisations provided social housing and adoption services, for example, these services were only available to Christians and the non-religious were unable to access them, which is why the British Humanist Association, despite its principled support for services provided uniformly and without discrimination 'across the board', established a humanist (sheltered) housing association and an adoption service, only 'handing these over' to other providers when these services became freely available to all.
2. I then mentioned experience of faith-based health and welfare services in various other countries, for example the US and Australia, and the widespread concern in those countries about accountability; discrimination in employment and service provision; 'public services' that demanded and were allowed the right to refuse to provide certain kinds of service for reasons of conscience, for example Christian hospitals opting out of contraception advice and abortions, and welfare services that incorporate proselytising, requirements that service users pray, etc. I said that we were horrified to hear about John Hutton singing the praises of faith based welfare in Australia when we were hearing more and more about the problems that have arisen there.

3. I briefly mentioned the recent debate about Catholic adoption agencies demanding the right to discriminate against gay couples wishing to adopt despite providing a publicly funded public service as an example of the issues that are likely to arise if faith-based organisations are contracted to provide more public services.
4. I also mentioned that we were aware of a Christian charity that had recently (since the introduction of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations) decided that it would only recruit Christian (professionally qualified) staff to provide the service, in spite of the fact that the service was wholly funded by Social Services. This, we are told, has resulted in an inability to recruit staff of the right calibre and two cases about to be heard in an Employment Tribunal.

Having made these points, I asked you for a firm assurance that all contracts with faith groups to provide welfare services would include a requirement that the organisation would not discriminate on grounds of Religion or Belief, or on any other grounds, in its service provision, either as to who has access to the service or in the way it is provided, or in its employment and volunteering policies and practices, and that it would not be permitted to proselytise.

Your response to this question was, as I recall, that this was 'a question of principle, and we will have different views'; that you feel it is right to forge links with faith groups, and that 'the rest is a question of how'. Regarding the Australian experience, you said that the government would not 'be lifting any model wholesale, but we can learn from them'.

You did not give me any of the assurances I asked for.

In the presentations and discussions that followed, I was struck by the fact that the Bishop of Hulme and Lt Colonel Roland Sewell of the Salvation Army both not only expressed concerns about taking on public services, but also made it absolutely clear that they were not interested in simply contracting to provide a public service. The Bishop of Hulme said that the Church would only consider doing this if they had a say in policy and in how the service was funded and provided; while Lt Colonel Roland Sewell said that religious organisations must not be constrained by government to provide particular services in a particular way; that service users must experience the service differently because it was provided by a faith group, and that if there was no difference, there was no point in the faith group doing it. This appears to amount to an assertion that there will be a distinct religious flavour to any public services religious organisations offer under government contract. Are you happy with this, and do you not see not only objections of principle but also dangers in emphasising divisions in society?

I am also concerned about your announcement about developing 'a centre of expertise within the procurement team working with the Third Sector, to specifically cover the needs of faith-based groups'. I have absolutely no problem with faith groups being 'on an even footing with all other private and voluntary sector organisations who wish to compete to deliver our services' but that laudable objective is surely negated if the procurement team then addresses 'the specific needs of faith groups'. I noted the announcement of a think tank on procurement to be established in May which will, among other things, look at the constraints on providers. This issue is not only of significance to faith organisations, and I would hope that if, as I assume, faith organisations will be involved in this think tank, the British Humanist Association will also be invited to participate.

I appreciate that you did not really have the opportunity to give me a considered answer to my questions during the Manchester seminar, but I very much hope that you will be able to provide a more satisfactory response to this letter, and that you will be able to give me the assurances I asked for.

In view of the importance of all these issues, I would also very much appreciate a meeting with you to discuss them.

Thank you for giving these matters your further consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Hanne Stinson
Chief Executive

cc The Rt Hon John Hutton MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions