

## BHA BRIEFING 2010: Queen's Speech Debate and Equalities, Communities and Public Services

Monday 7<sup>th</sup> June

Briefing from the British Humanist Association on "Big Society", equalities and public services

### Communities

The Government will create a 'Big Society' and encourage decentralisation of power and localism. They have announced a *Decentralisation and Localism Bill* which will devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions.

### **Our Position**

We want a government that will 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 and work together on issues of shared concern.

We are concerned that the previous government identified community groups by their religious affiliation and were in danger of splitting the community sector into two along religious and non-religious lines. This was causing the loss of support for secular (neutral) groups as funding and support was aimed at 'faith groups' and 'faith communities.'

The 'Big Society' agenda can only work in the context of inclusion and the identification and privileging of groups due to their religious affiliation should not be encouraged.

More on our work on communities [www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/government-and-faith-communities](http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/government-and-faith-communities)

### Equalities

In the Coalition Agreement, the government plans to "tear down ... barriers and help to build a fairer society," citing these barriers as "gender, race, religion or sexuality."

### **Our position**

We campaign for stronger equality laws against irrelevant discrimination, particularly in the context of the 'religion or belief' and 'sexual orientation' equality strands. We welcome the government's apparent commitment to equality with the announcements of Rt. Hon. Theresa May MP as Minister for Women and Equality and Lynne Featherstone MP as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Equalities).

The BHA strongly believes that any exemptions in equality law must be as limited as possible and subject to stringent tests for legitimacy and evidenced need.

We further believe that all government departments and local authorities should recognise the full strand of religion or belief as covering people with religious beliefs, non-religious belief and no religious or belief as failure to do so leads to the privileging of religious individuals in equality work and disadvantaging of non-religious individuals.

More on our work on equalities [www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/equalities](http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/equalities)

## **Public Services**

*“The role of social enterprises, charities and co-operatives in our public services will be enhanced.” Queen’s Speech, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2010*

In the Coalition Agreement, the government plans to “give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services,” and suggests “much greater involvement of independent and voluntary providers” in the health sector.

### **Our position**

Increasing the involvement of independent, voluntary and community providers of public services means that inevitably mean that public services will increasingly be delivered by religious organisations – a continuation of the previous government’s policy.

Our main concerns in this area are the continued exemptions from various aspects of equality law which religious groups enjoy, which allow them to discriminate in employment and in service provision, even when they are delivering a publicly funded service.

We want inclusive, accessible, secular public services with no discrimination in employment or service delivery, and human rights protection for service users.

The BHA believes that religious organisations providing public services on behalf of the state should be held to the same equality and human rights standards and requirements as any other private, voluntary or public provider.

More on our work on public services [www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/public-service-reform](http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/public-service-reform)

### **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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