

Transcript of Southampton SACRE discussion of humanist membership

21 September 2020

Full meeting recording available at: <https://bit.ly/3211j3T> (relevant discussion at 01:19:55

Alison Philpott (Southampton Council Advisor) : So, um, for some time now those of you who have been on SACRE for a little while will know that we've had contact in from the British Humanist Society [sic] around wanting to become a voting member of SACRE. Um, Covid has kind of intervened as has many other things, but you will recall that we had some legal advice provided um last September around um, around this issue, particularly the challenges given that Group A is not, um, full... that we have some vacancies in Group A, which adds an extra dimension to the challenge. As per the previous meeting, I have spoken with the current members (all bar one) and we don't have consensus is the decision. So, Group A has decided as a group that, there are some members of Group A who do not feel that SACRE should take the position of having, um, a humanist rep fully constituted into the Southampton SACRE. So, um, that's the position that they have arrived at, so that's the position that I will be, um, taking back to Council members in terms of the Cabinet, um, for the Council meeting in November, I believe it will go to.

Now, um, that obviously then will be voted on by Council, as whether they take that forward or not, whether they challenge it or whether they accept the decision that the group members that it affects can take effect. Um, that said, there's been quite a lot of discussion that quite a few Group A members wanted to go alongside that decision, in that they felt quite strongly that this should be a national decision that's taken for all SACREs and not pushed down at a local level. So, I will have the opportunity to raise that, um, in a DfE discussion as a position of our SACRE if we are all in agreement that that is what we feel as the whole SACRE we should be suggesting. And it was very clear from the Group A members that actually we really welcome the input from our co-opted humanist representative, um, you know, she's, she's actually on holiday today but she has contributed and attended lots of meetings and would like to do more but obviously, um, from a legal position, um Group A have listened to that legal advice and taken their, taken their thinking accordingly and that's me agreeing with them that I will report back their group decision and the consensus of that group. Are there any questions?

Richard Wharton (CofE Diocesan Education Team): To add to the discussion of all of that, Alison, the slight elephant in the room for me that we've never publicly acknowledged, without any disrespect to our humanist rep, the British Humanist Society [sic] are openly hostile to the existence of SACREs and are campaigning for their abolition. So it's always seemed like a slightly Trotskyist move to me to be, to want to be a member of a committee that your society, association, whatever you want to call it, is openly opposed to. Sorry, go on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Jenkerson (Baha'i Representative): Uh, no, it is not the national humanists, it is the National Secular Society. The humanists very much support SACREs, at least those that I've known and also the official position.

Richard Wharton: Is that the official position?

Elizabeth Jenkerson: Sorry?

Richard Wharton: That's their official position is it then? Because that's not what a lot of them often say.

Elizabeth Jenkerson: It certainly used to be that they officially supported SACREs and endeavoured to... not as constituted though, I suppose maybe that was what you're referring to. They, you know, the idea, etc., yes, um, the way it is constituted, I mean, everybody (no offence Richard) but, everybody agrees that it's not fair the way one group has its own group, if you know what I mean...

Richard Wharton: Well, the whole thing is a kind of historical anomaly as are so many things...

Elizabeth Jenkerson: Well, I was at a NASACRE meeting... no, the REC meeting and, um, I sat next to... I can't remember now who it was, um, who said basically, it was somebody from the Church of England and he said, basically, we would love to get out of it but we feel that we have to stay because this is the way it is constituted and frankly because it is the Church of England who does so much to support RE and does it very well, I think, and in a very open way and in a way that is very encouraging of other groups but, that's the way it is being treated now when the way it is constituted gives scope to, to misuse, I guess is the concern. Um, or even more likely frankly, um lack of involvement would be a real problem for SACREs I think if the Church of England didn't continue to support RE the way it does. And, um, I think the feeling was that most of the Church of England people would love to get out of it, there's just no way that it can happen.

Richard Wharton: That's always the irony isn't it? That the, um, Humanist Society [sic] portrays it as an abuse of power when really we're just trying to prop things up!

Elizabeth Jenkerson: Yeah! It's like, 'give us an alternative, give us an alternative'. No, absolutely, I was present at the REC meeting when the National Secular Society tried to become a member and there was a lot of concern because they definitely were on the record as not supporting SACREs or RE or any of these things and they said, no, no, no, they'd changed and even though that was officially accepted, when the vote went to members they lost by one vote and I gather that they are back now to saying, 'no, we don't support RE, we don't want to be involved' etc, etc.

Alison Philpott: Elizabeth, Councillor Kataria has got his hand up.

Elizabeth Jenkerson: Sorry.

Alison Philpott: Yes, no.

Councillor Toqeer Kataria (Labour): Yes, I think that with the humanists, they are on some SACRE boards around the country in certain councils like Bolton and some boroughs in London and they are on some SACRE board the humanists. So I don't know how that stands with SACRE nationally with how the policy, you know, how, how it works, but I know there are a lot of SACREs where humanists are actually on the board as members representing.

Alison Philpott: Yes, so that..

Councillor Toqeer Kataria: And [inaudible] and the humanists, they are actually pushing this and encouraging people from all councils and boroughs to actually get involved with SACREs. Overall, I don't know what...

Alison Philpott: Yes, Councillor, yes, that's the right position and that's where the South Hampshire Humanists, which is our local group, had kind of put this into the kind of discussion place to see whether... but, as SACREs are constituted it is a local decision making process so it comes back to each local authority to make that decision based on their recommendation from their SACRE. And, I think the, um, the fact that we're not full in Group A is an added complication to that for us because, were we to... any dec[ision]... basically the legal advice was, stated that if we make any decision, where we've taken any vote, actually, were we to do that without Group A full membership be it um, even the vote to open the agreed syllabus conference today could be called into question, although it would be very unlikely to because we've got a five year statutory duty to review the syllabus, um, changing the constitution to agree to have another faith group - which is what Group A is - and that would be a humanist representative, could be, could bring legal challenge to the local authority. And um, that the local authority legal team would be saying that the risk of that is too high and therefore would not be in the best interests of or the best use of money to be potentially taking on a legal challenge. And I get it, why people think it should be a national decision for all SACREs, as opposed to a local process that is um, you know, more determinant and it will be different in every local authority, there will be a different position and different thinking processes around it.

Elizabeth Jenkerson: It's interesting, a couple of years ago when this was brought up a number of SACREs reviewed their position and some decided that, in spite of the legal difficulties, they went ahead and accepted the humanists as full members, but actually some SACREs where they already had the humanists as full members decided that they really couldn't be and they made them co-opted instead of actual full members. So it's just everybody has to look at their different legal status and, um, you can't go by what's likely to happen, you have to go by what legally could happen, I think. That's my feeling anyway. [As a point of fact, no SACRE has removed a humanist from full membership since 1994.]

Alison Philpott: Yes, and that's the end of that AOB item.

Elizabeth Jenkerson: Great. OK, um, is there anything else? We've done the agreed syllabus conference, to go back to the members' local and national updates, was there anything? Anyone have anything?

Councillor Matthew Bunday: Sorry, can I just check what the outcome of that discussion was then, is it being rolled over for future meetings, the humanist one?

Alison Philpott: Um, yes, so Group A, Group A had to have the discussion separately because it is Group A that has to make that decision and if one member of Group A didn't agree that humanists should become members then, um, we couldn't move that forward so, yeah, so the decision is that we will be putting forward that we don't have a humanist rep so we won't be making a change to that constitution.

Elizabeth Jenkerson: But we definitely want to continue having her or any humanist rep as a co-opted member and I think many of us, certainly speaking for myself and I'm guessing for others as well, would love to have a humanist rep as a full member, we just don't think that we can risk it legally.

Alison Philpott: Yeah. That's exactly, that's exactly what the consensus was basically.

Councillor Matthew Bunday (Labour): OK, thank you.