

## **The Review of the BBC Charter Comments from the British Humanist Association**

### **SUMMARY**

*Broadcasting is perhaps the most important means whereby the members of a modern open society can communicate with each other and jointly address the challenges that face them. Public service broadcasting is vital to the fulfilment of this function, and the BBC is immeasurably more committed to meeting this need than any other broadcaster. Such broadcasting can only be secured if the BBC's independence is guaranteed. It requires a protected environment and cannot be expected to survive in an uninhibited marketplace. Independence is potentially threatened by over-commitment to commercial targets, by interference by government and by any over-identification with particular interest groups. We identify one such example of over-identification of peculiar interest to humanists: namely, the disproportionate allocation of broadcasting time to religious believers (overwhelmingly Christian) addressing believers about their religion and the total and explicit rejection of any comparable broadcasting by non-believers including humanists. We suggest that the Charter include an obligation to cater, without discrimination, for the different belief groups in society.*

### **The British Humanist Association**

1. The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the principal organisation representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to promote Humanism and support and represent people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. The census in 2001 showed that those with no religion were (at 14.8%) the second largest 'belief group', being two-and-a-half times as numerous as all the non-Christian religions put together. Other surveys consistently report much higher proportions of people without belief in God - especially among the young<sup>1</sup>. By no means all these people are humanists and even fewer so label themselves, but our long experience is that the majority of people without religious beliefs, when they hear Humanism explained, say that they have unknowingly long been humanists themselves.

2. The BHA's policies are informed by its members, who include eminent authorities in many fields, and by other specialists and experts who share humanist values and concerns. These include a Humanist Philosophers' Group, a body composed of academic philosophers whose purpose is to promote a critical, rational and humanist approach to public and ethical issues.

3. The BHA is deeply committed to human rights and democracy. We advocate an open and inclusive society: one "based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth"<sup>2</sup>. In such a society, the government, other public authorities and social institutions would seek to maximise individual freedom (not least of belief and speech) while building on common interests and working to reduce conflict so that people may live together constructively. The government and such shared institutions - including public bodies such as the BBC - need to exercise a policy of disinterested impartiality towards the many groups within society so long as they conform to the minimum conventions and laws of the society.

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<sup>1</sup> In a survey of 13,000 13-15 year olds, 61% declared themselves atheist or agnostic (Revd Professor Leslie Francis and Revd Dr William Kay, Trinity College Carmarthen, Teenage Religion and Values, Gracewing, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> George Soros: appendix to *The Bubble of American Supremacy* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

## **Broadcasting in an Open Society**

4. The comparative uniformity of society in past times has probably been exaggerated, but it is undoubtedly true that the last half-century has seen an accelerating increase in diversity of both views and interests. This has resulted from the end of social deference, the collapse of shared religious beliefs, the increase in the number and variety of people from different ethnic groups and cultures, and many other factors. Alongside this increasing diversity, which is welcomed by the British Humanist Association, is the growing pace and variety of channels of communications, which in itself is potentially destabilising.

5. In this environment, the importance of public service broadcasting<sup>3</sup> in providing a forum for public discussion cannot be overexaggerated. Society needs effective means to learn about itself, about changing circumstances and emerging challenges, and to communicate with itself and debate views and policies. Broadcasting offers by far the most important means for this to be done<sup>4</sup>, and the BBC is immeasurably more committed to this function than any other broadcaster. (And the value for money it offers is off the scale when compared with the cost of cable and satellite offerings.) This is not to say that the BBC is perfect: we share the widespread view that scheduling on both the principal BBC television channels is often depressingly unambitious (other than in terms of audience maximisation). But by contrast (for example) the offering of Radio 4 is incomparable.

6. Such broadcasting can only be secured if the independence of the broadcaster is guaranteed. It requires a protected environment and cannot be expected to survive in an uninhibited marketplace - as witness the impoverishment of broadcasting in the USA and indeed in so many other countries. The BBC's independence is potentially threatened by any over-identification with particular interest groups, by over-commitment to commercial targets, and by interference by government.

7. Taking these in reverse order, the BBC needs to have the robust security to stand up to the immense pressure that governments of both colours have brought on it from time to time, displaying sometimes an extraordinary oversensitivity to criticism (or truth-telling) quite alien to the vigorous reporting and policy debates that should characterise an open society. The BBC needs specifically to have security as an institution (free from arbitrary interference with its governance, its activities and its broadcasts and other publications) and security of income (so that a rolling licence fee arrangement would be desirable, removing any special vulnerability as fees come up for renegotiation).

8. Over-commitment to commercial targets includes the uninhibited pursuit of ratings and significant reliance on generating income, whether through the BBC's own commercial activities or its joint activities with partners. These interests can likewise influence editorial decisions for reasons other than excellence of programming: the BBC needs to be in a position if necessary to walk away from ratings and commercial arrangements in the interest of maintaining its editorial and institutional independence. Income from these non-licence sources must therefore remain of limited importance.

### **Religion or Belief**

9. Over-identification with particular interest groups is directly contrary to the role of an independent public service broadcaster in an open society. By and large the BBC maintains a

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<sup>3</sup> We do not intend in this memorandum to deal with the very many other functions of public service broadcasting (education, the arts, sport, etc) except to say that we recognise their immense importance and the generally high achievement of the BBC in these areas.

<sup>4</sup> We regard it as more important than the press because of the breadth of its audience and (in the case of the BBC) its mandated neutrality.

demonstrable independence of interest groups, but with one blatant exception which is particularly close to our own interests, namely in the area of religion or belief.

10. The British Humanist Association of course seeks to promote the humanist life-stance as an alternative to (among others) religious beliefs, but as active proponents of the open society we do not seek any privilege in doing so. Correspondingly, however, while we recognise and respect the deep commitment of other people to religious and other non-humanist views, we object to any privileged position accorded to them by virtue of their beliefs. The BBC, however, gives religion, and the Christian religion in particular, just such a privileged position.

11. There is in fact growing recognition that, in line with the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights, the entire spectrum of fundamental beliefs, embracing not just the various religions but also non-religious beliefs with a comparable function, should be treated without discrimination. This is what the Act<sup>5</sup> itself requires, as do (for example) the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003. Moreover, as the result of an amendment introduced by the Government itself, the Communications Act 2003 (at section 264(6)(f)) explicitly requires that public service broadcasters should provide programmes about “religion and other beliefs” (characterised as “collective belief[s] in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrines” - section 264(13)).

12. It seems to us that the BBC, with its traditional commitment to religious broadcasting, fails completely to live up to this requirement and - despite our repeated representations and despite the wording of the new Communications Act - shows little or no sign of correcting its long established bias. Two illustrations will suffice: the explicit and repeated refusal to allow speakers from non-religious belief traditions to contribute to Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* and the fact that Radio 4 broadcasts every week three-and-a-half hours of direct broadcasting by believers to believers - mainly but not exclusively Christian.<sup>6</sup> This excludes the several magazine programmes dealing with religion. (The position is similar but less marked on Radio 2 and television.) Though there is some very small provision for non-Christian religions, there is absolutely no comparable provision for what is (according to the census) the second-largest group in the spectrum of religion or belief - namely those with a non-religious outlook, including humanists.

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<sup>5</sup> The Act refers to “religion or belief”, a phrase that has been established in case law to include atheism, Humanism and other non-religious lifestyles. See for example: “As enshrined in Article 9, freedom of thought conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a >democratic society= within the meaning of the Convention. It is, in its religious dimension, one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life, but it is also a precious asset for atheists, sceptics and the unconcerned.” - *Kokkinakis v Greece: (1994) 17 EHRR 397, para 31* See also *Manoussakis v Greece: (1996), EHRR 387, para 47; McFeekly v UK: (1981), 3 EHRR 161; Campbell and Cosans v. UK: (1982), 4 EHRR 293 para 36* (re Article 2 - right to education). Note also: Article 18 [of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the wording of which was closely followed by Article 9] protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. - *UN Human Rights Committee, 1993 (General Comment no 22(48) (Art. 18) adopted on July 20th 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, September 27th 1993, p1.)*.

<sup>6</sup> Typically:

Sat: Prayer for the Day (2 mins) + Thought for the Day (3 mins)

Sun: Something Understood (30 mins \* 2) + Sunday Worship (38 mins)

M-F: Prayer for the Day (2 mins) + Thought for the Day (3 mins) + Daily Service (15 mins)

R4 total = 203 minutes / week (3 hours 23 mins) direct committed pastoral religious broadcasting. At times of religious festivals, this provision is substantially expanded.

13. In fact, the BBC appears to regard non-religious lifestyles as without content, the non-religious as merely lacking a dimension to their lives. This demeaning and insulting view is demonstrated by their customary responses to representations asking for some small measure of humanist programming. They say (a) that most of their programmes are secular - as if sport and quiz shows were an adequate answer to their religious bias; (b) that persons who happen to be humanist often take part in programmes - even though they do so not as humanists but as scientists or writers; and (c) that the non-religious are occasionally asked to appear in religious magazine programmes - where they are almost invariably asked to respond to religious speakers, so that they are positioned merely as foils to the believers, and can only explain their views in the context of religious belief.

14. At a time when religion is in such severe decline (a poll commissioned by the BBC itself for the *Heaven and Earth Show* last autumn showed 26% of atheists or agnostics and another 24% who were “spiritually inclined but don’t really belong to an organised religion”), it should not be the role of a public service broadcaster in an open society artificially to sustain religious belief, whether by providing religion with a disproportionate amount of air time or by excluding rival beliefs from the principal medium whereby groups in society can make themselves heard. Rather than provide a platform only for those who denounce the alleged rootlessness and immorality of the present generation, or indeed the increasing secularisation of society, the BBC should also be helping those with constructive and coherent alternative life-stances and non-religious answers to “ultimate questions” to test them on the public.

15. We suggest therefore that the Charter make explicit reference to the need for the BBC to cater, without discrimination, for the different belief groups in society.

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