

BUILDING PUBLIC VALUE

Response from the British Humanist Association

The British Humanist Association

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. A recent survey on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills found that 65% of 12-19 year olds in this country do not have a religious affiliation; a rise of ten percentage points since 1994.¹

By no means all these people are humanists and even fewer so label themselves, but our long and consistent experience is that the majority of people without religious beliefs, when they hear Humanism explained, say that they have unknowingly long been humanists themselves.

Broadcasting in an Open Society

In commenting on the BBC paper *Building Public Value* we draw on our deep commitment 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". 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.

As we stated to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in response to their consultation on renewal of the BBC's Charter:

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

¹ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf>

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.

In this environment, the importance of public service broadcasting 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, 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.)

We therefore have little difficulty in endorsing the general principles set out in the document *Building Public Value*. We endorse in particular the claim that people derive benefit “from a BBC service as citizens, such as its contribution to a better-informed democracy, higher educational standards or a more inclusive society” (page 84). (We were strongly critical of the recent Ofcom paper on public service broadcasting for reducing considerations of the audience as citizens to a thinly disguised repetition of their section on the audience as consumers.)

We pick out as important to us the principles of universality, fairness and equity, and accountability (page 7), and the references to “foster[ing] greater audience understanding of cultural differences across the UK population” in areas including “faith”, to “faithfully reflect[ing] modern Britain’s diversity in mainstream as well as specialist programmes”, and to “listen[ing] to [the] concerns and priorities [of the UK’s minorities], and reflect[ing] those concerns in the future development of services” (page 14). We welcome the pledge to “make special efforts to connect with the UK’s . . . minorities and to encourage members of these minorities to offer their talent and energy to BBC programmes and services” (page 19).

We agree that

“UK society is becoming increasingly plural and diverse. . . Differences between the generations are particularly pronounced, polarising views between young and old around issues [including] religion” (page 48).

Application to Humanism

Applying these principles in the case of the (very large) minority of people who live their lives without religious belief but according to ethical principles which are at least implicitly humanist, one would expect the BBC to listen to humanists’ concerns and reflect them in an appropriate provision of programmes about Humanism and for humanists. One would expect that the BBC would take care to meet the obligation under the 2003 Communications Act to provide programmes not only about religion but

also about “other beliefs” - which the Government made plain, when the Bill was in Parliament, included Humanism. One would expect that the BBC would eliminate discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, banned by the 1998 Human Rights Act for bodies such as the BBC, and that complaints that such discrimination was deeply rooted in the BBC’s policies and practices would be taken particularly seriously.

Sadly, however, none of these expectations is being met. The BBC may implement in other areas the principles it sets out in *Building Public Value* but it shows no sign of taking them seriously in the case of Humanism and humanists. Letters arguing in detail the legal duties - let alone the obligations on grounds of fairness or equity - of the BBC to pay attention to Humanism are consistently met with nugatory attention and bland assurances that the BBC is satisfied with its own performance. Comments are promised on ideas for programmes but in the current case are still awaited after eight months - and the promise is meantime used as another excuse for not addressing the issue.

Radio 4 alone provides over three hours a week of Christians broadcasting to Christians about Christianity. There has never been any similar programme of any kind on any national BBC radio or TV channel about Humanism. The last time there was any programme specifically about Humanism, so far as we are able to establish, was in 1965 - a suggestion that has not been denied when we have put it to BBC management.

The BBC may wish to “build a deeper understanding of multi-faith Britain” (page 71) but the total following of non-Christian religions in the 2001 census amounted to only 5.8% of the population and the BBC’s programming shows no awareness of the far more significant fact that Britain is increasingly a society of unbelievers living according to broadly humanist ethical principles. (The census found two-and-a-half times as many self-acknowledged unbelievers as followers of all the non-Christian religions put together.) If that large minority - perhaps even majority - of the population is denied access to the BBC’s channels to discuss their ethical principles and fundamental beliefs, the result is the present predictable confusion, with huge numbers of people adopting the traditional ‘Christian’ label when pressed for an answer although they never attend church and are abysmally ignorant of even the most basic facts about Christianity.

These people are not Christians in any meaningful sense whatever, and there are millions more who do not put a religious label on themselves, whose views are effectively humanist, but who have no access to discussion of the non-religious ethical life-stances or world-views to which they might well adhere. Yet modest proposals backed by over a hundred eminent scientists, philosophers and the like that Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* be opened to occasional humanist speakers were dismissed out of hand - and the dismissal was boasted of in a letter to the press from the BBC’s head of religion and ethics as a success in “fighting off the atheist lobby” (Daily Telegraph 23 July 2003). *This* is the language of everyday management in the BBC and it is very different from that of *Building Public Value*.

Building Public Value lists accountability as one of the BBC’s founding principles. Accountability requires that the BBC present an argued account of its case when criticised for failing to meet its principles or legal obligations. Unfortunately again the

BBC fails to live up to its principles. In defending itself when taxed with failing to provide programmes about Humanism or for humanists it has variously pleaded:

(a) that the great majority of their programming is secular - a ludicrous play on words which, taken seriously, would suggest that they consider humanists should be satisfied with sport and house makeover programmes;

(b) that humanists do appear on programmes - but the examples they give are of appearances as scientists or in other roles, not as humanists;

(c) that humanists do take part in religious programmes - where they take part in discussion about religious beliefs, and have very little, if any, opportunity to present or discuss humanism; or

(d) that programmes are occasionally aired that are critical of religion - but this is of only marginal interest to humanists, who wish to have programmes about their own beliefs.

The BBC has in these ways always failed to answer the case presented, offering instead defences to other arguments that we have not made.

Our conclusion is that *Building Public Value* is a welcome document setting out principles and plans with which we strongly agree - but that in the area which is of most interest to us the BBC has so far failed almost completely to implement the principles or to live up to its pretensions.

British Humanist Association
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