Coronation Street takes on assisted dying as right-to-die cases reach Supreme Court

Coronation Street has broadcast one of its most memorable episodes, in which the character Hayley Cropper, played by BHA Distinguished Supporter Julie Hesmondhalgh, decides to commit suicide after becoming terminally ill with inoperable cancer. The episode in question was watched by over ten million viewers.

Coronation Street’s brave tackling of this important ethical issue takes place as we await the Supreme Court’s judgement on the legal case to establish the right to an assisted death. During the hearings in December, we presented our evidence in support of Jane Nicklinson, the widow of Tony Nicklinson, who sought and was denied an assisted death, and Paul Lamb, who is seeking the right to an assisted death after being paralysed in a road accident. We have been a party to the case throughout as an intervener. The judgement will be announced later this year.

We were very pleased that ITV producers of Coronation Street chose to bid farewell to the much loved character of Hayley Cropper with a humanist funeral. By giving Hayley a humanist funeral, Coronation Street reflected the increasing need among non-religious people to say goodbye in a way that is authentic to them. A humanist funeral provides the opportunity to gather together as a community to say a personal and profound farewell, at the same time as acknowledging and celebrating all that the person has achieved.

ITV consulted with our Head of Ceremonies, Isabel Russo, checking on technicalities of the funeral process as well as on script content and delivery.

We are delighted that Hayley’s funeral will have helped to make so many more people aware that there is an alternative — and that it’s a really good one!

Humanist Funerals showcased on Coronation Street

As we draw closer to the World Humanist Congress in Oxford we are putting final details to the programme. We are pleased to give you a special sneak preview of just one of the sessions you can expect over the action-packed three days.

The difficult case of incitement to hatred:
Hate speech, the advocacy of hatred based on nationality, race or religion, occupies an exceptional position in international law, and many argue that the ban on hate speech is directly in conflict with the right to freedom of expression.

Here in the UK, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 created an offence of inciting hatred against a person on the grounds of their religion. The wording is careful to ensure that it excludes criticism and ridicule and made it clear that the law is intended to protect people, not belief. But the debate still continues about where the limits lie.

Featuring human rights lawyer and lecturer in International Human Rights at the University of Copenhagen Jacob Mchangama; UK’s leading authority on community cohesion and intercultural relations Ted Cantle; Australian philosopher Russell Blackford; our Head of Public Affairs Pavan Dhalwai and others, we will negotiate the difficult boundaries of freedom of expression and incitement to hatred.
Just as this *BHA News* went to press, we heard that posters put up by our affiliated society in Southbank University had been banned and ordered to be removed. They depicted a famous scene from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but with the original character of god replaced by the satirical online god, the ‘Flying Spaghetti Monster’. That such mild and inoffensive visual humour should be banned by a British university is appalling - but, unfortunately, not as unusual or surprising to us as it should be. Case after case has come to us in the past couple of years of our affiliates on campuses being censored, intimidated or otherwise disrupted as they try to go about their perfectly legitimate social and political activities. At Warwick University, our affiliated society had posters depicting discarded religious symbols banned, our Reading affiliate was harassed at Freshers’ Fair over a pineapple labeled ‘Mohammed’ and our affiliate at the LSE made national headlines when they were intimidated by University authorities for wearing T-shirts depicting the popular web comic ‘Jesus and Mo’.

The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Student Societies (AHSS), which is a network of societies facilitated by the BHA, has grown fast in the last couple of years, and it’s not surprising in light of all this. We need to support freethinking in universities just as much if not more as in our schools and we’re actively looking for ways that we can do that in the coming years.

Tickets are almost completely sold out for the World Humanist Congress so if you are intending to come you should hurry to whc2014.org.uk today! Just this week, with the release on license of Alexander Aan from an Indonesian jail, imprisoned for setting up an atheist Facebook page, and with the arrest of a British Muslim in Pakistan for blasphemy, we’re reminded how important the theme of Freedom of Thought and Expression is. I hope you will join us in Oxford and meet humanists from over forty countries. It is as much by building strong personal relationships and networks with our fellow humanists across the world as through our advocacy at the UN and elsewhere that we can create a better world.

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**Bentham Lecture: Humanism and the Posthuman Challenge**

One of the leading figures in feminist political theory, Professor Anne Phillips FBA, Graham Walls Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, presented our annual Bentham Lecture at University College London (UCL) on the topic *Humanism and the Posthuman Challenge* in November.

Professor Phillips discussed the technological and moral questions posed by recent developments in cybernetics and biotechnology, exploring how the modification of the human body will affect how we relate to one another; if it will be possible to use digital technology to enhance human intelligence way beyond what humans are currently capable of; and what kind of relationship these enhanced, or ‘posthumans’ will have with non-enhanced humans.

Professor Phillips expressed a sceptical attitude towards post- and trans-humanism, expressing concerns over equality and highlighting philosophers Francis Fukuyama, who reflected on what rights trans-humans would possess in comparison to ordinary humans, and Jürgen Habermas, who argued that the creation of trans-humans would place restrictions on human autonomy by subjecting individuals to specifications imposed by someone else.

The Bentham Lecture is organised by the Humanist Philosophers’ Group, with support from us and the UCL Philosophy Department.
Trainee teachers receive sessions on Humanism

Our Board member, David Pollock, delivered training sessions at universities in Sheffield, Liverpool, and London in December for students undertaking a postgraduate certificate in education. Students received a thorough background in the rich history of Humanism, as well as engaging with some of the big questions about morality, meaning, and purpose. The training ended with a session on how Humanism can contribute young people’s education within Religious Education.

CFI UK conference on science and pseudoscience

The Centre for Inquiry UK, the section of the BHA that aims to apply science and reason to questions regarding religion and the supernatural, contemporary ethical dilemmas, and social/political problems, held a day-conference on science and pseudoscience in December. Speakers included Professor Chris French from Goldsmiths University Department of Anomalistic Psychology speaking on parapsychology and science; Andy Lewis from Quackometer speaking on the rise of pseudoscience in UK Free Schools; James Ladyman, former editor of the British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, speaking on pseudo-science, lies and science fraud; and Stephen Law, senior lecturer at Heythrop College, speaking on young earth creationism.

Extremist religious groups block report on sexual and reproductive rights in European Parliament

The Estrela Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights was blocked in the European Parliament in December as a result of frantic lobbying by extremist religious groups. MEPs received more than 80,000 e-mails requesting them to reject the report, sometimes with personal threats. The report, authored by Portuguese MEP Edite Estrela, recommends that people have access to sex education, contraception, and safe abortion. It also takes gender-based violence (mostly against women) and the prevention and treatment of STIs into account.

Dying Matters Week launch

Humanist Ceremonies’ funeral celebrants are busy organising events to support Dying Matters Awareness week taking place from 12 – 18 May.

From talks and displays, stands and death cafes, celebrants will be supporting this year’s theme of ‘you only die once’ (yodo), and in particular encouraging members of the public to think about and record their funeral wishes.

We are a member of the Dying Matters coalition that aims to change public knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours towards dying, death, and bereavement. For more information see www.dyingmatters.org

Free School has links to private creationist school

We were alarmed to discover that one of the Free Schools opened last September, Tyndale Community School in Oxford, is co-sponsored by an organisation that also runs a private school that is part of the Christian Schools’ Trust network of creationist schools. The other sponsor, Chapel St, runs two Free Schools, with three more on the way.

Afghan Atheist granted asylum by Home Office

The Home Office has granted asylum to an Afghan atheist who is at risk of being persecuted or executed if he returns to his home country. This is one of the few times that the UK has granted asylum to an atheist on the grounds of protection from persecution for reasons of religion or belief.

BHA condemns gender segregation at university events

Together with the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS) we have condemned a report which endorsed gender segregation at university events. The report, published in November by Universities UK, the umbrella organisation for UK academic institutions, outlined guidance for managing controversial visiting speakers on university campuses.

The report stated that the segregation of the sexes at university events is not discriminatory as long as ‘both men and women are being treated equally, as they are both being segregated in the same way.’ Universities UK later withdrew this guidance after it generated widespread criticism.

World Humanist Congress Promotional Video

We have sold over 75% of the places at the World Humanist Congress taking place in August, and last month we launched the promotional video showing what the Congress is all about.

Narrated by our president Jim Al-Khalili, the short film gives you a taster of some of the incredible venues in Oxford we will have access to, and the inspiring speakers and sessions we have planned.

The video can be viewed at www.humanism.org.uk/whc2014video

Find out more and register your place at www.whc2014.org.uk
We are making it as easy as possible for people to find out more about Humanism, but we need your help.

We have been building a community of like-minded people who support our aims – there are active humanist groups across the UK organising events, lectures, discussions, and social events. Members have been volunteering in the community, providing pastoral support in hospices and hospitals, joining local networks and forums, and volunteering in schools.

Our public events have had some of the world’s leading academics, scientists, and philosophers presenting to sell-out audiences, and we have over 30,000 followers on Twitter, and 30,000 likes on Facebook.

We want to build our community, and that is where you can help.

**What you can do:**

1. Help raise our online profile: If you use Facebook then why not ‘Like’ our page and share our posts with your friends and family? www.facebook.com/humanism. For those of you who use Twitter, you can follow us at www.twitter.com/bahumanists and get the latest news and information about issues that concern you. Let your friends, family, and followers know what we are doing by getting active in our growing online network, and if they are not members, encouraging them to join.

2. Watch and share our videos on YouTube: We have over 100 videos on our YouTube channel organised into different playlists. Missed a lecture? You might find a video of it here. Want a short video explaining what Humanism is? We have a whole section of videos to help increase public understanding of Humanism.

3. Join your local group: You can find your local humanist group on our website and find out what they are up to. Not one near you? Then why not start one yourself? Check out www.humanism.org.uk/setupalocalgroup to find out what is involved, or give us a call on 020 7324 3060.

4. Book your ticket for the World Humanist Congress: This event only happens every three years, and this year we are the host. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet humanists from around the world, and show them what we have been up to. Don’t miss out! Book at www.whc2014.org.uk

**BHA responds to education consultations**

Richy, our Faith Schools Campaigner, has been very busy since last issue responding to education consultations.

We made a submission to the House of Commons Education Select Committee’s inquiry into Academies and Free Schools, outlining our concerns about the lack of transparency in the Free Schools approval process and the Churches’ attempts to take control of a lot more schools. We made a similar submission to the Labour Union of Teachers’ Education Inquiry.

Finally, the Fair Admissions Campaign made submissions to both A Better Future for Our Schools, a joint document by CASE, Forum, the Socialist Education Association, ISCG and Comprehensive Future; and to Compass and the National Union of Teachers’ Education Inquiry. Richy also spoke in Parliament about the Campaign at Comprehensive Future’s AGM.

**Inconsequential technicality means London Oratory decision to be quashed**

Last August we were celebrating after our complaint led to a comprehensive rewrite of the school’s admissions policy. Ten separate areas were found to be in breach of the Code, including the so-called ‘Catholic service criterion’, which required parents to take part in activities such as flower arranging. That bit was found to breach the Code for three separate reasons.

However, after the school threatened to judicially review the decision, the Government decided that there is an ‘arguable error in law’ in the decision as relates to one of those three. In spite of the fact that the mistake is inconsequential, this, they said, means that the whole decision must be quashed and redone. The school were only too happy to agree.

Back to the start we go then — we will be pushing for an even stronger ruling next time.

**New supplementary guidance on sex and relationships education**

Recent months have seen growing calls from us and many others for new statutory guidance on sex and relationships education — amazingly it hasn’t been updated since 2000. The current guidance pre-dates the repeal of section 28, the legalisation of civil partnerships, and soon, of same-sex marriage. It also fails to deal with contemporary issues such as cyber-bullying, sexting, and the widespread availability of internet porn.

First Nick Clegg, and then even David Cameron, called for an update to the guidance, and finally the Sex Education Forum (SEF), PSHE Association and Brook decided to team up and produce their own ‘supplement’ to it to deal with areas that need revising (we are a member of SEF). The Department for Education has now decided to back this document and we’re hopeful that this will mean that there will now, finally, be progress in the advice given to schools on this hugely important topic.
I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6 April to 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities or Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for that tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify.

I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give on or after 6 April 2008.

Using Gift Aid means that for every £1 of your donation, we can claim an extra 25p from the HMRC. All you need to do is complete this form — we do the rest and it costs you nothing!

I enclose a donation of £___________ to the British Humanist Association

Your Name: ______________________
Address: ________________________
________________________________
Post Code: ______________________

BHAN1401

Donate

Faith Schools Campaigner Appeal

Every year we fundraise to ensure we can employ our dedicated Faith Schools Campaigner, Richy Thompson, for another year and to fund his campaigning activities, and we are close to our target for 2014.

So please donate today at www.justgiving.com/nofaithschools

or send your donations to: BHA, 39 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB (making cheques out to ‘BHA’). Or you can donate with a credit or debit card by telephoning 020 7324 3060 or going to:

www.humanism.org.uk/donate

New research shows how intakes are manipulated

New research was published showing the extent to which some parents ‘game the system’ in order to get their children into ‘faith’ schools, where they perform well academically. Six percent of parents admitted to attending church regularly specifically to obtain places at schools for their children, which is staggering when you realise that nationally church attendance figures are also 6%.

Other new figures showed that the average age of baptisms and Christenings is getting later, with the Telegraph speculating that parents are increasingly only bothering to do so when they find they need to for school admissions.

Three other high profile schools found to break Admissions Code

In better news, three other extremely selective Church of England secondary schools were also found to have admissions policies that comprehensively break the School Admissions Code, each being ordered to make major rewrites.

All three are amongst the one percent most socio-economically selective in the country. One of them, Twyford Church of England High School in Ealing, had the most extreme admissions policy we’ve seen. They had prioritised pupils on the basis of parents’ activities such as ‘bell ringing’, ‘flower arranging at church’, ‘assisting with collection/counting money’, ‘tea & coffee rota’, ‘church cleaning’, ‘church maintenance’, ‘parish magazine editor’ and ‘technical support’. But now they’ve been forced to remove all of this.

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New Distinguished Supporter – Peter Tatchell

Peter Tatchell is best known for his work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender social movements, but over his long career his political campaigning has focused heavily on promoting equal rights and secularism, and against racism, and the both the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

In 2006, New Statesman readers voted him sixth on their list of “Heroes of our time”, in 2009 he was named Campaigner of the Year in The Observer Ethical Awards, was listed in the Evening Standard’s 1000 Most Influential Londoners, and received the London Citizen of Sanctuary Award, and the Shaheed Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti Award (for reporting the Balochistan national liberation struggle).

In 2010 he won Total Politics Top 50 Political Influencers. In 2012, he won the Irwin Prize in recognition of his lifelong commitment to the defence of human rights against religious fundamentalism. In 2012, he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement award at the UK’s first National Diversity Awards.

We are delighted to welcome Peter Tatchell to our list of Distinguished Supporters.

Peter will be at the World Humanist Congress, speaking with journalist, television presenter and Labour Party Peer Joan Bakewell, Baroness Bakewell, DBE about his life dedicated to human rights. Book at whc2014.org.uk

BHA v Government at Information Tribunal over Steiner schools

Once again we are set to take on the Department for Education at the Information Tribunal, over an aspect of its Free Schools programme. This time the case centres on Steiner schools, in particular the decision taken in 2010/11 to offer them state funding as part of the programme. We have reason to believe that the Free Schools team recommended that they do not get funding, but this was overruled. We are hoping to confirm whether this was indeed the case.

Our concerns about Steiner schools range from the widespread pseudoscience in the curriculum (including scepticism of evolution), to the schools employing ‘anthroposophical doctors’ to give homeopathy to children.

Obituary: Hetty Bower, political activist and humanist

In November, political campaigner and humanist Hetty Bower, died at the age of 108.

One of the longest standing supporters of the British Humanist Association, Hetty spent decades supporting anti-war causes in particular. Her legacy includes working with refugees during the Second World War, campaigning on issues that affect women, marching against hospital closures and cuts in services for the disabled and others, speaking at numerous anti-war events, including the Hiroshima Day ceremony at Tavistock Square in 2011 where she described her experience of World War One and the effect this was to have on the rest of her life: ‘War was a word to me. It seemed an idea that they should stop.’

Hetty once summed up her philosophy: ‘We may not win by protesting, but if we don’t protest we will lose. If we stand up to them, there is always a chance we will win.’
**From the Chair**

Pete Seeger’s death made me think about how a few good people can really make a difference. As a student in the late 1960’s, Seeger’s messages were part of my daily diet of strong ideas from popular musicians about a better future. How do we keep alive hope and belief in the possibility of a better future? Last year the world said goodbye to Nelson Mandela, a single example of what one good committed person can do, and how it empowers the rest of us.

Recently I read the seminal 1968 paper by Garrett Harding *The Tragedy of the Commons*. It is a stunningly well constructed logical argument for the proposal that we must accept that, because of its effects on those things that we hold in common in the world, the rational position on population was that we had to find a way to stop its growth, and that educating future generations in the rational analysis of such questions is the only solution.

Good education is the way to develop rational humans capable of the necessary personal and communal decisions for the planet and all its creatures. But it is in the area of education that there has been a steady stream of moves by the government that challenge the humanist principles upon which we believe the state should organise the administration and syllabus of schools. The objectives of good secular learning are being undermined and subverted by particular interest groups. Faith schools; local control of religious education; blocking compulsory Sex and Relationship Education in state schools; examples that we must continue to work on.

As I said last time, 2013 was a difficult year in which a great deal was achieved. As M. Scott Peck wrote, ‘Life is difficult’. Life is difficult for an organisation like the BHA, with the types of challenges that it takes on. But that difficulty doesn’t mean that it’s not hugely worthwhile and that we are not effective. We are growing in strength, year on year, both organisationally and in our effectiveness. We are using volunteers much better, and attracting committed and very able people to our causes and campaigns. We are also making our assets work harder in delivering the services and campaigns that we care about for the community.

Part of the difficulty is that there are always some areas where we haven’t been able to achieve as much as we would have liked — needing decisions about what we need to do with our resources in pursuit of the long term aims. The support for local groups has not been as strong as we would have liked and we will need to work more on that in the next couple of years. There is always a long list of more things that can and should be done by the BHA, so your support is the thing that will need to be continuous and steadfast to keep us on track, delivering the changes that together we seek in society and our own movement.

— Robert Ashby

**Humanist Volunteers for Schools**

In partnership with local humanist groups we’re delivering training courses for our School Volunteer Programme to support humanists to work with teachers in schools.

The course aims to increase volunteer knowledge of how schools work and their confidence in working at the planning stages with teachers.

Have you ever:

- Wished that you could make a difference to someone’s life?
- Considered the importance of making sure young people understand the world they live in more fully and the range of belief and value systems that enable us to live together in harmony?
- Thought about how you could use your knowledge and your life experience to help young people learn about Humanism?

The first training has taken place in Swindon, and we are in discussion with groups from across England and in Wales to set more up over the coming year.

Find out more at: humanism.org.uk/schoolvolunteers

**Local Groups review**

**Lancashire Humanists**

Lancashire Humanists hosted a meeting on the religious dimension of the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Presented by Gina Dowding, Lancaster Central’s Green Party county councillor, the event focussed on her visits to the West Bank and experience of the religious and secular tensions of the national identities and intentions of the respective governments.

Find out more at: www.lancshumanism.org.uk

**Hull and East Riding Humanists**

Lynn Peterson spoke to Hull and East Riding Humanists about her work with LifeLines, an organisation that supports and befriends prisoners on Death Row throughout the United States through letter writing.

LifeLines is the first established organisation of its kind, and has spread both nationally and internationally, with members all over the world.

Find out more at: www.hull-and-east-riding.humanist.org.uk

**Shropshire Humanists**

Shropshire has the Darwin Festival in February coordinated by Shropshire Wildlife Trust, and members of the Shropshire Humanists attended a number of the events over the week. The main event, however, was the Darwin Memorial Lecture titled *Masterpieces are not single births: Darwin and his predecessors* presented by Dr Rebecca Stott. The Darwin Memorial Lecture is sponsored by the Friends of Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, and focussed on the influences on Darwin and the evolution of his ideas.

Find out more at: www.shropshire.humanism.org.uk
The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity.

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DISCLAIMER: Humanists do not agree about everything and some readers will disagree with some views expressed in this newsletter. The opinions of individual humanists are always interesting but are not, of course, necessarily BHA policy. On occasion we include inserts with BHA News. Many of these are part of reciprocal arrangements that allow us to send our leaflets to other organisations’ subscribers. We only accept inserts we think may be of interest to some of our readers, and will not include material promoting causes we oppose. Please do not assume that inserts imply BHA involvement with the cause or campaign, unless otherwise stated.