

A Humanist Manifesto for the 2005 General Election

Humanists believe we have only one life, and we embrace the responsibility to lead our lives ethically and to work with others for the common good.

We want a society that is:

- an 'open society'; one that is "based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth"¹

Government listens too much to demands from 'the majority' and the media - moral panics make bad law. Human rights and individual freedom should be curtailed only in the most exceptional circumstances. The proposed Commission on Equality and Human Rights is welcome and should be accompanied by a comprehensive Single Equality Act.

- inclusive, and values cooperation and compassion at least as much as competition

An overly-competitive society is hostile to the human values that enhance individual life and happiness and inform policies to improve the plight of the poor and oppressed here and around the world.

- secular, giving no privilege to any particular religion or belief (including Humanism)

Religious privilege in the UK is extensive, is growing, and should be eliminated. Christians and others who see a secular and plural society as hostile to religion should understand the difference between hostility and neutrality.

We want a Government that will:

- give equal recognition to religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs such as Humanism

The law recognises religious but not humanist weddings. The Charities Bill explicitly recognises advancement of religion as charitable but not advancement of non-religious beliefs. The Equality Bill proposes to legalise discrimination against humanists by LEAs in the provision of subsidised school transport. The Home Office deliberately excluded humanists from the working party that produced the 'Working Together' report on how government should consult with 'faith community leaders'. Government departments pay too much attention to the views of religious leaders, many of whom are considerably more reactionary than the communities they claim to represent. Many religious organisations are undemocratic and oppressive towards women and dissenting minorities in their own communities: consulting with their leaders increases their power over 'their' community, and marginalises dissenting voices.

- eliminate privileges for religion or belief

The blasphemy law and the 26 seats for Church of England bishops in Parliament should be abolished. Exemptions for religion from the laws against discrimination based on sex and sexuality and religion or belief should be minimised: the present Bill on religious discrimination merely codifies existing discriminatory practice. Exemption from animal welfare laws for ritual slaughter should be abolished (as in some other countries). Thousands of mainly Christian chaplains are employed in the armed forces, NHS and prisons: provision should also be made for the large and growing non-religious population. The BBC provides many hours of broadcasting every week by Christians about Christianity for Christians, but never an equivalent programme about Humanism: the Government should correct this in the process of renewing the BBC Charter.

¹ George Soros: appendix to *The Bubble of American Supremacy* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

- uphold religious freedom at home and abroad, and oppose bullying by religious groups and legal restrictions on individual freedom based on religious doctrines

The recent violent demonstrations by Sikhs against a play by a Sikh playwright should have been forcefully condemned by Ministers, as should the harassment by Christian Voice of BBC executives over the televising of 'Jerry Springer – The Opera'. Religious doctrine should not be allowed to dictate the law on (for example) euthanasia, abortion or stem cell research. Internationally, religious pressure to prevent the promotion of contraception and the use of condoms to combat AIDS should be resisted and denounced.

- remove the pro-religious bias in schools

Religious worship should be permitted in community schools only as an opt-in extra - at present daily acts of mainly Christian worship are required by law. The remaining pro-religious bias in the new National Framework for Religious Education should be removed and the framework should become mandatory so that RE turns into objective, fair and balanced education about religious and non-religious belief systems. Discrimination against humanists on LEA advisory bodies on RE should be removed.

- halt the expansion of faith-based and sectarian schools and progressively diminish their privileges until they are assimilated into the community school system

The arguments against faith schools are overwhelming and widely accepted. They pour public money into the promotion of particular religions, with some schools openly acknowledging that they indoctrinate their pupils. Socially, religiously and ethnically divisive, they offer selective education by the back door, run contrary to all the ideals of social inclusion and cohesion, and segregate children by the religious beliefs of their parents, and often also by ethnicity. Their comparative academic success is accounted for by their selectively middle-class intake, and their positive ethos is paralleled in countless community schools. Religions should use the home or church or mosque, etc, to propagate their beliefs.

- ban teaching of creationism as a scientific theory to rival evolution in schools paid for by public funds

This applies not only to the growing number of 'independent' academies but also to some voluntary aided faith schools. Belief that the world was created a few thousand years ago is no more scientific than the belief that it is flat or that the sun and planets revolve around it, and should never be taught in the science curriculum or as fact.

- keep religion out of delivery of public services

Public services are increasingly being delivered through faith groups. Already religious organisations such as hospices, operating with public money, promote religion to unwilling service-users. This alienates those not of the relevant religion, sometimes deterring them from accepting the service at all, and gives improper support to religious organisations.



Humanism: a firm foundation for ethics and morality in a secular age