



AHS 2011 AGM - minutes

Date: 9th July 2011

Place: University of Southampton

Chair: President Richy Thompson

Voters

Voting attendees (28): Richy Thompson (AHS Executive – casting vote), Nicola Jackson (AHS Executive), James Murray (AHS Executive), Andrew Copson (AHS Board), Norman Ralph (AHS Board), Andrew West (AHS Board), Jenna Catley-Richardson (AHS Board), Stuart Pilbrow (Warwick Atheists), Will Wybrow (Warwick Atheists), Jens Christensen (Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society), Ben Millwood (Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society), Jenny Bartle (University of Bristol Atheist, Agnostic and Secular Society), Michael Harratt (University of Bristol Atheist, Agnostic and Secular Society), Jordan Milton (University of Southampton Atheist Society), Mathew Power (University of Southampton Atheist Society), Adam Blackwell (Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society), Emma Bryce (Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society), Sam Corcoran (UCLU Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society), Dom Blacklock (UCLU Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society), Katherine Draxlbauer (University of Birmingham Atheist, Secular and Humanist Society), Benjamin Mee (University of Birmingham Atheist, Secular and Humanist Society), Alex Gabriel (Oxford Atheists, Secularists and Humanists), Chris Wilton (Open University Secular Students), Tulpesh Patel (Aston Humanist Society), Jenifer Hardy (Queen Mary Atheism Society), Catherine Capone (LSEU Atheist and Humanist Society), David Jenkins (Bradford Atheist and Humanist Society), Ellettra Rastelli (Leeds Atheist Society)

Non-voters attendees (8): Emma Bell, Mike Paynter, Damian Rumble, Dan Fahey, Sam Cannon, Sam Whitehall, Jess Vautier, Tom Grainger

Apologies from societies: De Montfort University Rationalist Society, University of Derby Humanist, Secular and Atheist Society, York University Agnostic & Atheist Society, UCC Atheist Society, UAL Atheist Skeptical Society, Sussex University Secular Society, Bangor University Science, Evolution and Atheism Society

Introduction

Richy Thompson and Nicola Jackson introduced the AGM

Message from the Board: Jenna Catley-Richardson spoke on behalf on Board:

Constitutionally, the Board shall have ultimate management responsibility for the AHS, reporting to the Trustees of the British Humanist Association. The Board shall have management responsibility for the financial state of the AHS, including any budget delegated by the Trustees of the British Humanist Association. The Board currently has seven members: three AHS appointees – Alex Gibson, David Pollock, and Andrew West; and two BHA appointees - Jenna Catley-Richardson (myself, Acting Chair) and Norman Ralph. We are both ex-Presidents of the AHS. We are joined by the Chief Executive of the BHA, Andrew Copson, and the current President of the AHS, Richy Thompson.

But what do we actually do?

The Board of the AHS was constituted at the 2010 AGM to add a formal level of support to the structure of the AHS. The Board was conceived as an advisory body consisting of experienced members of the AHS and representatives from the BHA experienced and interested in student affairs. The AHS being run by and for students sees a continual turnover of personnel, most officers holding positions for just one year. To facilitate handover between Executives and to ensure the combined experience of past officers sees the organisation learning from and building on its successes and its mistakes, a more permanent fixture, the Board was put into place by a vote of the Caucus.

While most of the Caucus will not come into contact with Board, the President reports to the Board on behalf of the Executive. For the most part, the four physical annual meetings between the Board and the President of the AHS serve to provide an opportunity for reporting which is a useful exercise in focus, appraisal and reflection for the Executive. The Board is there to listen, provide reassurance and support, to raise questions, and to make suggestions. Whilst the Board does not govern the AHS in terms of policy and execution of the aims, it is responsible for governance in ensuring that the decisions of the Executive are in the best interests of a long lasting AHS. The Board may additionally be called upon to act as impartial mediators in disagreements between AHS personnel for example in Executive Conciliation.

Individual Board members offer a variety of viewpoints based on their experience but the shared motivation of the Board is the best interests of the AHS. This is judged from a variety of standpoints including financial and administrative; and with regard to the spirit of the AHS, which the Board members have a keen understanding of, most having been involved in the founding of the AHS.

As individual members of the Caucus, Board members have the right to speak and to vote at the AGM.

Any questions may be directed to Jenna Catley-Richardson, Acting Chair of the Board

Yearly report

The yearly report was led by Richy Thompson and included James Murray reporting on the finances over the last year and Michael Paynter explaining the new branding of the Regional Development Officer scheme and work on Freedom of Information requests.

Please see the 2010-11 Annual Report for further details.

Motions

Motion to represent new organisation on the AHS Board

Proposed: Alex Gabriel

Seconded: Emma Bryce

NB: the following motion proposes changes to the AHS Board's composition. As such, it is suggested that current Board members abstain from voting due to conflict of interest.

This caucus notes:

- 1. The AHS's relationship with the British Humanist Association (hereafter 'the BHA') has a great deal of constitutional influence at present. Specifically:*
 - Amendments to the AHS Constitution must be ratified by a two thirds majority of BHA Trustees.*
 - The AHS cannot disband without the agreement of BHA Trustees.*
 - The AHS cannot affiliate with any organisations without the agreement of BHA Trustees.*
 - The BHA currently provides 4 of the AHS Board's 7 members (6 of whom hold BHA positions) and its Chief Executive, currently Andrew Copson, has an automatic place on the AHS Board.*
- 2. AHS Members' viewpoints vary more than this conveys. Of 34, only 6 identify solely as humanist groups; 17 (half) have titles not including 'humanist'. Most of these identify as atheist and/or secular(ist) societies; 'rationalist', 'skeptical' and 'agnostic' and 'evolution' also occur.*
 - As such, individual members frequently question the non-involvement of other national bodies, and specifically the National Secular Society (hereafter 'the NSS'), in the AHS's day- to-day running.*
- 3. The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (hereafter 'the RDF'), the BHA and the NSS can respectively be considered representative of atheism, humanism and secularism.*

- *The RDF focuses on outspoken atheist identification more than its peers with the OUT Campaign, its charity initiatives Non-Believers Giving Aid and For Goodness Sake and the 'scarlet letter' graphic.*
 - *Although BHA publicity material emphasises representation of the non-religious (atheism) and advocacy for a secular state (secularism), its Humanist Ceremonies Network and attention to broader ethical issues – assisted dying, sex education etc. – are what distinguish it from similar organisations.*
 - *The NSS announced its intention last year to 'leave humanism for the humanist groups, atheism to the atheist groups and fix [its] sights uniquely on secularism'; the secular charter accompanying this announcement set out a secularist viewpoint more explicit and ideological than the BHA's or RDF's.*
4. *Previously, perceptions of mutual animosity have hampered the BHA's relations with other groups, especially the NSS. However, with NSS Vice President Gerard Phillips speaking at the AHS Convention in 2011 and BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson calling for future cooperation, this trend is reversing.*

This caucus believes:

1. *The AHS's vital relationship with the BHA (as outlined in Section 12 of the AHS Constitution) entitles the BHA to strong representation, specifically on the AHS Board, but must never be our only relationship.*
 - *To represent the broader views of our individual members and their societies properly, the AHS should continue building bridges with other organisations: specifically, the RDF and NSS.*
2. *Organisations such as the RDF, BHA and NSS are at their best when working together. As an explicitly atheist, humanist and secular(ist) national body, the AHS is an excellent forum for this.*
3. *The RDF has much to offer the AHS. Specifically:*
 - *Our financial model is more like the RDF's than the BHA's, not being based on individuals' membership fees. This means the RDF can (a) give very salient financial advice, and (b) supplement the BHA's monetary support for the AHS if necessary, having previously sponsored Members' events.*
 - *The RDF's event-planning resources are considerable, including the unique overseas links shown by their recent collaboration with Project Reason alongside OxASH, the BHA and Centre for Inquiry UK. Stronger ties of this kind are an excellent future goal for the AHS.*
 - *Finally, closer relations with the RDF will aid interactions with Richard Dawkins himself. Not all AHS individuals share the same view of him, but this would be helpful; the current executive has waited several months to meet with him, and close work with his organisation could eliminate future delays.*
4. *The NSS has much to offer the AHS. Specifically:*
 - *Despite limited finances and fewer members than the BHA, the NSS has considerable campaigning achievements to its name, such as successful lobbying for sixth form students' right to withdraw from collective worship and*

parliamentary debates in the House of Lords. As another organisation aiming to punch above its weight, the AHS could learn much from these achievements.

- *The NSS has close access to worldwide church-and-state developments, especially via its Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood who has opposed Vatican activities from the floor of the United Nations. This would be an asset to the AHS, especially in its work with other organisations.*
- *Similarly, the NSS has a detailed grasp of current events: its most recent Newline at the time of writing details events in Glasgow, Bridport, Surrey and Kent. Local lobbying can be an essential part of an AHS member group's activities, and the NSS's resources could be invaluable in coordinating this as well as for future Press Officers and freedom of information requests.*

This caucus resolves:

1. *To include NSS and RDF representatives in the AHS Board, forming a new board composed of the following members:*
 - *1-4 representatives appointed by the AHS, including the AHS President.*
 - *1-2 representatives appointed by the BHA, including the BHA's Chief Executive.*
 - *1 representative appointed by the NSS.*
 - *1 representative appointed by the RDF.*
2. *To require only the reformed AHS Board's ratification to dissolve or for constitutional amendments not directly related to BHA facilitation. BHA Trustees' ratification will still be sought for other amendments.*

The following Constitutional amendments shall therefore be made:

2.1. The AHS shall be an association of atheist, Humanist and secular student societies, facilitated and supported by the British Humanist Association.

Shall now read

2.1. The AHS shall be an association of atheist, Humanist and secular student societies, facilitated and supported by the British Humanist Association and also supported by the National Secular Society and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.

6.1. There shall be a Board which shall elect its own chair and which shall have ultimate management responsibility for the AHS, reporting to the Trustees of the British Humanist Association, consisting of...

Shall now read

6.1. There shall be a Board which shall elect its own chair and which shall have ultimate management responsibility for the AHS, consisting of...

6.1.1. Up to four members appointed by the Executive

Shall now read

6.1.1. Up to four members appointed by the Executive, including the President of the AHS

6.1.2. Up to three members appointed by the Trustees of the British Humanist Association

Shall now read

6.1.2. One to two members appointed by the Trustees of the British Humanist Association, including the Chief Executive of the BHA

6.1.3. The President of the AHS

Shall now read

6.1.3. One member appointed by the Council of the National Secular Society

6.1.4. The Chief Executive of the BHA

Shall now read

6.1.4. One member appointed by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

6.2.5. No member of the Caucus under 4.1.1. and 4.1.2., Executive, or Officer may be appointed as a member of the Board under 6.1.1. Or 6.1.2. and no Board member under 6.1.1. Or 6.1.2. may be a member of the Caucus under 4.1.1. and 4.1.2., Executive nor an Officer.

Shall now read

6.2.5. No member of the Caucus under 4.1.1. and 4.1.2., Executive or Officer may be appointed as a member of the Board under 6.1.1., 6.1.2., 6.1.3. or 6.1.4. and no Board member may be a member of the Caucus under 4.1.1. and 4.1.2. Executive nor Officer.

Insert new clause in section 6 after 6.2.5.:

6.2.6. The Council of the NSS may at any time remove a member of the Board appointed under 6.1.3.

Insert new clause in section 6 after 6.2.6.:

6.2.7. The Richard Dawkins Foundation may at any time remove a member of the Board appointed under 6.1.4.

Insert new clause in section 6 after 6.2.7.:

6.2.8. In the event that one of the three other organization (BHA, NSS or RDF) splits up the organisation will continue to have one representative until the next AHS AGM or EGM.

Insert new clause in section 6 after 6.2.8.:

6.2.5. In the event that any one supporter organization (BHA, NSS or RDF) ceases to exist or becomes inactive, the organization will lose their seat on the Board. This will be subject to a two thirds majority of the Caucus.

13.1. The AHS shall be affiliated with any organization that furthers the aims of the AHS by majority resolution of the Caucus and agreement of the Trustees of the British Humanist Association.

Shall now read

13.1. The AHS shall be affiliated with any organization that furthers the aims of the AHS by majority resolution of the Caucus.

14.1. This constitution may only be amended or the AHS dissolved by a two-thirds majority of the Caucus and a two-thirds majority of the Trustees of the British Humanist Association.

Shall now read

14.1. This constitution may only be amended or the AHS dissolved by a two-thirds majority of the Caucus.

Alex Gabriel presented the motion, and with Emma Bryce spoke several times for the motion. Andrew Copson and Richy Thompson gave speeches against the motion. To give his speech, Richy Thompson temporarily ceded the Chair to Jess Vautier.

The motion suggested that the Board abstain from voting. This was put to a vote of non-Board members:

- 12 voted that the Board should be able to vote.
- 10 voted that the Board should not be able to vote.

As a result, it was agreed that the Board should be allowed to vote on the motion.

Move to vote called and passed.

Final vote:

- 9 Supported the motion
- 18 Opposed the motion
- 0 Abstained the motion

The motion failed.

Motion to allow joint candidacies for Executive positions

Proposed: Emma Bryce

Seconded: Aaron Keohane on behalf of Nicola Jackson

This Caucus notes:

This year the AHS has grown considerably (both in terms of membership, and its remit), and is likely to continue to do so, meaning it takes a greater amount of time and dedication to run.

Executive Roles are large ones, and as we have seen from past Executive Officers, arguably too large for a single individual to dedicate sufficient time to while still in education, or in full-time employment.

That only permitting individuals to run for larger positions (particularly President) means that the potential pool of applicants able to commit sufficient time may be limited to those with the financial means to dedicate a year solely to the role.

That permitting co- Executive Officers allows individuals to play a role in the AHS who may otherwise be unable to or unwilling to, meaning that all good candidates are able to run.

This Caucus believes:

It is unfair, and detrimental to the AHS, to have a structure that prevents individuals from being involved in larger roles due to their personal circumstances.

The potential for co-Executive Officers means that a more diverse range of skill-sets and interest areas are present in the team running the AHS.

It is simple to solve any practical problems by the co-Executive Officers sharing the single vote of their office, and having clear structures in place to resolve disputes meaning that the balance of power remains the same.

That the potential for co-Executive Officers does not negatively affect candidates standing alone, there being advantages to both options, and some roles, either by their nature or size, being better suited to a single Executive Officer. It is for the Caucus to choose what is best for the AHS in each individual case.

This Caucus resolves:

To permit joint candidacies for Executive positions, that is, two individuals running together with the intention of sharing the role.

That at the first meeting of the Executive, areas of responsibility for each of the co-Executive Officers will be noted by the secretary, any further changes throughout the year will not be deemed valid unless the secretary is informed via email with three days' notice.

The following Constitutional amendments shall therefore be made:

5.1.1. The President, who shall be chief executive officer of the AHS and shall chair the Executive and the Caucus.

Shall now read

5.1.1. The President(s), who shall be chief executive officer of the AHS and shall chair the Executive and the Caucus.

5.1.2. The Treasurer, who shall be the chief financial officer of the AHS and shall be responsible for presenting the financial situation of the AHS to any Member Society and at meetings of the Executive or the Caucus.

Shall now read

5.1.2. The Treasurer(s), who shall be the chief financial officer of the AHS and shall be responsible for presenting the financial situation of the AHS to any Member Society and at meetings of the Executive or the Caucus.

5.1.3. The Secretary, who shall be the chief administrative officer of the AHS and be responsible for recording the happenings at any meeting of the Executive or the Caucus.

Shall now read

5.1.3. The Secretary (or Secretaries), who shall be the chief administrative officer of the AHS and be responsible for recording the happenings at any meeting of the Executive or the Caucus.

Insert new clause in Section 5 after 5.4:

5.5 Where there are Co-Executive Officers, they shall share the single vote of their office, and function as one Executive member for all purposes.

6.1.3. The President of the AHS

Shall now read

6.1.3. The President(s) of the AHS

A change for it to only apply to two people and no more was suggested and accepted.

Emma Bryce presented the motion, and with Nicola Jackson spoke several times for the motion. Mike Paynter, Sam Corcoran, Richy Thompson, Jenna Catley-Richardson and Norman Ralph gave speeches against the motion. To give his speech, Richy Thompson temporarily ceded the Chair to Dan Fahey.

Move to vote called and passed.

Final vote:

- 10 supported the motion
- 17 Opposed the motion
- 0 Abstained

Motion failed.

Motion to create the Executive position of Vice-President

Proposed: Michael Harratt on behalf of Damian Rumble

Seconded: Benjamin Mee

This Caucus notes:

In previous years the membership of the AHS was small enough to be handled by an executive of three. Now this is neither representative of, or large enough to handle such a large body of people.

The AHS executive has a history of poor retention amongst its elected and appointed representatives. At times the AHS has been run by two or even one person.

The loss of executive members represent a substantial existential threat to the AHS.

The AHS is responsible for an increasingly large geographical area which represents logistical problems for the current three man executive.

This Caucus believes:

A four man executive team will greatly improve productivity of the AHS; allowing more input into the decision making process, more delegation options when running large events, more flexibility in representing the AHS across country and greater security in the event of other executive officers being unable to fulfil their responsibilities.

Not having some kind of back up option in the event of the loss of executive officers is an unacceptable risk to the functioning of AHS and puts unnecessary responsibility on the other officers.

four people is better than three as there will be a wider array of skills to utilise and views to consider in the running of the AHS.

This Caucus resolves:

To permit candidates to run for election to the position of Vice-President.

The Vice-President duties are to support the president (and other executive officers) in the running and representation of the AHS.

In the event of one of the other executive officers being unable to fulfil their roles, the Vice-President is obligated to cover their role until a suitable replacement can be found.

Other duties of the Vice-President will be discussed at the first meeting of the executive.

The following Constitutional amendments will therefore be made:

Insert new clause after 5.1.3:

5.1.4. The Vice-President, who shall be an executive officer of the AHS and shall support the other executive officers in their responsibilities and cover for them in the event they are unable to fulfill those duties.

Damian Rumble presented the motion, and with Benjamin Mee spoke for it.

The motion was discussed at length, but ultimately withdrawn.

Elections

Jess Vautier was unanimously voted as Returning Officer .

President

Jenny Bartle stood unopposed.

Vote:

- For - 24
- Re-Open Nominations - 1
- Abstaining - 2

Jenny Bartle elected President.

Treasurer

Dom Blacklock stood unopposed.

Vote:

- For - 24
- Re-Open Nominations - 0
- Abstentions - 3

Dom Blacklock elected Treasurer.

Secretary

Michael Paynter and Damian Rumble both stood.

Vote:

- Michael - 25
- Damian - 3
- Re-Open Nominations - 0
- Abstentions - 0

Michael Paynter was elected Secretary.

Letter from University of Edinburgh Humanist Society

A message from University of Edinburgh Humanist Society received just before the AGM. President Richy Thompson read the letter out in full, and it is included below.

This statement has been prepared by the standing committee of the University of Edinburgh Humanist Society, to be presented to the AHS 2011 AGM.

First, we believe that the structure and focus of the federation has shifted disproportionately towards the expansionist aspects of its mission, with too much emphasis being placed on the importance of its central organisation and executive committee instead of on the welfare of its member societies. We feel that these goals do not appropriately represent those of those societies, which is a central purpose for which the organisation was founded. We also feel that the litany of personal attacks against a member of the executive committee was deeply unprofessional and damaging to the reputations of both the AHS and its constituent members.

This systemic disregard for member societies can perhaps most obviously be seen in the manner in which decisions are increasingly being made behind closed doors by the executive committee. A prominent example of this is the recent decision to charge entry to the AGM

weekend, a measure which apparently was discussed extensively, but seems not to have been mentioned to any of the caucus members until it was put in place. The UoEHS committee feels strongly that a vote for a change on such a fundamental issue would have been far more appropriate.

The attempts by Richy Thompson and Nicola Jackson to deal with our grievances outside of the AGM by inviting us to meet the night before the AGM before discussing anything with the other AHS delegates only goes to show how eager the executive committee are to quietly deal with issues behind closed doors which should involve the entire federation.

Secondly, it is the opinion of the committee of the University of Edinburgh Humanist Society that the AHS does not live up to the original aims that we helped found the society with. Though the AHS claims to build, support and represent societies, any efforts towards this aim have not been effectively reported to its members for quite some time. As it stands, this limited progress would not appear to be worth the amount of time, effort and money required from member societies.

The UoEHS, which has been involved in the AHS since its inception, has received little support, developmental assistance or significant publicity from its four years of active association. Instead, we have received unnecessary hostility and dismissive responses when questioning unilateral decisions taken by the AHS executive committee. In violation of the central values of openness and transparency in the AHS, these communications came from the serving president and were apparently unknown to the majority of the executive committee.

The aim of the AHS to facilitate communication between societies seems to have slipped into facilitating communication between the executive committee and the clearly now subordinate member societies. The UoEHS expresses alarm that little is made of inter-society endeavour in AHS communications.

The pressing question is, given the above concerns, what benefit does the AHS really provide for its members, both new and established?

In light of these factors the UoEHS committee feels that a satisfactory answer is yet to be found and as such we have collectively decided to suspend our membership pending an EGM in September of this year.

We would like to reassure all concerned that we have no issue with any of the AHS member societies and will continue to extend the same degree of friendship and co-operation to all.

Micheal Newman, Secretary

Lauchlan Hall

Mary Hucker, Treasurer

Kyna Reeves, Ordinary Member