

Humanist Association of Ireland Submission to the Working Group on Domestic Partnership established by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Executive Summary

The Humanist Association of Ireland contends in this submission that in relation to marriage of Irish citizens the State should legislate for two categories of persons only: those who have entered into a civil marriage agreement, and those who, while living in a manner that could be objectively described as married, have not signed a civil agreement to this effect.

Introduction

The Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI) is a company limited by guarantee without having share capital, and with an elected Board of Directors. It is a member organisation of the European Humanist Federation and is affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

It is a voluntary body founded in 1993 to promote the ideals and values of Humanism: an ethical philosophy of life, based on a concern for humanity in general, and for human individuals in particular. This view of life combines reason with compassion. It is for those people who base their interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. In this, Humanism continues a tradition which has existed for over 2,500 years and which still flourishes today. Humanism encompasses atheists and agnostics, but is an active philosophy in its own right and not simply a negative response to religion.

A Humanist believes that the happiness of individuals and of humankind depends on people, rather than on religion and dogma. We encourage open-minded enquiry into matters relevant to human co-existence and well-being and believe that people can and will continue to find solutions to the world's problems so that quality of life can be improved for everyone. As Humanists we are committed to the application of reason and science, to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.

Both in personal and social terms we believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness and responsibility. Moreover, our ethics are amenable to critical, rational guidance. It follows from such commitments and beliefs that we are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with the elimination of discrimination and intolerance. We support the axiom that a separation of Church and State will facilitate the achieving of a society that is open, tolerant and pluralist.

In pursuance of these ideals, the HAI provides support and representation to people who seek to live full responsible lives without religion, assisting in the provision of secular ceremonies of births, weddings and funerals, publishing a quarterly journal *The Irish Humanist*, maintaining an informative website (www.irish-humanists.org) and making constant endeavours to voice the Humanist and secular viewpoint in both the print and broadcast media. In addition, the HAI makes appropriate submissions to Government, organises seminars and workshops and contributes to cultural life. In short, Humanists are positive, gaining inspiration from our lives, art and culture, and a rich natural world. It is worthy of note that those who do not avow any religion now form the largest ethical minority within the country, greater in fact than the other four minority Christian denominations combined – Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Orthodox and Methodist (National Census 2002).

Humanist Association of Ireland and Domestic Partnership

Individuals across many cultures and belief systems find satisfaction and joy in making public commitment to another person. To Humanists such relationships are of prime importance and for this reason Humanist organisations (including the HAI) currently facilitate ceremonies where such commitments are made.

Under the constitution the State is bound to defend marriage, presumably in the belief that long term relationships between individuals are conducive to the stability of society. Humanists along with the major religions would be, broadly, in agreement with such an understanding of human society. However, Humanists see no reason for the State to privilege marriage to one form of relationship between two people. In fact we believe that the expansion of the definition of marriage would tend to strengthen the institution of marriage, for it would encompass a larger segment of society.

All individuals fulfilling the legal requirements such as age and competence should, on signing the civil contract of marriage, be equal before the law as regards the rights and responsibilities of those who are married. Thus, a Humanist marriage ceremony may include particular promises and commitments differing significantly from those made during the ceremony of a particular religious denomination. However, the civil contract remains the same in all marriage ceremonies. The State therefore can remain neutral to such personal (often deeply so) and private aspects of marriage.

Thus, the HAI considers that the Working Group need consider only one relationship type that is outside of traditional marriage, and this is one between two people who, while living in a manner that could be objectively described as married, do not sign a civil agreement to this effect. This must present the State and the individuals themselves with difficulties in relation to such matters as tax liability and property inheritance rights.

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