

## CHAMPIONING CHANGE

Humanists have played a leading role in bringing about many important social reforms. The central humanist values of thinking for yourself and acting for others have made many not just willing to question the status quo, but motivated to work hard for change.

Humanists do not try to claim all the credit for these achievements. However, these examples help to illustrate the influence humanists have had on human freedoms, rights, and equality.

### **1911: THE WORLD'S FIRST ANTI-RACISM CONFERENCE**

The First Universal Races Congress was organised by humanists, most notably Gustav Spiller. The Congress brought together delegates from over 50 countries in an effort to increase international understanding, break down prejudice, and challenge racist ideas.



American intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois

### **1946: A GLOBAL BODY FOR PEACE AND COOPERATION**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded in 1945 to promote international peace through education, science and cooperation. It was founded on humanist values, and its first Director was Julian Huxley. Huxley was also the first President of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK).

Sir Julian Huxley  
by Howard Coster  
half-plate film  
negative,  
1939 NPG x21138  
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### **1928: WINNING WOMEN THE RIGHT TO VOTE**

Many humanists fought for the right for women to vote in elections: only finally achieved on the same terms as men in 1928 with the Representation of the People Act (Equal Franchise). They challenged traditional ideas about women (which were often justified with religious notions of men and women's 'places' in society). One of the earliest of these was Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who started working for women's rights in the 1860s. She died in 1918 - the year some women got the vote.



Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (right)  
with Emmeline Pankhurst

## **1955: MORALS WITHOUT RELIGION**

In January 1955, psychologist and humanist Margaret Knight gave two talks on the BBC World Service arguing for education based on humanism, rather than religion. These programmes had been years in the making, with Knight having to make the case for broadcasts on humanist ethics to BBC controllers who feared an 'attack' on Christian values. In fact, Knight's talks recognised that many people were doubting - or no longer believed in - traditional religious ideas already, making it sensible (and helpful) to propose a basis for ethics that did not rely on religion. The recognition that we could be good without religion was something long understood by humanists and is recognised by many people today.

Although Knight received a great deal of criticism, she also received an outpouring of public support, and played a major role in opening up the debate about who should be represented in broadcasting, and about religious education in schools. She went on to publish the Humanist Anthology, which brought together examples of humanist thinking from the ancient world to the modern day, doing much to improve people's understanding of the long history of humanist thought.

**Margaret Knight**



## **1948: CREATING THE NHS**

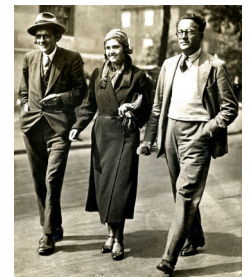
The bold thinking of three pioneering humanists (William Beveridge, Clement Attlee, and Nye Bevan) lay behind the creation of the UK's National Health Service. Labour Minister of Health Nye Bevan, who had been born into a Welsh working class mining family, worked tirelessly to bring the NHS into being: providing healthcare free at the point of use to everyone in the UK.



**Nye Bevan in a Manchester hospital on the first day of the NHS, 5 July 1948**

## **1969: A 'UNIVERSITY OF THE AIR'**

The Open University was launched in 1969 under humanist Minister for Education Jennie Lee. It aimed to make good quality higher education accessible to all, regardless of wealth or circumstance. Jennie Lee, like her husband Nye Bevan, was a humanist.



**Jennie Lee walking to the House of Commons in 1929**

Throughout history, in all manner of reforms - social, cultural, and educational - non-religious people have played a major role. Humanists have had a profound influence on the modern world in which we live today, which, for many people, is a much more equal and secular world, with greater freedoms and rights, and increased tolerance, inclusion, and opportunity.

Of course, humanists have worked alongside those of other beliefs to achieve many of these reforms, but at times they have had to fight for the recognition that non-religious people can be just as moral, compassionate, and motivated as the religious. Guided by the principle of thinking for oneself, and acting for others, humanists have been actively involved in some of the most historically significant changes in society.