

HSLD 2020 Leadership Contest Interviews:

Ed Davey MP



Interviewed, Tuesday 21st July 2020 by Toby Keynes, HSLD Chair.

Toby Keynes:

Hello; welcome, Ed Davey.

Thank you for taking the time to join us for our second interview with a party leadership candidate, the last in this series, and I hope we won't be starting another series too soon with any luck.

As with Layla, we just have half an hour, so bearing in mind there are a huge number of virtual hustings and events in which you're giving your all and your general leadership pitch we will skip that if that's OK with you...

Ed Davey:

...that's fine...

Toby:

...and of course anybody watching this can find all of those events and hustings on www.libdems.org.uk/leadership.

Impact of your beliefs on your political views

And I'd like to start off with a general question which should give you an opportunity to give a broad view, and that is "Does your religion or belief influence your political views and if so in what way?"

Ed:

Not really.

My religious beliefs are that I'm a Christian, I attend a very liberal Anglican church in Surbiton - it's sort of between a non-conformist and a sort of ultra-liberal Anglican - and the biggest teaching I have from my faith is "Love thy neighbour as thyself", and to me that really drives my liberalism, but I don't really bring my Christian faith directly into any of my views because I'm a legislator for the whole community, and in my area we have a Jewish community, we have a Hindu community, we have a Muslim community, we have a Sikh community, and my job is to represent them and all the people who don't have any religious faith at all, so I don't think it would be right for me to give my personal religious views to issues and I don't.

Toby:

That's an interesting approach.

Right, well, we move on anyway.

Disestablishment of the Church of England

Disestablishment, which of course is taking religion or belief out of the public arena.

"Do you support the continuation of the constitutional links between the state and the Church of England?"

Ed:

No, I think disestablishment is absolutely what should happen.

It seems to me really odd that we're in a country that's got a huge number of different religions and people of no faith at all, but somehow the state is linked to one particular faith, and indeed one particular version of that faith, so that doesn't seem to me at all sensible in the 21st century.

I think it's been anachronistic for quite a few decades, so disestablishment is something that I think liberals should back.

It goes back to our non-conformist tradition where the non-conformist Christians in the party were very upset that the Church of England was the Conservatives at prayer, and so I'm very much in favour of disestablishment.

I think we should, for example, not have bishops in the House of Lords.

Of course, I think the House of Lords should be reformed totally and should be democratic totally; that would see the end of the bishops there.

So while I think people of religion have a role to play - their views I think should be heard - I think it's important that we have that religious freedom and that healthy debate, I don't think the state and the government should be linked to a religion.

Toby:

And presumably would that mean the end of Christian worship as a part of daily parliamentary business?

Ed:

Yes, I think there should be some form of reflection and thinking, and that could have different forms of religion and humanist forms.

I think reflection is really a valuable part of our lives.

One thing that I find valuable when I go to church is actually prayer, and when I'm thinking about it I'm actually thinking about lots of different issues; and reflecting on my life for those quiet moments, I think, is really helpful.

When we're very concerned about mental health and well-being and we have a debate about mindfulness, I think it's really important that we do reflect and have moments of quietness.

That doesn't need to be religious of course, but I think finding time in our days for that is important.

Toby:

Some aspects of disestablishment are clearly going to be more challenging than others; for example, in particular, because the Queen is the head of the Commonwealth as well as the UK, and I think that's the general barrier to progress which is put up by opponents to disestablishment.

Do you see that as standing in the way of reform generally?

Ed:

Well, it depends which particular reform you're talking about.

I don't think it means that we shouldn't disestablish; I don't think it means that we shouldn't get the bishops out of the House of Lords and reform the House of Lords.

There will be Commonwealth countries that probably have different faiths as well, so why the head of the Commonwealth as the head of the Church of England should really dictate what faiths are in India and Pakistan and many African countries and all the former Commonwealth doesn't make sense to me, so I don't really see it's a barrier at all; indeed you could argue that it would enable the monarch to have a clearer lead in the Commonwealth and be more acceptable because she's not head of the Church of England.

Humanist Marriage

Toby:

Right, OK, moving on to a theme that's dear to quite a few of us in Humanists and Secularist Liberal Democrats, some more than others: humanist marriage.

Now in 2013 the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act incorporated provisions which will enable the government to make humanist marriage ceremonies legal in the same way that Christian marriage Ceremonies are, and we're still waiting on that and the government's conducting a major review of the whole of marriage law and how it all hangs together.

Do you think the government has a case or should they just get on with legitimising humanist marriage ceremonies?

Ed:

Just get on with it!

There's no reason to delay at all; you know Scotland's done it, other countries have done it, there's absolutely no reason why we couldn't give legal recognition to humanist marriage tomorrow.

I'm totally in favour of that; I can't see any reason for delay at all.

Toby:

Good, thank you for that.

Assisted Dying

And your views on assisted dying?

Ed:

Yes, I think this is a very personal issue, and my views on assisted dying don't come from my religion, actually they come from my own experience.

It's very personal to me and I've always voted against assisted dying when it's come into the Commons, and it goes back to my young period as a young carer.

My dad died when I was four, and then my mother became terminally ill when I was 12 and I nursed her with my brother until she died when I was 15, and I was at her bedside in Nottingham General Hospital when she died, on my way to school, and my mum had originally had breast cancer then it went to her bones.

Anyone knows anything about bone cancer knows how painful it is, and in nursing mum for a long time I had to administer morphine; I had to administer other painkillers; she even had these electrical currents which were taking away the pain, so it was quite difficult.

So I reflected quite hard at the time as a young person, talked to my mother about it, and I'm Afraid that experience obviously had a massive impact on me and my views about the health service, about caring, about so many things, but also on assisted dying and the precious time I had with my

mother, hours of talking to her and then those last few days and weeks when I was by her bedside I'm afraid gave me a very personal view that I think we should be very careful about legislating this area.

It's an individual issue but for me my views do not come from religion, they come from my own rather formative personal experience.

Toby:

So when you say we should be very careful, do you mean that we should ensure that there are proper safeguards in place or that essentially we shouldn't do it?

Ed:

Well, I've looked at all the safeguards and I've just been very worried that they will never really cover every issue.

I remember how my mother, in the last few weeks, sometimes was clear, sometimes wasn't, and having witnessed death from other relatives as well and been at the bedside of people dying, I just get quite worried the safeguards that I've seen don't really cover every every example, so I'm quite concerned about this and would need some convincing that this is the right step to take.

I've always actually been willing to debate people on this one because my views come from a personal experience not a religious view - as a liberal Anglican there's no barrier to embracing assisted dying from a religious perspective – for me it's really about human rights, and there's a trade-off between recognizing the human rights of the individual here not to have their life taken away, and dignity.

I think it's a much more difficult trade-off than some people present, and I know some people bring their religious views to it; I don't, and I just think one needs to look at the rights of the person, and I just don't think it's all one way which it's sometimes presented.

Faith Schools

Toby:

OK, moving on then to faith schools, where the party has fairly substantial policy, the question I've been asked to pass on to you is “What should the LibDem position be on religious schools?”, which takes the whole thing so you can concentrate on any particular angle.

Ed:

Well, I think the party policy is pretty extensive on this, and broadly I support it whether it's about religious worship, the idea that it should be inclusive, whether it's about religious education where there should be humanist teachings and it shouldn't be primarily about the main religions, it should be more and more philosophical, more open; I have absolutely no problem with that and I do believe that admission based on faith needs to be phased out, so I'd start by changing the rules on new schools and be really clear that new schools couldn't be faith-based in admission at all.

I think there are challenges going very very quickly with existing faith schools, both legal challenges, financial challenges, political challenges, and we need to be pretty aware of those, but we should engage.

For example, I think the voluntary controlled status as opposed to voluntary aided is a particular approach the parties had as policy in the past: seeing whether schools would be prepared to be multi-faith and including humanist teaching, and in other words taking an ethos of values, of morals, but taking that not just as one particular religion's view on that.

So I think you need to phase things out and not have overnight to year zero, and I think that is the way that you will eventually manage to remove admission by faith.

So, easy with new schools; with existing schools you will have quite a few problems and one needs to manage those and I think that's a sensible approach.

Toby:

The party policy at the moment is phasing out indeed over five or six years - I can't remember which.

Do you see that as a realistic timescale or could it take considerably longer, and could there be significant standout elements from that, if you like.

Ed:

Yes, I think one's got to remember the costs involved here, because this isn't a free option.

The churches and other religious faiths own the schools; and while most of their revenue funding comes from the taxpayer, which is why it's a totally legitimate debate, I think people who've looked at this realise it would be a bit tougher than some people think both in terms of the cost and the legal challenges and in terms of the political challenges, so I'm just a realist.

I'm very keen to make sure that we have an open inclusive education, absolutely, and we need to find all the different ways to make that happen.

Could you in five or six years?

I think that's what you might call "brave, minister", but you've got to consult, you've got to be open about it and try and engage people, to see what is possible, particularly with the legal financial barriers which I think have been slightly underplayed.

Toby:

So effectively you can see the likelihood that say 90% of schools could have got rid of selection within that time frame but it would be perhaps very challenging indeed to deal with the rest.

Ed:

Well, take the Church of England for example where the vast majority of the faith schools are; my impression is that they are much more willing to embrace admission just by local community, so with no religious element at all.

I'm not saying that's everywhere in every part of every diocese, but the reality is we are a multi-faith diverse Britain now and we also have many people who don't have a faith, and so it is totally anachronistic that faith schools in areas where frankly the number of people who go to church is tiny should have anything on their admissions criteria, and many don't.

But my wife Emily was a governor of a faith school in Dorset, and she proposed to the governing body that actually the admission policy should be that they should favour non-Christians, because if they really wanted to bring people in that would be the best way; that's my wonderful wife for you, always thinking outside the box.

I just think frankly this will be a lot easier in the C of E than in another faiths, let's be clear, and we can start there and make some real progress

Toby:

But in principle, am I right and understand you are opposed to any selection by faith, you just think that there are significant practical barriers to phasing it out completely in the short to medium term?

Ed:

Yes, that's essentially it; we should have an inclusive open society in state-funded education.

Of course, that's what the party policy is, that's what I've always argued for; I just think sometimes the practical issues are a bit more difficult than people think.

Just remember, there's a history here going back many, many years, and several hundred years in cases, and you can't just rewind the clock overnight in a very short period, and I think you know as liberals we need to work with society and take people with us, and I think we can because of the nature of Britain's society having evolved so dramatically, but I think the practical issues have to be better thought through.

Toby:

Right, thank you for that.

Caste Discrimination

The next question is on caste discrimination: should it be explicitly outlawed under equalities law as a subset of race discrimination or by some equivalent means?

Ed:

Yes, we need to have a clear lead on this, and the idea that anyone can be discriminated against is abhorrent.

Liberal Democrats respect people, every individual human being, with equality of respect, whether they're in the UK or elsewhere, and to allow discrimination based on caste I think is just wrong and we should outlaw it.

Toby:

Does it affect your view in any way that such reforms are strongly opposed by traditional Sikh organizations in particular, and of course supported by groups representing Dalits and other castes that have suffered from caste discrimination, or at least say they have, or would that in some way strengthen your view?

Ed:

Well my view is, because of my liberalism, it's about equality fundamentally and the question is "How do you do this?", and "Does this need a phase-out?".

I don't think it does, it should happen straight up, there's no reasonable obstacle to getting rid of this discrimination.

Will it be politically difficult?

Yes, of course it will be, but this is, it seems to me, a basic human rights question and therefore I don't see that we should shirk from taking it on.

Ultimately as liberal democrats we're in politics to promote a liberal society where every human being has a right to respect and equal treatment for the law, where they can maximise their potential - that's while we've so focused on education for our young people and our children – and anything that gets in the way of that, a barrier to that freedom, we exist to tear down.

That's in our preamble to our constitution and therefore we have to take this on, and we have to take it on with some respect for other people who have different views from us, I think we have to understand and engage in debate with people who will not like this, but I don't think we should shirk from it.

Toby:

OK, thank you for that.

The “Islamophobia” Definition

The longest question that has come in, and also my last specific policy question I think, unless something emerges from the discussion is Islamophobia, the definition.

“Humanists UK say “We believe that the APPG definition of Islamophobia is problematic because it does not sufficiently differentiate between (1) prejudiced and discriminatory actions against people who identify or are identified as Muslim, and (2) criticism of the beliefs, ideas and practices that might fall under the umbrella of Islam. It therefore poses a risk to freedom of speech and thought, and of religion or belief.” What should we as LibDems do about this?”

Ed:

Well, as someone who went to the unveiling of the definition of Islamophobia I was impressed by the huge amount of consultation and cross-party work that had been undertaken by the APPG, and also the courage of taking this issue on, because it's extremely important that Muslim people in our country get some better protection.

Rightly, the party has adopted a very clear position on antisemitism, and we've strongly upheld the international definitions and indeed adopted them into our party's rules, and I think we need to think very strongly about doing the same on Islamophobia.

Islamophobia is not only abhorrent but it's across our society.

I saw this picture of all these different headlines of the usual suspects, the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, The Sun and so on over a period of months, and the amount of coverage on the front page of stories that were effectively demonising Muslims is quite outrageous.

I had a constituent who was illegally rendered to Afghanistan by the CIA, then taken to Guantanamo Bay, he was there for four and a half years, I waged a massive campaign to get him out, I went to the pentagon, I went to the state department, I was vilified in the press, people like Richard Littlejohn had a really big go at me because I was standing up for an alleged Islamic terrorist, but I was about human rights and civil liberties and so I ignored all the attacks I was getting, went out and supported him and got him out.

And the reason I give you that story is: that whole experience of fighting for my constituents and their civil liberties showed me how deep Islamophobia is, and how awful it is, and the impact it has on people and individuals, and as someone who represents a lot of Muslims as well as many other faiths I'm really conscious of how they are feeling attacked in our society, so you've got to do something.

And is this definition absolutely perfect? probably not.

Could it be reformed, could we find ways? I'm sure the APPG and others would be up for a debate about that, but sometimes people will always expect, well let's have the perfect straight away, and rather than getting as close to it as we can and having debate about it I think you start off with the principle, “We have got to tackle Islamophobia”, and if you're not prepared to do that and get off your backside and say “This is wrong, Liberal Democrats should stand up to that”, then I'm afraid I'm not interested.

We need to be there for our Muslim brothers and sisters who are being discriminated against.

The APPG definition I thought at the time incredibly well researched.

Could improve? Well fine, let's improve on it, but I think there's a danger of missing the big picture and the big picture is the reality of Islamophobia and the question to the party is what are we going to do about it, and I think working with all religions, working cross-party, to get a definition that is acceptable is the right thing to do, and maybe this first cockshy isn't perfect but let's improve on it, let's have some real suggestions, and sometimes when I've heard people going yes, APPG definition, it's almost like they just don't want any definition of Islamophobia and I can't agree with that.

We have to have a definition; let's work hard to get it right.

Toby:

So how would you respond to those who say “We absolutely categorically and wholeheartedly condemn prejudice, discrimination, abuse, violence, directed against Muslims or against people who are perceived to be Muslims or friends of Muslims, but we reject the definition because it also seeks to put protections in place of political ideologies driven by a religion, of political institutions, of beliefs and cultural practices which are not matters of human rights.”

Ed:

Well, I'd ask them “Do they think there should be definition at all?”

I mean that the law has lots of definitions of different issues; we've talked about the definition of antisemitism.

Do people think there should be a definition of that?

I think there should, and I think there should be definition on the Islamophobia because it helps people.

Now my understanding, because I ask this question, could people criticise the teachings of Allah, the Quran, my understanding is the definition allows that to happen.

So I absolutely get as a liberal, there's an issue when you have these definitions about where does free speech come in and is there a tension, and we've got to get that right, and I've been involved in many debates over many years about how you manage this.

Things like hate crimes, there's been a massive debate on where the barrier is, and the barrier in the law has tended to be written where things get to a criminal perspective where people are extolling violence against another individual or a minority group, so we're going to have a good debate about that, we should have a good debate about that, I think that's healthy, but I'm afraid I'm quite solid on the need to find some protection and not to ignore the challenge.

So my pushback is: OK, fine, you tell me what your proposed definition is; don't ignore the issue because there are millions of people out there who are being severely discriminated against and the people who are perpetrating it, mainly the right-wing press, are sowing division in our society, and these national populists who are frankly behind this Islamophobia, they're not our friends, they're not liberals.

Toby:

Right, I hope we'll have an opportunity to take up what sounded like an offer there at some point in the future, whether as party leader or as an MP.

Ed:

Toby, I'm always happy to have the debate, but I hope people on your side recognise the scourge of Islamophobia.

Engaging with faith and belief groups within the party

Toby:

Right, moving away from the specifics to a broad question: engaging with different faith and belief groups.

Would you see it as part of your job as party leader to engage with groups of party members representing different faith and belief communities such as Muslims, Christians, humanists, and indeed do you think there need or ought to be more religion or belief groups within the party with which you could engage, and particularly when some of these groups may not be on friendly terms with each other?

Ed:

Yes; very short answer, but let me elaborate a little bit.

My constituency is probably the most diverse of any Liberal Democrat MP, and I've represented it for over 20 years, and I've worked with the Muslim groups here, with the Jewish groups here, with the Hindu groups here, with the Koreans who are mainly Christian but some not, I've worked with the Sikh community here, I helped get them a gurdwara a few years ago, and I found that engagement extremely enriching.

By the way, it's also helped improve the diversity of our local party but a lot of members have joined from many different groups, many of whom are councillors; we have eight black and ethnic minority councillors on Kingston Council, out of 38 councillors, so that engagement that I've been delighted and honoured to be part of in my constituency has helped improve the diversity of the party, and therefore I think that's what the leaders should do on a national scale.

Of course one should engage with everyone in society.

I'm not comfortable with people where you're excluding groups.

Maybe I wouldn't go and have dinner with UKIP, but in terms of those who represent the public, I think we should do more of this.

Let's take a real problem which I if I'm an elected leader will be focused on tackling in a very deep way, and that is the lack of representation in the Liberal Democrats at all levels of black and ethnic minorities and particularly the black community; and I thought about this and talked about it for some time to a number of people, and if you look at the black community in the UK about half of the black community go to church; they're a very big church-going community.

So if we want to represent Britain and to have more black representatives, I think one's got to go to church, and people may not like that but I think it's the reality, and if you aren't prepared to do that are you really going to be able to represent the black community in Britain?

And we need to; we need to get off our backsides, because I'm absolutely fed up of us failing on this issue, and we cannot call ourselves liberals, we cannot call ourselves people who are open to diversity and equality, unless we go to meet the people where they are.

That's what I've been doing in my constituency for years, to the synagogue, to the mosque, to the Hindu temple, to the gurdwara now we have one, and there you're not talking about religion, you very rarely have religious discussions, you talk about those communities and the problems that they're

facing, how one can help them, and they respect the fact that you've gone to meet them, and I don't actually have a big black community in my constituency, it's mainly people from Asia, from India, from Pakistan, from Sri Lanka, from Korea, from Syria, from Iran and Iraq, those sorts of countries, we have a number of Africans but relatively few Zimbabwe, Somalia, a few from Ghana, but we don't have the sort of big Afro-Caribbean population that you do get in other parts of London and indeed in other cities and towns around the UK, and I think the party really has got to make a much more determined effort, and if that means engaging with them in their churches so be it.

Meeting with a segregated audience

Toby:

Right, and the final question which follows on naturally from that and from what you've said: "If you were invited to speak to a religious group, and when you arrived the audience was segregated by gender, what would you do?"

Ed:

I would just go to the seat that they showed me to.

When I go to my local synagogue in Surbiton about half a mile from where we are, the men and women are segregated; when I've gone to the local mosque the men and women are segregated.

The idea that I should turn around and walk out of the synagogue and the mosque I just think is wrong, and we have to recognise that different religions and cultures have different approaches.

And that doesn't stop us being liberals and arguing for equality on gender, on sexuality and so on that we passionately believe in, of course we should argue for that; when it comes to matters of state and matters of legislation, absolutely we take the issue of equality very seriously, and I've had people from Christian backgrounds, from Muslim backgrounds, criticise me, Muslim friends, Christian friends criticise me, because I've taken the lines I have on a whole range of equality issues.

I take the range on the equality issues because I'm a liberal, but in pursuing that liberalism in the law and arguing for example for LGBT+ relationships and sex education to be part of the curriculum, which I passionately believe in, just because people from the local Muslim community don't like that I have to say to them I'm sorry but that's my position.

so I draw a distinction between how you behave in Parliament as an elected Member of Parliament through the law and in government and so on, to how you engage with individuals who have their beliefs and their cultures, and I don't think it's terribly liberal or tolerant to walk out of a mosque or walk out of a synagogue if the congregation is separated by gender.

Toby:

I'm going to take that question a little bit further: what would you do if there were no women in that audience because they were entirely excluded from that discussion?

Ed:

Well that can happen, and do I find it comfortable? No.

Do you engage with people about it in private? Yes, you do.

But if one said that there should be a barrier to Liberal Democrat candidates, Liberal Democrat elected representatives, going to mosque if women aren't in the same room as men, even if they're in different parts of the mosque, then we wouldn't be able to talk to Muslim communities.

The question is, do you also engage with the women as well, and I do.

So I know many women of Muslim faiths, different types, I have a big Ahmadi Muslim community in Kingston and I've met with women from that community, and indeed we've had Liberal Democrat councillors who are women from the Muslim community, so I'm afraid when you go to a place of worship I don't think it's up to a Liberal Democrat elected representative or candidate to tell them how they should organise their worship.

And that might be difficult for us because we have a different approach, but I just think we believe in the Human Rights Act, we believe in the European Convention on Human Rights, and that protects religious beliefs and religious expression.

If you believe in that, if you believe in human rights, if you believe in the European Convention of Human Rights, then to me it follows that if you go to another community's place of worship you respect them.

Toby:

Right, well, thank you for that.

I thought that you would probably not be giving a simple answer but one that was nuanced, as I think it should be.

We've run out of time.

I would like to thank you for participating in this interview, and also again to all of the people who submitted questions, and I wish you luck with the rest of your campaign.

Ed:

Thank you, nice to talk to you.

I'm very happy to come and talk to you at a conference; hopefully we can get to meet in person sometime and engage; that'd be good.

Toby:

happy days; thank you very much; goodbye.

Ed:

Thank you; bye bye.