

HSLD 2020 Leadership Contest Interviews:

Layla Moran MP



Interviewed, Wednesday 15th July 2020 by Toby Keynes, HSLD Chair.

Toby Keynes:

Good afternoon, Layla; thank you for joining us.

Layla Moran:

Good afternoon; it's lovely to be with you.

Toby:

And this is our first interview ever with the party leadership candidates.

We have had statements on previous occasions, but technology has moved on so this is a first for us.

It won't be a first for you, of course, because we're halfway through the process.

Layla:

You are one of the first though so you are a trailblazer.

Toby:

OK, right, well, hopefully the others will be as improvised as this one then.

We only have half an hour, so I'm proposing that we go straight to the relevant issues rather than giving you time to talk about your general qualities and why you would make a good party leader, because anybody who wants to can look at any of the other various hustings sessions...

Layla:

...and there are many of them...

Toby:

...which people will find at www.libdems.org.uk/leadership.

Impact of your beliefs on your political views

So can I start by asking a general question that was passed on to us which I thought was rather good, which is: "Does your religion or belief influence your political views and, if so, in what way?"

Layla:

Well, I thank whoever asked the question for the question because it's a really interesting one, and the answer to that at first was, well, I'm not really sure.

When I was growing up, my primary religion that was in the family, if it was practiced at all and actually in a very loose way, was Greek Orthodox Christian.

My mother's Palestinian, and my experience of religion up until that point was largely Christmas and Easter, and cultural Christian is perhaps how you might have described my family, but also there were links of course back to my family history in Jerusalem, where my great-grandfather and through my grandfather would tell his stories, but he also wrote diaries that I reread quite recently where he

speaks about Jerusalem, where you've got Muslims, Jews, Christians living side by side peacefully enjoying each other's diversity, having fun together, and being very respectful of the fact that they all came from different religions, and yet had a deeper human commonality.

And then I went to school and that was primarily Church of England, and I loved church at that point mainly because I'm a singer, I'm a musician and so I spent a huge amount of time in the chapel because of choir; to the point where in fact I became chapel prefect.

But by that stage, having dabbled for about a year or so and thinking actually I wanted to be confirmed and really be part of the church, I actually by that point also discovered science and I realised that what I was seeking in religion was actually that deeper sense of human connectivity, and in fact that connectedness not just between all humans but also all things.

And I found that in physics: in the end we are all stardust; and actually, if you boil it all down, it comes down to maths too and I think I found that level of fulfilment there; and actually it explains that is the thread that runs through my liberalism, and these days I would probably actually describe myself, and I have described myself, as a humanist, because, whenever I've read descriptions of what a humanist is, it is about appreciating the diversity that exists in humanity, actually believing that you don't need an outside structure to do good and create good in yourself, actually humans have that innately in themselves, then that's probably where I am now.

I struggle with the labels but, hey, that probably is another reason why I'm a liberal.

Toby:

Well, we don't have rules about whether you can define yourself as a humanist, which probably helps, and I actually signed up as a humanist at the first Liberal Democrat conference I went to, and I approached the stand and had a similar experience to you. I was also Head of Choir at school by the way so that's two things we have in common.

Disestablishment of the Church of England

Right, so the first slightly more specific question is on disestablishment, which is another one that we had submitted.

“Do you support the continuation of the constitutional links between the state and the Church of England?” - which is not quite the same as “Do you believe in the Church of England?”, of course.

Layla:

I've always been very uncomfortable with this, and I think the reason for that is that, whilst there is still a plurality of people in the country who count themselves as Christian, for me that's an entirely internal belief and I don't think that there is any place for the state to be interfering in that, and vice versa, and I would love to have a society that was completely secular and where we didn't have any kind of division or overdue influence from any one religious group over another, and I think it does cause tensions and it also causes discrepancies in our own democracy.

I mean, as a result of that we have committees of the House that just look at how compatible legislation is with that of the Church; we've got appointed members of the House of Lords who are bishops, and I know some of them and they are wonderful people so there's nothing against them personally, but actually, for the same reason I think the house of lords should be elected, I also think that the bishops make no sense to me, so let's have entirely separate institutions; and if we are to be a truly liberal country where every individual is allowed to make a full choice in their own religious beliefs and then separately feel completely free in the democracy that they participate in, I find those links very uncomfortable.

That said, of all the things that we have to campaign on, electoral reform is way up there, but I do think it's a conversation worth having in this country especially as we see the rise of tensions between different community groups where we've seen a rise for example in Islamophobia and antisemitism over the last few years, and I just wonder: is this almost overinfluence of Christianity in our democratic life one of the reasons why we haven't taken those things as seriously as we should? And we've seen these big movements now that have come up over the last few years, these anti-racist movements, which were of course the right thing; and I just wonder: if all religions were treated equally, and indeed those who have no religion treated exactly equally, in our democracy, would that not make for a better society?

But that's a very big question and one that I always enjoy chatting to you about, Toby, and others who are part of Humanist and Secularist LibDems.

Toby:

Right, thank you for that.

We can go into a huge amount of detail on the nature of a proper secular society on some future occasion but I think we ought to move on to this point.

Assisted Dying

I suspect the next question will be just as easy for you and that is your views on assisted dying.

Layla:

On assisted dying, actually I'm much more settled, which is that I am pro giving people the dignity to choose that end phase in life; and the reason for that actually primarily comes from having lived in Belgium for many years where they do have a law and they do have the safeguards in place, and I do understand the consternation of those who say it does need to be properly regulated, and there is a concern about particularly people being forced into it or indeed feeling like they have to, but a lot of this has been worked out in other countries that that do this; and when I've had these conversations, and it is an uncomfortable conversation sometimes to have around a dinner table I find myself very much on the liberal side of the individual and I feel that it really ought to be their choice, and so long as the safeguards are in place to make sure that they are absolutely sound of mind that there isn't another reason why they're doing it, I don't think it should be any kind of knee-jerk wish, it should be something that's very carefully thought through and regulated in that way, I'm actually very much pro giving people that dignity to choose how they die.

Toby:

Do you see us making progress in this country on actually getting that legislated for, in the near to medium future?

Layla:

Yes, I do actually and interestingly there has been some work being done in the House at the moment to bring through a coalition of people who are more open to this.

My sense in those that I speak to in the Houses of Parliament is that the resistance to it is weakening.

However, the question then becomes: is there enough of a positive push for it in order to get through legislation?

And I think whilst we've got Conservatives in government I just don't see that happening any time soon; I think it would need to take a change in government, but we continue to push.

It's certainly something that as LibDem parliamentarians we're involved in.

When I get emails in my constituency inbox asking me about this, I tell them my views and I argue the case, so there is certainly backing for it in more corners of the Houses of Parliament than you might imagine but I think it is going to be a slow process.

Toby:

Right, but presumably faster than disestablishment is ever likely to be.

Layla:

I would imagine so; well, let's see; I mean, if we achieve House of Lords reform, which you know was the slightly lower hanging fruit even than electoral reform in the coalition government - albeit it was scuppered because relationships broke down between us and the Tories - nevertheless I do think that that might be possible; so who knows, and politics is quite volatile at the moment; that means there's opportunity.

Toby:

We'll look forward to it.

Faith Schools

Next question: "Faith schools: what should the Liberal Democrat position be?"

This is a fairly broad question, of course.

Layla:

I think our current policy is about right, which is that we would end selection into faith schools on a faith-based basis over six years.

The reason why it's six years is because if you as a parent and a family went to a faith school then you wouldn't suddenly find that all those rules were removed; so for every year group that joins the school as it goes up you would then get rid of the bizarre situation that many families find themselves in where you know they are for all intents and purposes not that religious but they find they have to go to the local church for a year before they apply to the local good school, which happens to be a faith school, and they have to pretend.

And I keep hearing stories of this, and it may not be the vast majority but it does happen, and I think it also undermines the purposes of that faith, because surely faith should be something that you as an individual and you as a family choose for yourselves and it's something that you practice in your home, and if you're finding that other people are imitating that in order to get into an institution that we all pay for, which is a school and these are state schools that we're talking about here, then I think that's not a good thing for that religion.

But equally, we all pay for them, and if we are paying for schools that are in essence in part dividing people because there are some who just aren't able to have access, I've got an ideological opposition to that in of itself; so I think where the party's policy is is about right.

Toby:

OK, so let's say you've managed to get rid of the discrimination in faith school admissions, you've got into your preferred school, where would you stand on religion in school beyond that point.

For example, religious assemblies and indeed teaching of religion rather than about religion in class.

Layla:

Yes, my own view on that is actually I'm less worried about whether or not it's in the school so long as there's another option for those who don't want to participate, and I think forcing people to participate

in something religious that is not something that they want to participate in is absolutely wrong, and so I would much rather that all schools were asked to have a truly inclusive way of worshipping that was respectful of the whole of the diversity of their community.

And in terms of teaching religion in schools, again, so long as it's opt-in and those children who are doing it are doing it in a sense not to the detriment of anyone else, I have no problem with that.

When I was a teacher, and I was the head of year for many years in many schools, I was in charge of the PSHE curriculum and as part of that I always made sure that, when we talked about religions, we also included religions that you wouldn't normally, including humanism, to expose the children to the fact that there are different ways of worshipping and that we are needing to understand each other in order to foster an appreciation for each other's diversity.

So that I think I would absolutely encourage; and in fact I would encourage more of that, because I don't think you solve society's problems and society's divisions by pretending that they don't exist: you actually celebrate them; you realize how wonderful they are, and actually by teaching very often about different religions we can see that commonality between people and we can develop that appreciation.

I have to say, I really enjoyed those trips with the students; we'd take them to all sorts of places and we'd go to all sorts of temples and we'd speak to all sorts of different leaders of different faiths and different groups, and they found it absolutely fascinating and very eye-opening.

Toby:

That would have been very interesting if it happened in my day, which was slightly earlier than yours I suspect.

Humanist Marriage

Humanist marriage; interesting things going on there.

Humanists UK are awaiting judgment on a law case calling for the legal recognition of humanist marriage.

Now, the reason they're doing that is that legislation was put in place in 2013 as part of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act to enable the government to give legal recognition to humanist marriage ceremonies, and seven years later it still hasn't happened, and instead the government is conducting a review of the whole of marriage law to see where it should go with that and whether a place should and could be found for humanist marriage within that.

Do you think that the government should be abandoning that approach and going straight ahead with legalising humanist marriage, if that's the right expression, or should we just wait until we can do the whole marriage job properly?

Layla:

Well, I don't know the ins and outs of exactly what's in this consultation and what else they're looking at, so I'm not going to be able to say now whether or not I think that should stop; however, I'm fully supportive of humanist marriages, having been to one - and it was wonderful - but I do remember that they had to do the "official" bit beforehand and there was this sense of "well, why?"

It doesn't make any sense, and this is such a private matter, why should that not be allowed?

So my own view is that, absolutely, humanist marriage, or the legalization of humanist marriages if that is the right term, should just go ahead regardless of whatever else they're looking at in that consultation.

Caste Discrimination

Toby:

Right, and then we have caste discrimination.

Should it be explicitly outlawed under equality law, as a subset of race discrimination, or are there better ways or indeed is the status quo perfectly adequate?

Layla:

Now thank you for this, and actually on this again I'm going to say, and as a scientist I try not to make proclamations without understanding the full lengths and depths of it, I understand the issue well and it is certainly a problem.

The question I have is, is it a problem with the legislation or is it something else? and actually on that I'm not an expert and I don't know.

What I do know is that I think that caste-based discrimination or indeed any discrimination of any form is just wrong and it should never happen, and if we need legislation to sort this out then yes it should be looked at; but I need to look into more details, and I hope that's OK in the context of this interview but I'd love to talk more about it.

Toby:

You're allowed not to claim to know everything about everything on this occasion.

Layla:

Thank you.

Toby:

In three months time, if you become leader of the party you may feel differently.

Layla:

Thank you; but I'll be plugged into the USB stick for leader you see in my head; by that point I'll know.

The "Islamophobia" Definition

Toby:

I had a question which I was wondering whether to put or not; again, one that's come in.

I think I shall since we're running fairly well.

"Humanists UK say "We believe that the All-Party Parliamentary Group definition of Islamophobia is problematic because it does not sufficiently differentiate between (i) prejudice and discriminatory actions against people who identify or are identified as Muslims, and (ii) 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 Liberal Democrats do about this?"

Layla:

My general approach to these things is that we just need to be very specific in our language, and if we are specific in our language then that's how you stop falling into the trap of accidentally including groups in a criticism or a critique that you're making that you didn't intend to.

A really good example of this is the way that I talk about antisemitism and how I avoid antisemitism in my critique of Israel, and as a Palestinian-heritage MP there have been occasions in the House where I have spoken about this, and my rule of thumb is: identify what it is that you're saying and be very very very specific; so, for example, when you say "falls under the auspices of Islam", as you well know there are very many different forms of Islam and even within the different forms of Islam, there are then different factions within that, and different factions within that, and occasionally there are people who are just so far on the extreme of those that it becomes very difficult to say that they are representative of anyone other than themselves, and they themselves are the problem and not the religion itself.

And so all I would say is, and I know having lived in very many countries where Islam is the primary religion, and thinking back to my first answer where I spoke about what it was like for my family growing up in Jerusalem, very much the nexus of the three great world religions from that area, I feel that actually the tone that we should be taking with our Muslim friends and families and in this country is that actually we are all British; we have much more in common, we value the religion, we value you and we will fight tooth and nail for your right to be able to practice in the way that you choose, and we have respect for you; and when we are calling out those extremists in those groups then that is what we call them, but we make a very clear distinction between those who do not represent the whole and the religion itself, and that's the approach that I take.

Parliament as a hostile environment

Toby:

Right, "Do you ever feel that parliament is a hostile or unwelcoming environment for you as a non-religious person?"

Layla:

Well, the obvious answer to that is well usually not, but there is one time where I feel absolutely incensed by it, and it's less so these days because coronavirus means actually the number of places that there are in the chamber is reduced and you don't have this problem, but today is a Wednesday and there's PMQ's and at PMQ's usually there is a throng of people waiting to get in and in fact the best way that you can guarantee a seat is by putting a little green card on the green benches with your name on it so that you can reserve it for later on in the day; and you tend to do that maybe about 10am, something like that, and then there are prayers, and in order to secure your seat you have to be physically present at prayers; and when I first heard about this I was incensed, because I don't pray, it's not part of my tradition, it's not who I am, I don't feel I want to, I don't feel I particularly want to sit there while other people pray, and I certainly shouldn't have to do it in order to do my job, but I do under this system.

And the first few times I just went along with it, and it's high church prayer and it's kind of lovely in its own sense, but I remember looking across and seeing that Tom Brake sat down on the bench during it while everyone else prayed and it's quite awkward, and the first time I did the prayer and you sort of turn around halfway through and it's all very strange.

And it's not televised and I wish it was because I think if it were people would see just how frankly absurd it is that this is what we have to do in order to carry out our democratic duty on behalf of our constituents; because if you don't turn up...

So now when I do do this, I go in and once the prayers start I sit down on the bench, I get out my ipad and I start doing some work.

But that's the one time; I would say the rest of the time it's not really a problem.

Toby:

I can see the possibility of, if the prayer sessions were televised, I can see this being weaponised against anybody who was seen as not paying due respect to the ceremony as it was going on, as has actually happened elsewhere in council chambers somehow, but anyway, yes, the best thing would be to dispense with it altogether.

Layla:

Exactly; have it separately.

Toby:

I don't think many of us will argue with that.

A non-religious Prime Minister

“Do you see there being a non-religious Prime Minister in the medium to even near-term?”

We've had a Deputy Prime Minister who was apparently atheist, and as it happens he was a Liberal Democrat; we've had a Jewish prime minister, but that was over 100 years ago - 150 i think; I'm not sure what else we've had but I'm not aware that we've ever had a professed non-religious Prime Minister; what are the prospects?

Layla:

Who knows?

I think as religion in general is becoming to an extent, I would say, less important in the day-to-day running of the country - and I think that's a good thing, by all means let people practice as they choose - I would actually hope that we are moving towards a society where the religion of the Prime Minister is an entirely private matter for that individual and actually no one cares.

I don't see being non-religious as any particular barrier in the modern era.

I don't think you are more likely to be picked for something because you're Christian versus not, so I don't see it as being any kind of barrier, so I see no reason why it couldn't be possible right.

Toby:

Right, and of course there is the prospect of a non-Christian Prime Minister emerging in due course possibly from the currently ruling party so these things do move along.

Layla:

Indeed.

Meeting with a segregated audience

Toby:

Right, “If you were invited to speak to a religious group when you arrive the audience was segregated by gender how would you feel about it and what would you do?”

Layla:

Well, I think first of all you do your due diligence before you get there, and this is a very broad question but I think I would tend to honour engagements.

I think, however, I would also take pains to make sure that there was no one left out, and if it was the case where one side had more access to me than the other then actually I would make sure that that was addressed.

However, this is quite a hypothetical question so I think I would take it quite sensitively,

but I also think that I would be there representing the Liberal Democrats, and if I was there to be talking about society and Britain and how I believe that people should have absolutely equal rights and talk about the kind of open tolerance society that we want to live in, I would hope that if they invited me then they would know that that's the kind of thing that I would be saying, but you know we'd have to see on the circumstances.

Faith group organisations within the Liberal Democrats

Toby:

Within this party, you seem to be fairly comfortable talking to us as a humanist group; would you feel equally comfortable and familiar talking to a group such as the LibDem Christian Forum, and indeed do you regret that there are not more groups within the party representing different faith communities?

Layla:

Absolutely; let a hundred flowers bloom.

I absolutely believe that the more diversity is celebrated in our own party the better, and if people want to set these groups up I would welcome them and I would speak to them, and yes I'm very comfortable speaking to you and you know with other invitations I'm certainly going to try and fit them in although the diary is absolutely mad, so well done to you for making sure we got it in the diary; but we have to make sure that whoever is leader is able to have these conversations with all the different groups in the party, and I think actually coronavirus has presented itself with a really interesting opportunity for the party, because it's shown that you don't have to be in the same place in order to have a really interesting conversation with a group.

Since the beginning of the leadership election, I've actually spoken to, or been given the opportunity to speak with, 300 local parties from across the country, and that's because of technology and Zoom, and before we would have felt obliged to everyone get on a train and get in their cars and go to a village hall and speak there; and boy do I miss it, I mean I love seeing people in 3D, don't get me wrong, I'm missing that, but also it is this great opportunity to make sure that we are connected with each other; and as leader of the party I want to continue that tradition and I very much hope coronavirus is going to go away very soon - I'm rather sick of it, to be perfectly honest, it's not a very pleasant situation for everybody - but there are going to be things that we will take from this that are positive, and I hope that's one of them.

Toby:

Do you think - it sounds as if you do - that actually there is a need for you to be engaging with people who are different from you, who are liberals but who hold different religious beliefs, different economic beliefs and so on?

Layla:

Absolutely, and more than that, Toby, it's fun; I have fun when I'm learning something new, when someone's challenging something I'm saying, when we're having a decent debate; I love it, and actually I think it's more important than ever that the leader of the party is very open to being challenged to having those conversations, and having a diverse number of different views around you, and actually I think it improves decision making when you've got lots of people in a room with different points of view where you've got that tussle; and it's not just what I think, actually there's a lot of research that shows that good governance and good decision making is done on this basis as well.

It's a very big part of how I operate, and if I'm in a room full of people who I've appointed to help me make a decision, and we are all easily coming to the same decisions, then either we're asking the wrong questions or I've got the wrong people in the room.

My job is to make sure that I'm surrounded by that diversity of views and that is what will help me do ultimately what the job of a leader is, which is to listen but then to take the

right course of action, so yes I welcome it.

Toby:

Right, well, we're running out of time but is there anything you'd like to say to finish off – or do you think you just said it?

Layla:

I think it's probably that, but just to say thank you for organising this.

I think it's a very innovative way of being able to speak to your members, and whenever we've spoken - and I think perhaps there's a disproportionate number of scientists among you, that much I've noticed as well - I very much see kindred spirits.

I think that the challenging questions that you've asked have been really thought provoking, and I thank you for those, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Toby:

That's terrific; thank you very much.

I'd like to pass on your thanks to the people who submitted those questions, of whom there were a fair number, and no doubt we'll see how things progress.

Good luck in your campaign.

Layla:

Thank you so much; lovely to be with you.

Toby:

Thank you; goodbye.