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Response to Agenda 2020 (Policy Consultation Paper 125, Spring Conference 2016)

A. SUMMARY

Some of the issues raised in this consultation were addressed by us in our response to the earlier Agenda 2020 consultation (Paper 121, Autumn 2015) – hence the various references below to our earlier submission.

Most of the specific questions in the current consultation do not cover our areas of concern, so we have responded only briefly under two section headings, addressing specific questions under the third heading.

9. Education: how can education contribute to liberal goals?

We note that this section nowhere addresses the important policy strand of religion and belief in schools, although it is covered elsewhere in the section on Communities.

10. Fairness: how can we foster a more cohesive and equal society?

We refer to our earlier submission, which addressed the issue of institutionalised discrimination by the state on the basis of religion or belief.

11. Communities: how can we foster a more cohesive and equal society?

Question 47: safeguarding multiculturalism
We briefly lay out our approach to multiculturalism, and how our party should approach it.

Question 49: faith schools and community cohesion
The bulk of our response is concerned with this question:
- We demonstrate how faith schools damage community cohesion both between different religion/belief groups and between different ethnic groups.

- We show the relevance of existing party policies on religion in schools to community cohesion, and call for the reaffirmation of these policies.

- We call for an end to discrimination and segregation, based on religion or belief, in school admissions.

B. <u>DETAILED RESPONSE</u>

9. <u>Education: how can education contribute to liberal goals</u>

There is a strong body of existing party policy relating to religion and belief in schools, which is a primary area of concern for us.

We note that this important strand of education policy is completely absent from this chapter and its associated questions.

However, one of the key elements of this policy strand is encompassed within the Communities section, Q49, on faith schools and community cohesion, and we have therefore addressed it under that heading.

10. <u>Fairness: how can we foster a more cohesive and equal society?</u>

In our earlier submission, we addressed the issue of institutionalised discrimination by the state on the basis of religion or belief (under 3.4: Inequality and social justice).

While party policy recognises this issue in relation to education (see our response to Q49, below), we would wish to see its other aspects recognised and taken up by the party centrally as an essential element in the pursuit of a fairer, more cohesive and more equal society.

11. <u>Communities: how can we foster and strengthen communities?</u>

Q47. Should we safeguard multiculturalism in the United Kingdom? How can we do this?

Put briefly, we, our party and the state:
- should celebrate the diversity and richness of the many cultural traditions that are found in the UK today;
- should encourage minority communities to integrate into British society – to be made to feel that they belong as a part of British society;
- should work with community organisations, but should also recognise that such organisations rarely represent the interests and beliefs of all the people that make up those communities;
- should recognise that abuse can occur in any community, and that different kinds of abuses are associated with different communities, but that everyone is entitled to the same respect and protection by the law regardless of their ethnicity or religious background.

In our earlier submission (3.3: Demographic change), we wrote:
> "We also believe that it is essential for the state not to encourage isolation or segregation within communities. Community cohesion is dependent on individuals from different communities feeling comfortable and safe with one another, so that they can explore and celebrate their own and others' cultural practices without ever feeling a need to retreat into a defensive assertion of a narrow community-based identity."

This is a two-way street: a strong, multicultural society cannot thrive unless the dominant and minority communities are able to co-exist harmoniously.

Q49(a) Should we be concerned about the effect of increasing faith school numbers on community cohesion?

Yes, and of course this problem will be worsened by the government's recent ideologically-driven decision to remove all remaining community schools from local authority control. There are a limited number of bodies with the experience and competence to create new schools or to take over existing schools. Of these, a very significant proportion are Christian institutions because they have so many schools already in operation, and other established faith groups also have substantial resources available along with the desire to become involved in running state-funded schools.

If local authorities are not permitted even to run existing schools, let alone to expand existing schools or create new ones, the pool of available sponsors that are not religiously aligned is massively reduced and consequently the proportion of schools run by faith institutions will grow significantly.

Schools managed by faith institutions are not inherently problematical, where they do not seek to promote their religion to pupils to the exclusion or detriment of other beliefs, and do not select students or employees based on their parents' religious beliefs.

Ethnic minority segregation in faith schools

Community cohesion is concerned with relations between different ethnic groups as well as different religion or belief groups and different cultural groups – and indeed different genders and sexual orientations.

Strong community cohesion across all of these potential fault lines is essential to a well-functioning and fair society: we should all be familiar with examples of prejudice, discrimination and violence driven by ignorance and fear across every one of these divides.

State-sponsored discrimination and segregation between faith groups is hugely damaging in its own right.

However, religious affiliations tend to reflect ethnicity – even within Christianity, some denominations are associated with particular ethnic groups, Pentecostalism being a prime example – so anything that puts barriers in the way of relationships between people from different religion or belief groups will also tend to create similar barriers between different ethnic groups.

Schools are generally far more racially divided than British society as a whole. In 2013, a report by Integration Hub indicated that over 90% of white pupils were in schools that were majority white, while over 50% of ethnic minority pupils were in schools that were majority ethnic, rising to over 60% among year 1 pupils (http://www.integrationhub.net/module/education/).

Research by the British Humanist Association, based on January 2013 figures for school populations, showed that Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Roman Catholic schools were significantly or vastly more ethnically segregated, particularly compared to schools with no religious character:

- Out of the five Sikh state schools for which data was available, four had no pupils at all that were classified as 'White British', compared to 30% of their local populations;
- Out of four Hindu state schools, two had no pupils classified as 'White British', compared to 45% of their local populations.

- Out of 15 Muslim state schools, eight had no pupils classified as 'White British'. On average, over a third of the local populations were 'White British'. Overall, Muslim schools had on average 34 percentage points fewer 'White British' pupils than would be expected for ethnically diverse schools in the areas in which they are located.
- Out of 44 Jewish state schools, 29 had no pupils who are classified as 'Asian', compared to 12 percent of their local populations – with one school having a majority 'Asian' population in its immediate vicinity. Jewish schools had on average 13 percentage points fewer 'Asian' pupils than would be expected for ethnically inclusive schools located in their areas.
- Out of 1,985 Roman Catholic schools, 245 had no 'Asian' pupils. Catholic schools typically had 4.4 percentage points fewer 'Asian' pupils than would be expected for schools located in their areas.

In contrast,

- Out of 13,121 schools with no religious character, just 18 had no 'White British' pupils. 2,344 had no 'Asian' pupils, but less than 1% of these schools' local populations were 'Asian'. Schools with no religious character had on average 0.8 percentage points more 'Asian' pupils than would be expected for schools located in their areas.

(https://humanism.org.uk/2013/10/18/religious-schools-racially-segregated-state-schools-new-findings-show/)

Discrimination by schools based on religion or belief

There is a particular problem with faith schools that actively discriminate in the selection of students based on the beliefs and practices of their parents, with the approval of the state.

Schools that deliberately create an environment in which pupils only mix with other pupils, teachers and parents of the same faith, or where the minority of pupils who do not share the majority belief are effectively marked out as dissenters from the school's ethos, must by definition be damaging to social cohesion between faith and belief groups, bringing up the pupils in a tribal environment where they are unlikely to gain an understanding and respect for other cultures and beliefs.

Abuse against LGBT+ pupils

Social cohesion affects LGBT+ pupils too.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that some faith schools can be extremely hostile environments for LGBT+ pupils, many of whom are effectively forced into hiding, with prejudice against those pupils, and low self-image, being actively reinforced by the schools' teachings and by a reluctance by teachers and authorities to recognise and act against bullying.

Members of LGBT+ LibDems, and one member of our committee, have direct experience of the damage that repressive faith schools can do.

Forced placement of pupils in minority faith schools

There has been a small number of cases recently of pupils being placed in a minority faith school against the express wishes of the parents – a malign consequence of government determination to prevent local authorities from creating new community schools to serve the whole of their communities in areas where

they are desperately needed, together with approval for the creation of new minority faith schools where there is little local demand (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32449101). Existing government policy can only make this worse.

It is just as grossly inappropriate for a child of avowedly atheist parents to be placed without parental consent at a school that promotes Christian beliefs as fact, as it is if the parents are practising Christians and the school promotes any other religion (or indeed atheism) as fact. However, there is one significant difference, which is that creating minority faith schools where there is not adequate local demand, and then placing children in those schools despite the objections of the parents, also provides perfect fodder for racist and anti-immigrant polemicists and politicians.

Religious extremism in schools

We have not touched on the problems associated with schools that assume a particularly aggressive and extremist religious character (as happened in the "Trojan Horse" scandal). Schools that teach intolerance of other belief groups, other ethnic groups or LGBT+ people must have a significant impact on the behaviours and beliefs of their pupils that is profoundly damaging to local community cohesion, as well as to the prospects of the pupils themselves.

Similarly, there is the problem of unregulated and therefore illegal schools where pupils are required to spend all their study time learning religious texts in a foreign language and may leave the schools completely unequipped to cope in the outside world; for instance, Hackney's ultra-Orthodox Jewish Yevshidas, as reported this month in the Independent (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/illegal-jewish-schools-department-of-education-knew-about-council-faith-school-cover-up-as-thousands-a6965516.html).

These are both problems that need urgent attention, but they are symptoms of inadequate regulation, as well as an evident lack of political will, rather than an inherent problem with faith schools (and indeed the Trojan Horse schools were not technically faith schools at all).

Q49(b) If so, what should we do about it?

Existing party policy...

There is plenty of existing party policy addressing the various problems associated with religion in schools, pretty much all of which have an impact on community cohesion. We list those policies below, along with our comments where the relevance to community cohesion is not immediately evident.

It is essential that the party remains committed to addressing issues of community cohesion in schools by reaffirming these policies (quite apart from the other reasons why these policies are so important):

Discrimination in employment: *schools should not discriminate against teachers and other school employees, based on their religion or belief, except those responsible for religious instruction* (F27, Autumn 2014).
Pupils need to have role models who come from different faith groups and cultural backgrounds.

Compulsory acts of collective worship: *there should be an end to the existing obligation for all state schools to hold acts of collective worship, and for non-religious schools to hold acts of worship of a broadly Christian character* (F27, Autumn 2014).

Schools that choose to hold assemblies should ensure that any act of collective worship is optional for pupils who are old enough to decide for themselves and otherwise for parents. (F12, Spring 2009)

The inculcation of Christianity, as the default for all state schools that are not tied to other faiths, directly discriminates against all other religions and beliefs, and is bound to increase the desire of many non-Christian parents for schools that reflect their own beliefs. The same holds true for non-Christian faith schools: daily acts of worship in their own faith, and the compulsion on pupils to participate in these acts of worship, mark these schools out as places intended for the children of parents from those faith groups. These are key barriers preventing parents of other faiths and beliefs from voluntarily sending their children to faith schools, so it is not surprising that so many Sikh, Hindu and Muslim schools have no children from White British backgrounds.

Monitoring schools: *the Ofsted school inspection framework should judge schools on their promotion of equality of equality of opportunity and community cohesion.* (F18, Autumn 2013)

Diversity in the school curriculum: *the school curriculum should reflect the diversity of the country* (F18, Autumn 2013).

Inclusive religious education: *religious education should be inclusive in all schools and should teach about what people believe rather than what to believe, while leaving faith schools free to offer their pupils religious instruction in the school's own faith, subject to pupils being able to opt out where they have attained the maturity to make that decision for themselves and subject to parental decision until that point.* (F12, Spring 2009).
This would remove another key barrier that currently prevents parents of other faiths and beliefs from voluntarily sending their children to minority faith schools.

Discrimination by new schools: *there should be no establishment of new schools which select by ability, aptitude or faith, and new policies should be introduced radically to reduce all existing forms of selection.* (F12, Spring 2009)

….and a new policy to end discrimination in school admissions

There is one crucial area in which we believe existing party policy is unworkable: the issue of existing schools that practice discrimination in the admission of students, based on their religion or belief. Existing policy would allow local authorities to "withdraw state-funded status" from faith schools that could not "demonstrate the inclusiveness of their intakes". Quite apart from the vagueness of this obligation on schools, withdrawing funding from schools would be a nuclear option, and we believe it would be difficult or impossible for any local authority to do so, particularly in areas with a shortage of school places.

We have flagged this up on a number of occasions, including the Autumn 2014 Conference at which there was broad acceptance that a review would be appropriate.

The government proposal to end all local authority control of state schools would of course render the existing policy irrelevant.

We call for all religious discrimination in admissions to existing faith schools to be phased out over a five-year period.

This is the most damaging barrier to community cohesion that some faith schools choose to erect.

There are very few areas where the state actively and deliberately endorses blatant discrimination against children, and segregation on the grounds of their religion or belief. This is by far the worst, and our party has tolerated it for long enough.