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Response to AGENDA 2020 consultation

A. SUMMARY

2: The Liberal Democrat Philosophy

We commend this section, as an expression of the party's values, with one minor reservation.

In our separate Party Governance response, we argue that it is essential for the Preamble, or its successor, to explicitly recognise and reject discrimination on the grounds of non-religious belief, where at present it only refers to religious belief. In this response we address the policy implications, under 3.4.

3.3: Demographic change

This sub-section addresses the challenge of encouraging tolerance and good community relations within a multicultural society.

We explore the importance of education in addressing problems of social cohesion, not only from the earliest age but in reaching adults (generally first-generation immigrants) who are isolated by poor language skills.

3.4: Inequality and social justice

Our response to this sub-section concentrates on institutionalised discrimination by the state on the basis of religious or non-religious belief.

We call for broad disestablishment of the Church of England to be reviewed as a policy goal.

We argue that the party needs to develop a coherent and comprehensive policy for tackling institutionalised discrimination by the state against the non-religious.

3.5: Public services

We urge that the issue of religious discrimination and segregation in school admissions policies be reviewed, following from the consensus in support of a review that emerged during the October 2014 Equalities debate.

B. DETAILED RESPONSE

Section 2: The Liberal Democrat Philosophy

Q1. Is this a good summary of Liberal Democrat values and beliefs and our approach?

Q2. If not, how would you change it.

We commend this section, with one minor reservation. We consider it to be an excellent expression of the party's values; if we were to comment on all that is best about it, this response would be far longer.

The Preamble; religion and belief

There is considerable common ground between this consultation and the Party Governance consultation, both of which reference the party's Preamble to the Constitution, so some of the following comments are common to both our responses.

Since the Constitution was adopted, there has been a substantial increase in the number of citizens whose beliefs are non-religious, but the state continues to discriminate against and exclude the non-religious in many areas where it now seeks to involve citizens of all faiths on equal terms.

In our Party Governance response, we argue that it is therefore essential for the Preamble, or its successor, to explicitly recognise and reject discrimination on the grounds of religious or non-religious belief, in line with current party practice, where at present it only refers to religious belief.

In this response we address the policy implications of this issue, under 3.4.

2.1: The Liberal Democrat view of human nature

“The Liberal Democrat view is an optimistic one. We believe in the essential goodness and improvability of humankind – that, given the opportunity, people will choose to do good rather than harm”.

This is close to being a statement of humanist philosophy, and it is very welcome, but it certainly is optimistic, and is open to the accusation (made by a LibDem Voice contributor) of being naive.

Humanists tend to believe that humankind is naturally drawn to acts of great altruism, but that history and daily experience give us many instances of people, given the opportunity, choosing to do harm rather than good. Such choices are driven by many factors: a person may choose to offer help to a stranger on one occasion but ignore them on another apparently identical occasion. The same person may be wholly altruist and self-sacrificing within certain communities (their immediate family, neighbourhood, community, faith group, ethnic group, nation or whatever) and utterly callous and brutal towards anyone who falls outside those circles.

So we believe in the potential for goodness, and the improvability, of humankind – that as individuals and as a society we can and should seek to encourage the potential for good in everyone, to create opportunities for them to express that potential, to help them to appreciate the pleasure and fulfilment that such choices can give them, and to help them see themselves as part of many communities up to and including the whole of humankind.

We believe this also expresses a Liberal Democrat view of human nature.

Section 3: Challenges and Opportunities

Q3. Is this a reasonable summary of the major challenges facing the UK today?

Q4. And of the major opportunities?

Q5. What do you think liberalism has to offer in each of these areas?

We are focussing our response around a small number of areas that are of particular relevance and concern to us as humanists and as secularists.

3.3 Demographic change

This sub-section addresses the challenge of encouraging tolerance and good community relations within a multicultural society.

We particularly welcome the statement (in 2.10) that the individual should never be locked into their community and its traditions: “that communities can sometimes be illiberal and oppressive, restricting people’s freedom in the name of tradition or culture or the pressure to conform...[and that] each individual has a free choice of which communities, if any, to join or to leave and of what identity or identities to assume”. We believe that this basic liberal principle should apply at every level, from the state downward.

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 narrowly community-based identity.

Education should play a key role in this from the earliest age, and it is crucial that children should have the opportunity to develop close friendships across different ethnic, social and belief groups from an early age.

Schooling should also provide an opportunity for students to learn about different cultures, practices and beliefs, without being taught to see all other cultures and beliefs as innately alien and wrong. This is reflected in existing party policy, although we address one problem area relating to school admissions under 3.5 (public services).

However, the importance of education in addressing problems of social cohesion and isolation extends well beyond childhood.

Some of us, in our daily lives, meet adults, usually first-generation immigrants, whose poor English language skills mean that they are unable to work or socialise outside their immediate communities, trapped in low-skilled work and unable to understand let alone make use of their rights as citizens.

Basic courses in language and citizenship are essential but they are of no use to people who are so isolated by their poor English language skills that they have no way of even discovering that such courses exist. Liberal Democrats should explore ways of reaching such people, whether at the home, in the workplace or through community meeting places and events.

3.4: Inequality and social justice

Institutionalised discrimination by the state on the basis of religious or non-religious belief

This sub-section of the consultation paper examines inequalities and discrimination faced on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic group, disability and age.

However, it does not mention inequalities and discrimination faced on the basis of religious or non-religious belief. This may reflect a failure by the party to recognise the significance and extent of this problem; it is, of course, a primary area of concern for us.

We are not for a moment denying the scale of discrimination on other grounds throughout society, and its destructive effects.

However, in this response, we are concentrating on **institutionalised discrimination by the state** on the basis of religious or non-religious belief because:

- it survives across a variety of areas, and to a far greater extent than on most other grounds;
- it sends a clear message throughout society that discrimination on the basis of religion or belief is not only acceptable but right and proper, where similar discrimination by the state on most other grounds has become unthinkable;
- unlike general prejudice and discrimination in society, institutionalised discrimination by the state can and should be eliminated.

We are not for a moment denying the caustic effects of

In the UK, there are in effect three tiers of institutionalised discrimination:

- between Anglicanism and all other faith institutions;
- between Christians and people of all other faiths;
- and between people of faith and people whose beliefs are non-religious.

The first of these, the establishment of the Church of England at the heart of the state, its governance and its ceremonies privileges one religious institution representing one denomination of one religion.

Although the party has regularly reasserted its belief that the Church of England should not have a privileged position in the House of Lords, it has not called for a broader disestablishment of the Church of England since the 2001 General Election Manifesto. A review of this policy goal is long overdue.

The second tier of institutionalised discrimination occurs, to take one example, in non-denominational state schools, which are required by law to conduct a daily act of collective worship that is “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”. Schools may only be exempted from the “broadly Christian” requirement if their local Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education agrees to grant them that exemption. Thus, our state education system has a built-in requirement that that every non-denominational state school promotes Christian beliefs rather than any others, and that exemption from this requirement is a privilege that need not be granted.

Our main concern is of course with the third tier of institutional discrimination.

We list here ways in which the state excludes or institutionalises discrimination against the non-religious in particular:

- any religious organisation can apply to conduct weddings that are given legal recognition by the state; non-religious belief organisations cannot;
- in prisons, hospitals and the Armed Forces, the state pays for counselling and guidance to be provided by Chaplains, selected by and answerable to faith institutions primarily to meet the needs of members of their faith communities; no humanist chaplains are state-funded;
- a large part of the BBC's output is devoted to Religion and Ethics. As the title suggests, the BBC chooses to exclude non-religious belief from the bulk of its belief-oriented output. This is symbolised by Radio 4's Thought for the Day slot, in which only speakers from a variety of religious traditions are allowed to offer a daily reflection on life in the middle of the Today current affairs programme;
- at the national Remembrance Day ceremony at the Cenotaph, many faith groups are formally welcomed to participate, to honour their war dead, but the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association's applications to participate are repeatedly rejected because they do not represent a faith group;
- religious organisations – and only religious organisations - that provide public services under contract have special exemptions, under the Equality Act, allowing them to discriminate against potential and actual employees and service users on the grounds of religion or belief, or sexual orientation;
- religious education in local authority schools is given according to a syllabus determined by local SACREs (Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education), on which the Church of England and other faith groups must be represented – but non-religious belief groups have no official place (although many SACREs do choose to involve humanist groups unofficially);
- non-denomination state schools must have a daily act of collective worship (as stated earlier); this must by definition be of a religious nature, even if a school is permitted an exemption from the requirement that it be Christian in character;
- students of GCSE and A-level Religious Studies may choose to study a variety of religions in depth, but not non-religious belief.

The party has substantial policy in this area but, except in relation to education, it is largely piecemeal and adhoc, driven by amendments to conference motions – even though it involves discrimination against around half of the UK population¹.

We believe the party needs to develop a coherent and comprehensive policy for tackling institutionalised discrimination by the state against the non-religious.

¹ Annual British Social Attitudes survey, <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/>

3.5 Public services

Discrimination on belief grounds in school admissions

This sub-section covers education, which is a perennial focus of concern for HSLD. Party policy already effectively addresses institutionalised discrimination within the education system based on religion or belief, building on the excellent 2009 paper and policy motion “Equity and Excellence”, supplemented by more recent policy motions and amendments.

However, there is unfinished business here, arising from an amendment to the 2009 motion. We believe the amendment was poorly conceived and has left the party with an unworkable policy that would only allow local councillors to tackle problem schools by using the nuclear option of throwing them out of the state education system altogether, rather than by making changes to the school’s governance:

4.ii: “Requiring all existing state-funded faith schools to come forward within five years with plans to demonstrate the inclusiveness of their intakes, with Local Authorities empowered to oversee and approve delivery of these plans, and to withdraw state-funded status where inclusiveness cannot be demonstrated.”

At the October 2014 Federal Conference, our effort to resolve this through an amendment to the Equalities motion (“Expanding Opportunity, Unlocking Potential”) was rejected after a succession of speakers argued that our proposed change to schools admissions policy should be the subject of a proper review. This point was accepted by the summators of both our amendment and the main motion:

- “But on this issue here, let’s have the debate, but let’s have it properly. Let’s have a time when we can discuss it fully...”
Paul Halliday, proposing that this part of our amendment be subject to a separate vote
- “This area, to make sure that we can keep our faith schools both open and accountable, does need to be discussed, but it needs to be discussed in an open and transparent way and I don’t think that we can do this as part of an amendment...”
William Dyer
- “We do need a debate about faith schools and their place in the education system, but this is not the place to shoehorn this policy.”
Baroness Cathy Bakewell
- “There is a debate to be had around this but not today.”
Stephen Lloyd MP
- “But I heard lots of people say that we should have this debate – they just want to have it on another day. So let me play the role of Alex Salmond. I hope you will say yes; if you say no, that will start the debate and I look forward to the next Conference having that fuller discussion that everybody wants.”
Julian Huppert MP, summing on the amendment
- “The movers are of course right to highlight this important area, and Evan and Julian have made powerful cases. But I have considerable sympathy with those who’ve argued here that this very important issue to do with schools should be thoroughly examined and reported with

recommendations to Conference. Something with such potential consequences should be properly assessed and scrutinised, and not tacked on to a wide-ranging paper. Emotions run high in this area, and that is not always the best context for making decisions.... As you've heard, we already have a policy to stop the establishment of new faith schools selecting on the basis of faith, so let's make sure that any new policy in this area is carefully worked through..."

Baroness Lindsay Northover, summing on the motion

We can provide a fuller transcript of relevant speeches, and the full debate, including the two speeches on amendment 2, can still be viewed at

http://www.libdems.org.uk/f27_expanding_opportunity_unlocking_potential

That debate demonstrated a consensus in support of a review.

Now that the General Election is out of the way and the party is preparing a programme of policy development, we urge that the issue of religious discrimination and segregation in school admissions policies be reviewed, perhaps as part of a broader review, at the earliest opportunity.