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Response to Party Governance consultation

1. Summary

We're concentrating our response to this consultation entirely on the first question, concerning the party's values as expressed in the Preamble to the Constitution.

We urge that the Preamble, or its replacement, be updated to refer explicitly to non-religious as well as religious belief, to reflect the changes that have occurred, in how Liberal Democrats, society and the state recognise diverse faiths and non-religious beliefs, since the Preamble was first written.

In our separate Party Governance response, we expand on the policy implications of this, as both consultations feature the Preamble.

2. Detailed response

Party Values

The Preamble to our Constitution sets out the party's values.

Question 1: Are these still our values?

The Preamble is set out in full on pages 3 and 4 of the consultation paper.

Its first two paragraphs demonstrate a basic commitment to liberal secularism, with its references to freedom of conscience, speech and worship, its rejection of prejudice and discrimination based on religion, and of all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality, and its commitment to public services available on equal terms to all.

However, the preamble was adopted 27 years ago, and, while our party's core values have not changed fundamentally, they have developed, and so have the ways in which we express them.

The Preamble speaks of religious privilege and inequality. Non-religious belief receives no mention. It was perhaps forgotten, but more likely the authors felt that the inclusion of non-religious belief could be assumed without being stated explicitly.

Nowadays, our party has moved on, and generally gives non-religious belief equal and explicit recognition; we refer to “religion or belief”, in our consultative documents, policy papers and conference motions. This is by no means consistent, but when references to “religion” find their way into conference motions they are generally spotted and revised to embrace “religion or belief” through drafting amendments.

Much has also changed in our society since then. The annual British Social Attitudes survey consistently indicates that there is a greater diversity of religious belief, largely driven by immigration, and that the proportion of citizens identifying themselves as non-religious has also grown significantly, to around half of the population¹.

The state has increasingly recognised, accepted and even embraced that greater diversity of religious belief.

It generally seeks to be inclusive of minority religious beliefs, although the two major exceptions to this are the state-funded education system, where the default religion for non-denominational schools is Christianity, and the Church of England – one institution, representing one branch of one religion – which still retains most of its privileges and remains embedded in our country’s rituals and its legislature.

Non-religious belief has also been accepted in some respects; for example, in the Equality Act and the Human Rights Act references to “religion or belief”.

However, in many other ways institutionalised discrimination by the state, directed specifically against its non-religious citizens, remains deeply embedded.

To give a few examples²,

- any religious organisation can apply to conduct weddings that are given legal recognition by the state; non-religious belief organisations cannot;
- at the national Remembrance Day ceremony at the Cenotaph, many faith groups are formally welcomed to participate, and honour their war dead; the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association’s applications to participate have been repeatedly rejected;
- in prisons, hospitals and the Armed Forces, the state pays for counselling and guidance to be provided by Chaplains, but all of these counsellors are selected by and answerable to religious institutions, primarily to meet the needs of members of their faith communities; humanist groups do provide some Chaplains, but none are state-funded.

So there is now a distinct tier of discrimination built into the state’s laws and institutions, between those citizens who have a religious belief and those whose beliefs are non-religious.

It is therefore no longer sufficient for the party’s core documents to refer broadly to prejudice and discrimination based on religion; we urge that the Preamble, or any successor document, should explicitly and consistently refer to non-religious as well as religious belief.

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

² Our Agenda 2020 response includes a much fuller set of examples