

MCB VOTER CARD ANSWERS FROM THE LABOUR PARTY

Q1:

Will you support legislative measures to provide equal protection to Muslims and other faith groups from discrimination in all areas with a positive duty to promote equality on grounds of faith as is provided under the race laws?

In its manifesto, the Labour party is committed to bringing forward legislation to protect Muslims against religious discrimination in goods and services. We have already outlawed religious discrimination in the workplace. We have also made a manifesto commitment for a Single Equality Act which will further help protect against discrimination on the grounds of faith.

Q2:

Will you support legislative measures to make incitement to religious hatred illegal so that Muslims and other faith groups enjoy the same protection as is enjoyed by Jews and Sikhs under the race laws?

Legislation to create an offence of incitement to religious hatred is of vital importance to the Muslim community.

The Labour government brought forward proposals in the last Parliament to outlaw incitement to religious hatred. However this was blocked both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. But for their actions this offence would now be in British law.

The Labour Party remains firmly of the view that there should be equal protection in law for those of all faiths, including the Muslim community. We cannot see why it is right to have protection in law for Jews and Sikhs, but wrong not to extend to other communities like the Muslim community.

It remains our firm and clear intention to give people of all faiths the same protection against incitement to hatred on the basis of their religion, and Labour is the only party which has made a clear manifesto commitment to bring forward such legislation in the next Parliament.

Q3:

Will you oppose all measure that compromise the Rule of Law and instead promote steps that ensure that no individual loses their liberty or dignity without the proper and transparent process of law?

Terrorism represents a serious threat to fundamental aspects of our society. And we stand with the British Muslim community in opposing and condemning it. Such a threat does however require a particular response and we have brought forward measures to disrupt and prevent terrorist activity.

It is vital that any measures that are taken are not discriminatory or stigmatise any racial or religious group, and are consistent with the rule of law. Where measures do involve the loss of individual liberty it is important that is done within the proper and transparent process of law.

Q4:

What positive action measures would you and your party take to enable Muslims to achieve equality of opportunity and to address the causes of their social exclusion deprivation and marginalisation?

The Labour Party has always been committed to social justice and tackling social exclusion. Our manifesto reaffirms our commitment to end child poverty by 2020.

The Muslim community has benefited from this government's focus on providing help for hardworking families. We have introduced the minimum wage, tax credits and increased child benefit. Sure start and children's centres, are helping to ensure that children have the best possible start in life. In Tower Hamlets, for example, Muslim children and their parents are benefiting from the government-funded sure start creche in the London Muslim Centre. We have also introduced a new child trust fund for every child born since September 2002, as an investment in the future of all our children.

We are committed to continuing work with parents and teachers to improve school standards and will continue to invest in our schools and refurbish their buildings through our Building Schools for the Future programme.

The New Deal has already helped thousands of British Muslims back into work. We will continue to work with you to tackle unemployment and increase opportunity.

We know the importance of the providing of good quality housing and driving the regeneration of our cities. We want to see more affordable housing and will provide help so that one million more people become homeowners, including many from the Muslim community.

And over the long term, a strong and stable economy with low inflation, low interest rates and low unemployment will ensure that living standards keep rising, and that we can continue to tackle poverty and invest to improve our schools and hospitals.

Q5:

Will you promote a foreign policy that is based on justice and fairness?

The promotion of democracy and human rights remain a cornerstone of our foreign policy. We are, for example, the second largest contributors to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and to the International Red Cross. The Government directly assists human rights projects in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain and Indonesia. And we have actively encouraged democratic reforms in Turkey and are its strongest supporter for accession to the European Union.

We led the intervention in Kosovo to protect the lives of Muslims in that country. We are the only party to make a manifesto commitment to continue to strongly support the peace process between India and Pakistan, and back moves to resolve the long-running dispute over Kashmir.

Our manifesto also reaffirms our commitment to the UN and its reform.

We have also made it very clear that we will continue to work tirelessly to bring about a viable and independent state of Palestine, as part of a peace settlement in the Middle East.

Q6:

Will you support the immediate publication of a timetable for the withdrawal of all British forces from Iraq, and oppose their deployment under similar conditions in the future?

We understand and fully respect the strong feeling in the Muslim community and elsewhere about the issue of Iraq. But we are working to support the elections and democratic process now underway, under the auspices of the United Nations. The timetable and process for the presence of British troops in Iraq is that set by the UN itself. Under Security Council resolution 1556, the mandate for international troops runs until December this year. Any extension to that mandate can only occur with the express approval of both the UN Security Council and the elected Iraqi government. If the Iraqis wish for the troops to leave earlier, then we would comply with their wishes.

Q7:

Will you work to ensure that the necessary resources and programmes are put in place to address the problem of Muslim students in state schools underachieving, and will you support equality of treatment for Muslims in the provision of state funding for Muslim schools?

Labour was the first government to provide state support for Muslim faith schools. And we remain committed to the policy of creating a level playing field for Muslim faith schools that wish to enter the state system. However, in 18 years of government, the Tories did not provide state support to any Muslim faith schools, whilst the Lib Dems opposed it.

Since 1997, school funding has risen by £1,000 per pupil. We will continue to raise the share of national income devoted to education. We will not let economic disadvantage stand in the way of young people staying in education beyond the age of 16, including those from the Muslim community.

Q8:

How will you ensure that Muslims are represented in all walks of British life, including politics?

Before 1997, there wasn't a single Muslim MP or Member of the House of Lords. Labour has changed that. We have Muslims in the House of Lords and the first Muslim MPs, both of whom are Labour. And having selected further Muslim candidates in seats that Labour holds, we hope and expect to see further Labour Muslim MPs elected on May 5th.

In many professions and jobs, of course, British Muslims already make a tremendous contribution. The improvements we have seen in our health service, for example, have been greatly helped by NHS staff from Muslim backgrounds. And we are proud that the last few years has seen the appointment of the first British Muslim Ambassadors. We have an increasing number of Muslims in the civil service and the police. That's real progress but we now need to see more appointments at a senior level.

We have made a start but we know that there is still more to do. We want to see a country where there is no barrier to progress and where people get on regardless of background. That is why our proposals on incitement and religious discrimination are

so vital. We want to see British Muslims being given the opportunity to play a full part in this country's future. Not just because it is right to do so, but because this country cannot afford to waste the talent of any of its people.

As a footnote it was this government which ensured that the 2001 Census included a question on faith identity.

Q9:

How will you and your party ensure that religious and moral contributions to discussions on issues such as abortion and euthanasia are fully taken on board?

These are matters of conscience, and MPs within all parties have freedom to make up their own minds on these issues.

Q10:

What is your position on immigration policy and what will you do to ensure that the tone of this debate does not fuel a racist agenda?

Immigrants and their children have contributed greatly to this country's culture, prosperity and success.

Most migration, including students and tourists, is legitimate and welcome as it strengthens our economy and public services and is supported by the CBI and employers. Our new transparent points system for those wanting to work in the UK will ensure our economic needs are met while simplifying the present system.

Labour believes in a fair, fast and firm asylum and immigration system together with controlled economic migration, fulfilling the needs of our economy. Britain has a valuable tradition of offering a safe haven to those genuinely fleeing persecution. We are proud of that tradition but we cannot tolerate abuse of our asylum system. To stop abuse, we have enhanced our border security and have taken action to tackle illegal working, people smuggling and trafficking.

Within weeks of coming into office in 1997, this government repealed the pernicious Primary Purpose Rule, which divided families and caused huge resentment within the Muslim and Asian communities here in the UK.