



General Election 2005 Advice on Responding to Questionnaires

Muslim Council of Britain

19th April 2005

- 1. 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?***

Liberal Democrats are committed to combating discrimination in all its forms, including on the grounds of race and/or religion. We will strengthen the fight against discrimination with a single Equality Act to replace the tangled mess of our existing anti-discrimination law. We will protect people from discrimination, harassment and victimisation on the basis of religion or belief. This legislation will be equivalent to existing race discrimination legislation and would apply in fields such as employment, education and the provision of goods and services.

- 2. 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?***

Liberal Democrats will protect people from discrimination, harassment and victimisation on the basis of religion or belief. This legislation will be equivalent to existing race discrimination legislation and would apply in fields such as employment, education and the provision of goods and services.

The current racial hatred provisions are inconsistent. They cover, by almost an accident of interpretation, those who are Sikhs and those

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who are Jews, but not those who are Muslims or of other faiths. We pledge to extend the law to outlaw racism disguised as religious hatred.

Labour's proposed new law would create more problems than it solves, including potential problems of free speech. We have discussed this with Muslim and other communities and have put forward an alternative suggestion to amend the existing racial hatred laws, which Labour has rejected. It is regrettable that Labour is now seeking to play politics with such an important issue in the run up to the election.

3. 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?

Liberal Democrats have expressed particular concern that the use of anti-terrorism powers such as "stop and search" have disproportionately affected minority groups and aggravated community tensions. It is of particular concern that Section 44 of the Terrorism Act has led to a disproportionate increase in the number of Asian people being stopped.

We believe that the terrorist threat is real, but that our response must be effective, proportionate, appropriately targeted and not counter-productive (e.g. alienating Muslim communities whose vigilance the police especially need).

We would replace the flawed Prevention of Terrorism Act. We would introduce new anti-terrorism legislation which would take steps to allow suspects to be brought to trial in the normal way so that their guilt or innocence can be established according to due process of law. These steps should in our view include a new offence of planning terrorist acts, as well as moves towards using phone tap evidence in court. Prosecution is preferable to holding people without trial. The government must not use the 'climate of fear' to justify draconian and unnecessary measures such as compulsory ID cards. More, better-equipped police will be more effective at combating terrorism than ID

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cards. We would set up a National Border Force to tackle cross-border terrorism, drug smuggling and people trafficking

4. *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 Liberal Democrat proposed Equality Act will contain provisions to facilitate general progress towards equality. It would require persons, such as public bodies and employers, to take steps to remove obstacles to equality and to take positive measures to secure it. It would impose a general equality duty on public bodies to take into account the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination on any prohibited ground, including on the basis of religion or belief, to promote equality as between different groups, and to promote good relations between different groups. The Secretary of State would be allowed to make an order on public bodies to ensure their performance of these duties, and supplementary duties could be imposed by secondary legislation to add to this general duty. It also requires employers to carry out periodic reviews of the composition of the workforce and their employment policies. If a review indicates failings in terms of equal opportunities or equal pay, they are required to draw up proposals with a view to bringing about change.

The employer is obliged to draw up and implement a plan of action which will remove the barriers that exist and give effect to positive policies and practices to achieve fair participation across all categories covered by the legislation. This requirement does not require an employer to take steps which would place a disproportionate burden on him to create new jobs or to ignore a person's merit in applying for a particular job. The plan must be drawn up through a process which includes discussion with representatives of the workforce.

Furthermore, we believe that equal access to education is crucial for achieving equality of opportunity. Our policies to improve quality and access to education and training are therefore especially important to many minority groups.

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

Liberal Democrats will promote a foreign policy based on liberal values, respect for the rule of law and human rights.

Both at home and abroad trust has been eroded and Britain's reputation has been diminished because the Labour Government took the country to war against Iraq without express UN authority and on a flawed prospectus.

The war showed scant regard for international law and institutions, and reflects a relationship with America, and George Bush, which is so subordinate as to appear subservient.

We can re-commit ourselves to the rule of law in international affairs, engagement in multinational institutions and collective action on global challenges.

We can use our influence in Europe, the Commonwealth and UN to promote democracy and respect for human rights, wherever they are abused or neglected. We can commit ourselves to support, in deed and in word, the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

We can do more to use aid, trade and debt relief to bring hope to millions for whom poverty is routine, and hunger a daily debilitating experience. We can crack down on the export of arms wherever they aid oppression or fan the flames of conflict.

6. 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?

By invading Iraq the government has imposed on the UK a moral obligation to the Iraq people to work towards the achievement of a stable, secure and democratic Iraq.

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However, we believe that the UK should now produce an exit strategy, which augments the democratic process, provides for Iraq's security, and establishes the basis for the phased withdrawal of British troops by December 2005 when the UN mandate expires.

Liberal Democrats believe that military force should only ever be used as a last resort, and in accordance with international law, to protect Britain or British interests, or to halt systematic large-scale abuse of human rights such as in Kosovo.

7. 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?

We would tackle underachievement among Muslim students in state schools in an inclusive way, by reforming the curriculum so that it engages them in the learning process and by offering a network of community support to promote the value of learning.

Success with raising educational standards in inner-city areas of London have shown that target-setting and monitoring are key to improving achievement and keeping pupils engaged and in schools. We will scrap the endless formal testing, which does little to motivate pupils who are feeling excluded and replace compulsory tests at 7 and 11 with a system of sampling against national standards. Pupils would be monitored with regular progress reports, which identified their weaknesses and set out interim targets for them to achieve and plans for longer term improvement. Mentoring and positive role models are also vital. We will encourage men and women from the Muslim community to act as mentors to young people, giving them advice on their studies and career, in consultation with their teachers and parents.

We would take steps to engage all Muslim students in learning, by trying to stop exclusion and the accompanying underachievement from

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occurring place in the first place. We will reform the curriculum, so that more pupils are stimulated by and engaged in the learning process by giving all students over the age of 14 the opportunity to mix high quality vocational and academic courses from a choice of schools and colleges. Meanwhile, we will introduce key skills tests in literacy, numeracy and ICT - so that all pupils have a good education in these basic skills, which give pupils a solid academic grounding. Reducing class sizes at age 7-11 to an average of 25 will give teachers more time to address individual pupils needs. We would also ensure that teachers in core subjects are properly trained specialists, with the ability to reach all pupils with their lessons.

So that no child is left out, we will create a single, joined -up admissions system, operating at a local level, for all schools that receive state funding. This will guarantee that every child will receive an offer of a school place in their local area.

Liberal Democrats recognise both the popularity and the success of many faith schools. They are often over subscribed and they achieve higher than average points scores at both GCSE and A level. We do not and have not advocated their removal from state funding.

It would be unacceptable to deny Muslims or other faiths the same opportunities to operate schools as Catholics, the Church of England, Jews or indeed other Christian denominations, which is why the Liberal Democrats supported the right of other faiths to operate schools in the School Standards and Framework Act. However, in so doing the challenge to us all is to promote co-operation, understanding, joint working and other arrangements that will help bridge divides without losing the inherent importance of individual faiths or ethos

Faith schools must comply with the national requirements that are placed on all non-faith schools, namely the teaching of the national curriculum and a fair admissions policy.

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

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Liberal Democrats encourage people of all faiths and none to play an active part in society. Any barriers to participation should be removed by our proposed Equality Act which would outlaw all unfair discrimination.

We also believe that the best way to ensure that the government is sensitive to the needs of ethnic and religious minority groups is to enhance political representation of these sections of the community. We would do this by bringing in fair votes for all national and local elections by introducing the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system.

9. *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?*

Issues such as abortion and euthanasia are matters of conscience and are therefore subject to free votes in Parliament. Individual candidates are advised to give their personal views here, if they so wish.

10. *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?*

Economic migrants have helped to make Britain one of the richest countries in the world, both economically and culturally.

Liberal Democrats believe that there is a strong positive economic case for managed immigration to meet the demand for skills and labour that are in short supply. We will improve clarity and public understanding of the scale of and reasons for immigration by setting an annual quota for economic migrants. This will be based on the needs of the economy rather than arbitrary political targets. We will also establish a simple Green Card scheme which will be based on points earned for possessing skills and qualifications.

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