

# What do the main parties have to say on secular issues?

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The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have all released their manifestos for the General Election. Read our analysis of what they say on issues from equality to human rights, Islamist extremism and education.

We'll continue to update this article as the other parties publish their manifestos.

## Conservative Party

The Conservative Party manifesto states: "We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality."

One of the major injustices we deal with is parents facing religious discrimination when looking for a local taxpayer-funded school for their child. It isn't clear if the commitment to a "review of school admissions policy" will consider that.

The manifesto rightly states that in "too many parts of our country, we have communities that are divided, often along racial or religious lines" and it pledges a "new integration strategy". But worryingly the manifesto appears to roll back integration and inclusivity measures for faith schools, labelling these rules – and not the religiously (state and private) segregated schools that necessitate them – "unfair and ineffective".

The manifesto pledges to ensure schools with mon-ethnic/mono-cultural intakes "teach their students about pluralistic, British values and help them to get to know people with different ways of life."

Seemingly contradicting this aim, the manifesto pledges to open new 100% religiously selective faith schools. The new 'integration' measures designed to replace the current cap on religiously selective admissions are [not effective](#). Requiring "new faith schools to prove that parents of other faiths and none would be prepared to send their children to that school" is a mockery, when those schools will be able to exclude those children.

The Conservatives say they "will push forward with our plan for tackling hate crime" committed on the basis of protected characteristics, and offer a welcome commitment to "strengthen the enforcement of equalities law – so that private landlords and businesses who deny people a service" on the basis of protected characteristics are "properly investigated and prosecuted".

They undertake to remain signatories of the European Convention on Human Rights for the "duration of the next parliament" and say they will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act during the Brexit process.

The Conservative manifesto has several passages dealing with countering extremism "especially Islamist extremism", pledging to "to learn from how civil society and the state took on racism in the twentieth century". They propose a new 'Commission for Countering Extremism' as well as creating

new criminal and aggravated offenses.

While the NSS shares the commitment to challenging extremism, we have concerns that 'extremism disruption orders', proposed several years ago, will chill free expression and can capture a whole range of views which are not dangerous or comparable to Islamist extremism.

The Party also promised to "expand our global efforts to combat extremism, terror, and the perpetration of violence against people because of their faith, gender or sexuality".

[Read the full manifesto.](#)

## **Labour Party**

Labour commit to "enforce effective measures to prevent all forms of abuse, including female genital mutilation." There has never been a successful prosecution for FGM in the UK.

Labour commits to "review the Prevent programme with a view to assessing both its effectiveness and its potential to alienate minority communities." While many will have honestly-held concerns around Prevent, honest debate has been consistently undermined by myths and misinformation campaigns, often backed by those who would rather there was no counter-extremism programme whatsoever.

The Party says it will "address the government's failure to take any effective new measures against a growing problem of extreme or violent radicalisation." As mentioned, the proposed extremism disruption orders never surfaced from the Government, but the NSS is concerned that proposals from Labour or the Conservatives might result in measures that chill free speech with subjective definitions of 'extremism'.

On this point, the Party promises that new counter extremism powers will "not weaken our individual rights or civil liberties."

The Party plans to "build a society and world free from all forms of ... Islamophobia." The NSS supports efforts to challenge anti-Muslim bigotry and all forms of sectarian hatred. However we (and many others) have [criticised](#) the unclear and much misused term 'Islamophobia'.

On equality law and hate crimes Labour says it "will bring the law on LGBT hate crimes into line with hate crimes based on race and faith, by making them aggravated offences" as well as supporting the Istanbul Convention and reporting responsibilities.

It says: "We need to celebrate the profound and enriching transformation brought by the diversity of people in this country".

Labour will "appoint dedicated global ambassadors for women's rights, LGBT rights and religious freedom to fight discrimination and promote equality globally." We are disappointed that the proposed ambassador for 'religious freedom' is not explicitly an ambassador for freedom of religion and belief.

The NSS would welcome such a role, provided they dealt with the closely related issues of religious freedom and freedom from religion. Around the world Christians, atheists and other religious and political minorities face persecution from theocratic regimes.

The plan to "extend the Freedom of Information Act to private companies that run public services" may help bring scrutiny where religious organisations are running public services.

[Read the full manifesto.](#)

## **Liberal Democrat Party**

The LibDems offers a welcome promise to "outlaw caste discrimination." The late Lord Avebury, a Liberal Democrat peer and honorary associate of the NSS, was very active in our ongoing campaign to have caste discrimination explicitly outlawed in equality law.

They have also pledged to "Strengthen legal rights and obligations for couples by introducing mixed-sex civil partnerships and extending rights to cohabiting couples."

On education the Party will give local authorities "proper democratic control over admissions and new schools", something that has been weakened by academisation. There have been examples of local authorities being powerless to stop religious organisations running new or converted community schools.

It will also "repeal the rule that all new state-funded schools must be free schools or academies." The NSS has repeatedly raised concerns about the ways in which academisation can be used to drive the unwanted growth in faith school numbers.

However the Society questions the LibDem pledge to "Guarantee the freedom of people to wear religious or cultural dress". In almost all circumstances such a freedom rightly exists already, but there are many examples where this right is reasonably limited.

The LibDem spring conference [backed](#) the phasing out of religious discrimination in school admissions, an end to compulsory worship, and reform of religion and belief education – commitments missing from the manifesto.

[Read the full manifesto.](#)

## **UKIP**

Much of UKIP's manifesto is taken up with measures to combat Islamic fundamentalism.

The Party vows not to be intimidated by accusations of 'Islamophobia' and says that "mass uncontrolled immigration has opened the door to a host of people from cultures with little or no respect for women."

It laments the failure to successfully prosecute an FGM case and the manifesto vows to implement "a screening programme for girls identified to be at risk of FGM from birth to age sixteen, consisting of annual non-invasive physical check-ups".

Additional checks will be made on "at risk" girls when they return from countries where FGM is customary and calls for a mandatory minimum sentence of six years.

The Party will ban face coverings in public places and says, "There is no human right to conceal your identity."

UKIP promises to end Islamist extremism in schools and says "we must wake up to the reality that extremism is taking hold in our country."

Schools found to be exposing children to Islamism should be put into special measures by Ofsted, the Party says, and schools should dismiss teachers, staff and governors who support radical mosques or imams. UKIP also calls for and it would require Ofsted to conduct snap investigations of schools where "girls are being offered unequal access to music, dance, PE or drama lessons, or are otherwise discriminated against" or where anti-Semitic and hard-line views are expressed.

On radicalisation in prisons it says no prisoner should be given "perks" because of their faith, and it calls for prisons to refuse imams or preachers who promote "views contrary to British values".

[Read the full manifesto here.](#)

## **Green Party**

The Greens say they will reject "the xenophobic Prevent strategy" and replace it with "community-led" and "collaborative approaches" to countering extremism.

They would bring academies and free schools under local authority control, and would abolish Ofsted.

They will implement a "strategy to tackle gender based violence" including FGM, but give no details in the manifesto.

The party says it will defend the Human Rights Act, and UK membership in the European Convention on Human Rights.

They also promise to tackle "discrimination on the basis of faith" and pledge "real equality for LGBTIQ+ people [and] equal rights for mixed gender couples to have a Civil Partnership."

[Read the full manifesto.](#)

## **National Secular Society: a manifesto for change**

The NSS is a non-partisan organisation. Ahead of the snap General Election, we're writing to all major parties, calling on them to embrace a series of secular reforms, drawn from our recently published secular manifesto, that make society, our education system, and the law fairer for all.

You can view all of our recommendations in [Rethinking religion and belief in public life: a manifesto for change](#) and add your support.

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