

# A response from the National Secular Society to the Select Committee On Citizenship and Civic Engagement's call for evidence



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## About the National Secular Society

1. The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs.
2. We regard secularism as an essential feature of a fair and open society, in which people of all faiths and none can engage with society on the basis of equal citizenship. We therefore welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee On Citizenship and Civic Engagement.

## Strengthening people's identity as citizens

3. The UK today has incredible religious diversity. Immigration and secularisation have driven significant changes in the UK's religious makeup. It is regrettable that in recent decades, successive governments have encouraged a multicultural approach to deal with the changing demographics of society. This has tended to manage diversity at the cost of undermining common citizenship and eroding some common human rights and values.
4. We regard it as highly problematic that state-managed multiculturalism (as opposed to 'lived multiculturalism') and multifaithism, has led to civil society being actively encouraged to organise around exclusive religious identities.
5. More recently, multiculturalism has evolved into 'multifaithism', with identity described around religion. This has resulted in an approach which emphasises communal or group rights, and treats minority religions as homogenous. Such an approach, like multiculturalism, gives unjustified power to group leaders, sometimes at the expense of individual human rights.
6. A focus on 'communal rights' under the multicultural framework has led to horrendous abuses, from female genital mutilation (FGM) to forced marriage, as people (particularly women) have been left isolated from mainstream society and trapped in cultural and

religious blocs, within which group pressure and 'shame' culture denies them their legal rights.

7. Likewise, under the emerging 'multi-faith' approach where minority groups are seen exclusively through the prism of religion, the rights of women and 'minorities within minorities' are abandoned and ignored, and secular space has diminished. These groups include, for example, gay Muslims, ex- Muslims, and (though not a minority) women. By shutting off, or starving support from, secular avenues for engagement, the state limits the options for such groups.
8. The increasing use of sharia as a system for alternative dispute resolution in the UK strikes at the heart of shared citizenship and therefore should be a particular area of concern. Sharia is a system which leaves children vulnerable and discriminates openly against women, undermining their legal and political equality.
9. We regard it as imperative that the state treats all citizens equally as individuals rather than as members of communities that are only deemed to be accessible through invariably patriarchal and often unrepresentative community leaders.
10. The media, too, sometimes still resorts to 'community leaders' to access hard-to-reach groups. This strengthens traditionalist voices, who are often unrepresentative and/or opposed to the interests of the minority groups within minorities. Both the media and the state should interact with minority religious groups through shared civic engagement, elected representatives, councillors and MPs, as they would with the rest of the population.
11. Increasing secularity and the fragmentation of religious belief means the need to treat people as individual citizens rather than as members of a religion has become even more apparent. No faith-based approach from the state will ever encompass every strand of belief that exists in the UK today, and a human rights, individual-centred approach – rather than the failed multicultural or multi-faithist model – is vital for every citizen to be treated and valued equally.
12. Secularisation has resulted not only in the decline of both religious beliefs and identities, but also for many the disentanglement of religious and political/social engagement. The assumption that citizens (particularly of minority faiths) will hold particular views or want to engage with civil society/state interventions on the basis of faith, is highly problematic. Britons of all faiths and none share many complicated overlapping identities, many of which may be more relevant than their faith identity in different contexts.

13. The UK must develop notions of universal rights and responsibilities that transcend all faith and belief systems. Multi-faith societies must also ensure that no citizen is favoured or discriminated against on the basis of their religious identity and should promote shared rather than sectarian values. Principles of equality and human rights are the foundation of equal citizenship; these values should be central to young people's education.

## The role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship

14. We regard citizenship education as a key element in preparing young people to exercise their rights as active, autonomous and equal citizens. The concept of equal citizenship regardless of one's religious or philosophical beliefs is central to secularism and something schools rightly have a duty to promote.

15. We welcome initiatives which bring together school communities in order to participate as citizens, as well as mechanisms such as National Citizen Service which bring young people together in a community based on a concept of shared citizenship. While many young people grow up as members of cultural or religious communities, it is important that they gain the skills and opportunities to participate in the multiple overlapping communities that make up modern Britain.

16. We would like to see citizenship education strengthened. The subject should enable all young people to critically and practically explore the values and ideas which underpin the concept of equal citizenship. The subject's content should enable students to recognise the protections granted to all people, regardless of belief, by human rights instruments such as the Human Rights Act 1998 - based on the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) - and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the UK is a signatory.

17. We further suggest that it would be helpful to emphasise that human rights apply to individuals and not organisations or ideologies – and for students to explore the difficulties with models of citizenship where human rights do apply to identity groups rather than individuals. Young people should be able to understand the rights and responsibilities which underpin the different communities within the schools, workplaces, civil-society and nation which they will grow up navigating.

18. In line with the duty on schools to promote 'British values', we believe the consideration of the impact of equality law and human rights on the nature of citizenship should be a key component of the subject. We would encourage an emphasis on the role of the individual citizen here, where every citizen has a vote, and that it is through the bestowal of the status of equal individual citizenship that the UK ultimately views and

treats its citizens.

19. Part of the solution to the problem of the development of parallel legal systems in minority communities may be to ensure that all schools, both in the state and independent sector, are under a duty to promote understanding of citizenship and legal rights under UK law so that people – particularly Muslim women and girls – are aware of and able to access their legal rights and do not regard religious ‘courts’ as sources of genuine legal authority.
20. Similar to the way that a ‘Secular Charter’ is displayed in a prominent position in French schools to remind pupils and teachers of the country's secular, Republican principles, consideration might be given to displaying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in schools.
21. Given the transformative demographic and social change which is taking place in Britain, the concept of secularism, with its commitment to *everyone's* religious liberty, stands to benefit us all. Religious conflict and sectarian grievances have the potential to tear societies apart. Secularism, properly understood, offers the chance for citizens to live in peace with other citizens whose creed is different from their own. We would therefore like to see explicit reference to secularism in the citizenship curriculum.
22. There is a pressing need to ensure that young people develop into citizens who are capable of living together well in 21st century Britain. By empowering the next generation of active citizens, and educating them together regardless of their religious or belief backgrounds, we can hopefully to move closer to the ideal of equal citizenship.

### Faith schools and the relationship between citizenship and social cohesion and integration

23. It is impossible to ignore the impact that a lack of diversity in schools has on integration in society as a whole – and the implications this has for the concept of shared British citizenship.
24. Education is probably the best chance we have to promote shared citizenship and stimulate future social harmony and cohesion. That chance is being wasted by pursuing policies that promote faith-based, sectarian and fragmented schooling.
25. Even as we prepare this submission, the Government is contemplating abandoning the only meaningful effort to promote diversity and address the problems caused by faith-based schooling. Plans to abolish the 50% admission cap on faith schools, which currently limits religious discrimination in the admissions policies of oversubscribed new

faith schools, would be a highly retrograde step that can only exacerbate the problems caused by religiously segregated schooling.

26. The UK's long-standing commitment to religious schooling has encouraged the idea that it is acceptable and even desirable for children's education to be organised around religious identities. This has more recently encouraged religious minorities to establish their own schools: some within the state sector, some in the independent sector, and some in the burgeoning 'homeschool' and illegal sectors. We believe this will have profound implications for future social cohesion and shared citizenship, and run the risk of leaving some children vulnerable to extremism.
27. The school environment, where young people participate on a basis of equal pupilship, is a training ground to the adult environment where they will be expected to participate on the basis of equal citizenship. If young people are raised in an environment where pupilship is based on religion or belief rather than equality, it sends the message that citizenship too can be based on religion and belief rather than equality.
28. One of the most concerning aspects of faith schools is their potential to divide and segregate children along religious and ethnic lines. The Social Integration Commission has warned that "increased numbers of children [are] being educated in peer groups dominated by a single faith group or community".
29. Demos has warned that British schools are "highly segregated" and that "religious identities often overlap with ethnic identities and therefore some faith schools effectively exclude other ethnic groups." This mirrors the self-segregation of some religious minorities from wider society. This is deeply troubling and an inevitable result of a divisive faith-based approach to education.
30. Studies have shown that the younger children from all backgrounds start to be educated together, the more successfully they integrate<sup>1</sup>. If they are very young, this draws in the parents too. The more they integrate, the better their chances of employment and consequently the less the chance of social exclusion.
31. We therefore recommend a move away from faith-based education in favour of inclusive secular schooling which promotes commonly shared societal, rather than religion-specific, values. The most effective mechanism to boost integration would be to ensure that all publicly funded schools are fully inclusive and open to all children, without regard to religion.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/social-cohesion-sharing-crisps-with-someone-different.pdf>

32. Promoting shared universal values would better enable schools to develop a strong common social identity amongst young British citizens, a key component in building social cohesion. Allowing schools to promote the superiority of one particular religion or set of religious values, even implicitly, is inimical to this aim.

## What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support?

33. We would welcome the development of national identity based around a firm commitment to equality and universal human rights, encompassing the values of democracy, separation of religion and state, the rule of law, individual liberty, and tolerance.

34. We were broadly supportive of the introduction of the duty on schools to promote “British values” as we regard it as important that throughout all aspects of education, and indeed civil society, there is an emphasis on the basic values that underpin a free, equal and progressive society.

35. We strongly warn against rhetoric repeatedly used by Government that seeks to identify Britain as a “Christian nation”. Christianity is but one influence among many that shape our current way of life. We are a nation of many denominations and religions and large sectors of the population do not hold, or practice, religious beliefs, while many who are religious do not define their primary identity in religious terms. As citizens we share many things, but one thing we do not share is religious faith. Any approach which seeks to label the values widely shared by UK citizens as uniquely “Christian” is not only erroneous, but also doomed to be out-of-touch with the views and lifestyles of the population and counterproductive in promoting the concept of shared values and citizenship.

36. If there is to be a serious consideration of the values, principles and processes that might play a role in bringing people together and promoting engaged citizenship, the presence of a state religion cannot be ignored. A rethink is required about the merits of an Established Church and the way in which the link between Church and State manifests itself in our national institutions and ceremonies.

37. The existence of a legally-enshrined, national religion and an established church privileges one part of the population, one institution and one set of beliefs. A national religion which retains archaic and unjust privileges risks disenfranchising the rest of the population – the vast majority of which do not belong to or attend services of the Church of England.

38. The presence of an ex officio Bishops' Bench in the House of Lords is also representative of institutional favouritism for one religion. It is a privilege which sits uneasily in a modern democracy and is contrary to aspirations for a more representative and equitable Parliament.
39. Christianity in general, and the Church of England in particular, can no longer be fully inclusive of the whole nation. It is therefore also legitimate to question the appropriateness of the Church being so closely associated with national ceremonies such as the National Service of Remembrance, which should be equally inclusive of all citizens regardless of religion and belief. For similar reasons it also appropriate to question the relevance of the British National Anthem. *God Save The Queen* is unlikely to inspire citizens in modern, secular and religiously-diverse Britain.

## Summary

40. Living together successfully requires a celebration of diversity to be matched with a celebration of equality and respect for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Accommodating the vast plethora of identities within Britain requires engagement to be based on equal citizenship, rather than any particular identity frame.
41. The basis of the secular state which protects the rights of all citizens and shared civic spaces, from schools to high streets, should be protected. Britain should not be a 'Christian club' that tolerates 'outsiders'. A more secular outlook would enable all citizens, whatever their religious affiliations, cultural background, sex, or sexuality, to be — and to be made to feel like — equal citizens.

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