

Former UKIP leader calls for “national debate” on Islam

Posted: Thu, 05 Nov 2015

Lord Lamont, the former Tory chancellor, has rejected calls from former UKIP leader Lord Pearson for a "national debate" on Islam – arguing that it was not the place of Government to interfere with theological questions.

Speaking in the House of Lords, Lord Pearson of Rannoch urged for the formation of a council of Muslim leaders – with Government sponsorship – to "clarify the modern meaning" of Islam.

Calling for the Government to "encourage a national debate" on the religion, the peer warned that "where there is contradiction in the Koran, its later and more violent verses outweigh its admirably peaceful early texts."

He noted what he called the "seriousness of our domestic situation" and said that a council of Muslims leaders "could clarify the modern meaning of their religion and cast the extremists out of Islam".

Responding on behalf of the Government, Lord Ahmad said: "with the exception of one verse in the holy Koran, every verse starts with the words: 'In the name of God, the gracious, most merciful', which underlines the true sentiments and principle of that religion."

He added subsequently that "There are extremists of every guise who take noble faiths and seek to hijack them."

Lord Pearson's proposal was widely criticised by other peers.

The former Tory chancellor Lord Lamont rejected Pearson's suggestion and said that it was not the place of Government to interfere with theological questions. Lord Lamont said that while civil society was free to debate the benefits or failings of world religions, nothing would be served by the Government doing so. He said that "while it is appropriate for the Government to sponsor good community relations and to promote British values in citizenship courses and in schools", and for civil society to "debate the merits" of each religion "it would be totally inappropriate for the state to be involved, as the noble Lord, Lord Pearson, has suggested, in a critique of one of the world's great religions".

Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Hussein-Ece responded to the proposal by questioning if it was "helpful or constructive" that any religious text should be "taken and quoted selectively" in a "negative, divisive and political way to put whole communities on trial?"

Baroness Mobarik said that "peace, compassion and obeying the law of the land" are the true "nature of Islam" and that a debate on the nature of Islam in the manner Lord Pearson proposed "could be divisive and further exacerbate the current rise in Islamophobia".

The Bishop of Sheffield suggested "education and dialogue across a broad front" and for the Government to encourage relationships between "faith communities and civil society" and for greater "levels of religious literacy at all levels". The Bishop called for "further analysis of why

people of faith do, in a minority of cases, resort to violence".

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