

# NSS asks Lords committee on citizenship to promote secular principles

Posted: Mon, 11th Sep 2017

The National Secular Society has called on Britain to celebrate equality and respect for secular democracy, the rule of law and human rights as a basis for civic engagement.

The NSS was responding to a [call for evidence](#) by the House of Lords select committee on citizenship and civic engagement. Its [submission](#) said secularism was an essential feature of a fair and open society, in which people of all faiths and none can engage on the basis of equal citizenship.

The committee asked for evidence after warning that sections of society feel "left behind". It said it was looking for "new ways of building bridges within and between communities, and to support civic engagement".

In response the NSS stressed that the state must regard all citizens equally as individuals rather than as members of communities. It warned that minority groups should not be seen exclusively through the prism of religion. It said human rights abuses had been inflicted on women, children and minority groups as a result of an undue focus on 'communal rights' under the multicultural mindset.

The submission urged the committee to consider the emergence of parallel legal systems, warning that the increasing use of sharia 'law' as a system for alternative dispute resolution in the UK "strikes at the heart of shared citizenship".

It also addressed the vital role of education in supporting civic engagement. The NSS said citizenship education should be strengthened and all pupils be made fully aware of their legal rights under UK law. It said faith schools were detrimental to social cohesion and shared citizenship. And it warned that 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 will only exacerbate the problems caused by religiously segregated schooling".

The submission also advocated 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.

With [recent data](#) highlighting Britain's religious diversity and increasingly irreligiosity, the NSS response was critical of repeated government rhetoric that seeks to identify Britain as a "Christian nation". It argued that close links between church and state, such as the existence of an [established Church](#) and the presence of an ex officio [Bishops' bench](#) in the House of Lords, were "out-of-touch with the views and lifestyles of the population and counter-productive in promoting the concept of shared values and citizenship."

Stephen Evans, NSS Campaigns Director, said: "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.

"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. 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."

**See also: ['Fundamental British Values' and citizenship education](#)**

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