

# Ep 20: General election special

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mwTBwyy6Xo&feature=youtu.be>

Emma Park (EP): Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast. I'm Emma Park and this week I'll be joined by Stephen Evans and Chris Sloggett to discuss the upcoming general election. We'll be looking in particular at the NSS's secularist manifesto. This contains eleven policy proposals that the society would like to see implemented by whichever party or parties come to power after the vote on the twelfth of December. We'll be discussing what the proposals are, the reasons behind them and how likely it is that any of them will make it onto the statute book in the next Parliament.

To start with, here at the eleven things the secularist manifesto would like the next government to do: First, not to open any more state funded faith schools. Second, to end religious discrimination in school admissions. Third, to abolish the collective worship requirement in schools. Four, to promote free speech as a positive value. Five, to end non-stun slaughter. Six, to review the laws on assisted dying. Seven, to end all forms of non-consensual genital cutting of boys, girls and transgender children. Eight, to outlaw caste discrimination. Nine, to end the advancement of religion as a charitable purpose in law. Ten, to guarantee secular public services and eleven, to separate church and state.

These are certainly quite a diverse range of proposals but one thing they all have in common is the desire to put an end to the unfair influence of one or more religions on people's public and private lives. But how far are any of them reflected in the main parties' policies? And how likely is it that any of them will become law in the next parliament? I'm joined now by Stephen Evans and Chris Sloggett to go over these issues with a fine toothcomb. So, first of all, why these eleven proposals now? Stephen.

Stephen Evans (SE): Okay well you may have noticed that we're in the run-up to a general election and, eh, general elections are a good opportunity to try and influence policies and manifesto commitments, eh, remind parties what you're all about, what you want them to change and to try and get supporters involved in that process as well and that's what these secular pledges are all about. Um, the pledges that you ran through in your introduction reflect our campaigning priorities. The most obvious place to start when seeking to influence public policy is with the parties themselves and as you'd expect, we're constantly lobbying, engaging with political parties through various channels but, you know, a general election's a great chance just to have one last ditch attempt to try and influence the way in which they go.

(EP): And are all the parties aware of what your current proposals are?

(SE): Yeah, we've written to all the parties and for the most part, the parties have responded to thank us, um..., now we'll see what they do with them.

(EP): So, on that topic, how are the main parties doing on your proposals so far?

(SE): Ok, well, there are some positive signs – eh, the first few pledges of, of our pledge list involve education so we want to see an end to faith schools obviously but given where we are, that is more of a long term aspiration, I think than something we're expecting to see in the short term um, but certainly on discrimination in school admissions to faith schools, on collective worship and reform of RE, the Lib. Dem's appear to be doing quite well - at least their party policy is to support an end to religious selection in faith schools. Um, at least in England - education is of course a devolved matter....

(EP): What about the collective worship requirement?

(SE): On that too, yeah. That's um, the current legal requirement to hold daily acts of worship would be repealed according to the Lib Dems' party policy - whether that will make it into the manifesto I don't know but that's certainly a big tick for them as well. They also support stricter limits on religious discrimination eh, in um, employment in faith schools - so at the moment some faith schools can discriminate in a hundred percent of teaching positions, which obviously goes beyond any reasonable genuine occupational requirement so the Lib Dems would seek to limit that and they also are calling for all schools to teach impartial education about religion and worldviews in a subject which is inspected by Ofsted so that's very much aligned to NSS policy as well so a big tick there to Lib Dems too...

(EP): And I suppose that fits in with their long-term liberal values of secularism.

(SE): So that's right, well the Lib Dems last week released a plan for equality and human rights which also included a proposal to outlaw caste discrimination which unfortunately is a problem in the UK where victims have no realistic means of redress, so that's another positive commitment from the Lib Dems. The Labour Party too - certainly Jeremy Corbyn personally has been most supportive of that too in the past. But we'll have to see whether that's included in the manifest or not.

(EP): Just returning on the topic of education - what about the Conservatives and Labour - How do they stand on those issues?

(SE): Well, the Labour Party is of course calling for a National Education Service and we've certainly fed ideas into, into that process - their consultation process they've been running of what that might look like. It seems to me that we wouldn't tolerate faith-based discrimination in a National Health Service,

which is what the Labour party want to model the National Education Service on so it seems, you know, strange to me that we would actually tolerate it in a national education service. ,But you know, Angela Rayner released a tweet last night which did seem to give a quite a strong commitment from the Labour Party to the continuation of faith schools and indeed religiously selected faith schools too. So that's, that's very, very disappointing but you would have thought that pledge not to open any more state funded faith schools would be a tangible first step towards building the kind of inclusive society that Labour say they want.

(EP): Any thoughts about the Conservatives position on education. Stephen?

(SE): I think with the Conservative Party it's very much a position of status quo. Um, the Conservative Party have been in power now for several years and they've not shown any enthusiasm for any kind of secularization of the education system. It's a very conservative approach from the Conservative Party, as you might expect.

(EP): So, moving onto the other proposals, is there anything that stands out that any of the main parties are doing?

(SE): Well I was being quite positive about the Lib Dems when it came to education but I think they don't score particularly well on the commitment to free speech that we want to see because they are one of the parties that have adopted the contentious Islamophobia definition but so have labour, the SNP and Plaid Cymru as well um, and that certainly runs counter to our call for parties to protect free speech, but the Conservatives do seem to be scoring better on that front because they have, the language they use is about anti-Muslim hatred and anti-Muslim bigotry which is something we do want to confront but they seem to be quite reluctant to use the language of Islamophobia, which I think is a good thing.

Chris Sloggett (CS): We've seen the chancellor Sajid Javid go on the Andrew Marr show and he was quite clear about using the language of anti-Muslim hatred and anti-Muslim bigotry rather than this sort of conflating term of Islamophobia.

(EP): What about hate speech laws, any developments there?

(SE): Well at the moment the Law Commission eh. doing a review on hate speech laws which we have fed into - we have met with the law commission to discuss that so until they come up with their findings, I don't think the parties are going to make any moves on that front.

(EP): So, we've talked about free speech, we've talked a bit about caste discrimination and education.... Um, any other major proposals stand out?

(SE): Well previous Liberal Democrat manifestos have called for disestablishment of the Church of England. I think it's also been Green Party policy. I've noticed that it's not in the Green Party's manifesto - we'll see if it's in the Lib Dem manifesto this time. I'm not holding my breath but you do get the feeling that, in terms of disestablishment, we would be pushing on an open door with a Liberal Democrat government. I don't think you could say the same for the Conservative or a Labour government.

(EP): So we've talked about some of the policies which are potentially in at least some of the eh, well some of the Liberal Democrat policy, if nothing else. Which do you think, out of your proposals, are least likely to make it into any party policy?

(SE): Well certainly in the short term, we're not going to see an end to faith schools. Removing religious control from state education is not a simple process or a commitment not to open new faith schools I think is the best we can hope for and clearly, I think we've got to do some hard work on that to achieve it. Um, also the current debates

around anti-Semitism and Islamophobia which the Labour Party and Conservatives are certainly embroiled in at the moment do make it harder to address some of the issues that come up in our pledges such as non-stun slaughter of animals - we want to see an end to that and we won't see an end to forced genital cutting of minors as well.

(EP): So sorry Stephen, could you just explain how it is that the embroilment of Labour and the Tories in these debates makes it difficult to discuss these issues.

(SE): Well there's two things I'd say to that really because if you were to bring about an end to non-stun slaughter of animals, so that's a religious exemption that allows it, if you were to remove that religious exemption and if you were to give young infant boys the same protection that girls enjoy from genital cutting at the moment, that would lead to a restriction of the rights of Muslims and Jews. Now I think that's a perfectly legitimate restriction of their rights but in the current climate one has to accept that it's politically difficult to implement any policies that would adversely affect the Muslim or Jewish communities in the UK.

(CS): Yeah, it's, also one example that we've seen - the Green party manifesto's now come out and the Greens have said that they would defend the right of people to express their faith through food. Now this is obviously a party that you would hope would be very committed to environmentalism and um, would be quite tough on anything that smacks of, you know, cruelty to animals but that sounds very much like they have no intention of clamping down on non-stun slaughter and also shortly before we came on air there was a story published where Justin Welby the Archbishop of Canterbury said major parties must quote 'avoid anything that increases the perception of fear' unquote for Jews and Muslims at the election. Now the thing is there, I mean when he makes a point like that it's very important to acknowledge that there's a very genuine fear for many Jews and

Muslims in this country um, facing anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry and in some cases physical attacks and harassment. But the way that is phrased you know, the perception of fear - this is used to shutdown debate about issues that do need to be addressed. We were recently attacked in The Spectator over this. One of the writers effectively said our campaign to end non-stun slaughter added to an atmosphere which makes Jews and Muslims unwelcome In this country and unfortunately, you know, equality under the law is a precious thing and we should be seeking to uphold it while also absolutely rejecting 'othering' and bigotry against religious minorities.

(EP): So as the NSS often points out I guess there is a distinction between criticizing a religious idea and criti..., and attacking individual people.

(SE): Absolutely. And that's what, that's what makes this so frustrating for organizations such as ourselves who stand on a point of principle. I'm sure the RSPCA and Compassionate World Farming feel the same way too -you know, in our case that principle is the principle of one law for all which is a very important principle but racism, anti-Muslim bigotry, anti-semitism that we are seeing in society and we are seeing in our political parties just makes our job that little bit harder. In the meantime, farm animals continue to suffer unnecessarily, infant boys have been subjected to painful religious surgery and have their right to bodily integrity violated. It's all very frustrating.

(EP): And it strikes me, on the point of animal welfare, it's rather ironic from the Labour Party given how strongly they have been against fox hunting, which is another form of cruelty to animals, that yet at the same time they have this inconsistency with non-stun slaughter.

(SE): Yeah, it's another, it's another double standard that stems from religious privilege.

(EP): So, in short, Stephen how hopeful should we feel about the likelihood that any of these proposals will become law?

(SE): Well it's, I think it is worth acknowledging that many of the issues that we, we work on, aren't particularly politically salient. That's not to say that the majority of the population don't support us. That's not saying they don't agree with us. But I think it is fair to say they're probably not at the forefront of people's minds when they cast their votes and this is after all very much a Brexit election, I think, and it is going to be hard for any other issues to cut through.

(EP): As far as this issue of the religious suppression of discussion is concerned, um, Chris you've recently written a blog about this idea of excessive tribalism in politics today. Are religious organizations exerting an undue influence on party policy?

(CS): Eh, Yes - I think that they are. This is the argument that I laid out. So, in this election campaign we've seen almost a daily round of stories where parties seems to be appealing to particular religious groups and those religious groups or the, sort of, community leaders who claim to speak for those groups are often very keen to have those parties indulge their wishes, um..., so, for example, last week we had the Labour Party issued a race and faith manifesto. Um, now even in its name it sort of conflates the idea of race with the idea of faith and I mean, it's, it's, there's a lot of stuff in there that is quite concerning from a secularist perspective - so it identified what it called a failure in places including the media to quote 'deal effectively and efficiently with the rise of racist violence, hate speech and hate crime'. Now I mean, that sounds to me like just a sort of license for censorship when you're applying it certainly to, to the media.

(EP): And I noticed in your blog Chris, that you pointed out that Matt Hancock said that some people take quote 'a more balanced approach' unquote on Islamophobia and the

definition of it than Baroness Warsi and her response to that was that she accused him of 'whitesplaining' which again seems to conflate race and faith in a rather strange way.

(CS): Yeah and I think the concerning thing about that was that the accusation of whitesplaining just seemed like something that just shuts down debate umm... and, I mean, Sayeeda Warsi is of course entitled to be heard in public debate and she, you know, the concerns that she's raising about, she's raising concerns about bigotry within the Tory party towards Muslims, um some of those concerns are certainly valid and they, they do deserve to be heard but at the same time she shouldn't be beyond reproach and her approach to it is not beyond criticism so we need to see that nuance, we need to have a genuine, a sort of more... we just, partly we just need to have a better discussion about this subject.

(EP): Yeah, because it's simply too easy to use terms like whitesplaining to just or accusations or saying that you're offended by something someone says just as a way of completely stopping them for making criticisms, even valid ones.

(SE): Well that was part of the problem I was trying to explain earlier around Islamophobia and anti-semitism - so it's not just the parties are embroiled in these battles over those things, it's also that when we do say very reasonable, make really reasonable points um about how we should have one law for all, how, there should be, um, humane treatment of animals and that boys should have the right to bodily integrity too then, you know, those debates are too easy to close down with accusations of Islamophobia and anti-semitism.

(CS): Yeah. Yes and also just to add to that, I mean, if you look at what some of the, the Muslim groups who are quite powerful and have quite a strong voice in public debate are doing, are pushing for... for example the Muslim Council of Britain has issued election

pledges and some of them, you know, silence free speech on Islam, they'd make it harder to encourage integration and of course they would make groups like the Muslim Council of Britain more powerful, which is eh, convenient for that group but at the same time can silence dissenters within - you know, dissenting Muslims. Um, Mend which is another Muslim advocacy group has, I would say, gone further and it's, it's said, it's identified sixty to eighty seats where it says the number of Muslim voters is bigger than the candidate's majority. So it's sort of hoping to ensure that loads of volunteers canvas for candidates who endorse its manifesto um, and this is a, this is part of a concerning trend I suppose I would say that we are dividing voters up by their religious affiliation and their religious identity. And this isn't just about the way in which Labour is I think sort of appealing to Muslims. It's also about the way in which Hindus and Sikhs are being treated and I think in that case it's much more likely to benefit the conservatives um, so activists from groups linked to India's ruling party which is a Hindu nationalist party are reportedly planning to campaign for the Conservatives and it also applies when we think about the way in which the Conservatives I think, just in the way they often have, are appealing to the Christian vote - so, If you look at the way government peers responded when the idea of disestablishing the church was raised in the House of Lords last year, um, If you look at the Foreign Office's position on religious persecution which um, sort of, plays to the idea that there should be a particular focus on protecting Christians because they're Christian, these sorts of things I think are a kind of nod to the Tories' traditional heartland Christian vote.

(EP): Is there a sense that any parties are trying to appeal to a particular Jewish voter or a strand of the Jewish population?

(CS): Well it seems pretty clear that a lot of Jewish voters are put off by Jeremy Corbyn.

(EP): And we see um, MPs such as Luciana Berger who left the party and have now joined the Liberal Democrats for that sort of reason.

(CS): Yeah, um and, I mean, some of the sort of the, certainly the Jewish groups and the Jewish press, I mean, since the campaign began we've seen the senior rabbi urge people to vote tactically against Labour. We've seen the Jewish chronicle run a front page asking non-Jews to bear anti-Semitism in mind when they cast their vote. Um, now with this - again there's a similarity to the anti-Muslim bigotry issue - the difficult thing to pull out here is that there are some very genuine concerns. Um, what we sort of need to be aware of here is that there is a loosening of the taboo on scapegoating religious minorities, um, and that's, that's being accompanied by a politics which encourages voters to see themselves as members of religious tribes.

(EP): And is this part of British political tradition? - I mean as far as I'm concerned it doesn't seem to me a very British democratic thing to do - to vote along religious lines.

(SE): No, I mean we've always argued that there isn't a religious vote, as such, but I think the worrying trend is towards one at the moment and I think that's what we're trying to push back against.

(CS): Yeah, so I think we really should just be urging politicians to try and look past the religious labels. We should be trying to encourage politicians to engage voters as citizens and to stand up for consistent principles such as, we'd like to hope, the, the eleven pledges that we've issued - we hope that they are a reflection of that.

(SE): So I think when politicians come knocking, the message from us is do raise the secular pledges and, you know, these are what we think is the best way to a free and fair secular state and so, you know, please do urge MP's to support them.

(EP): Sure, and make MPs aware that some people do actually care about secularist issues and it's not only the religious voters who count I guess.

(SE): Well that's the key thing as well. That's why we have letters on our website that people can write to their MP's. It's important they hear from people about issues that we care about. So, yeah, absolutely - engage with your MP's. Send the pledge list to your local MP. Raise it on the doorstep but most importantly of all, just register to vote.

(EP): Chris and Stephen, thanks very much.

(CS): Thank you.

(SE): Thank you.

(EP): That was episode nineteen of the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park. If you would like to help us challenge religious privilege and support freedom of and from religion in Britain today, why not become a member of the NSS? Full details are on the society's website at [secularism.org.uk/podcast](http://secularism.org.uk/podcast). If you like this podcast, you can find more episodes on the website along with further information about the topics discussed. Thanks for listening.