

# YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

## 'Faith schools' are bad in both principle and practice, and the Liberal Democrats are wrong to support them, argues Simon Titley

When historians look back on this decade, one of the political curiosities will be why the Blair administration chose to hand over control of large chunks of the state education system to religious bodies, in an age when religious faith has fallen through the floor.

And as a footnote, they might ponder why the Liberal Democrats chose to endorse such a perverse and illiberal policy. Charles Kennedy, in a lecture to the religious group Faithworks (3 February 2005), said that he was in favour of faith-based welfare and thought that religious bodies should play a larger role in public life.

Kennedy added, in an interview with *Muslim News* (21 January 2005), that the Lib Dems would come up with a "package" of measures in which they would consider giving further privileges to religion. He also said that he would not oppose a growth in the number of state-funded Muslim schools.

Meanwhile, in a speech to the Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges (2 February 2005), the party's education spokesman Phil Willis assured his audience that, "We have no proposals whatsoever to close Church schools or to prevent the establishment of others – indeed it is a Liberal Democrat Council in Islington that has jointly sponsored the St Mary Magdalene Academy, the first Church of England Academy in the country."

Both speeches read like a nervous pre-election pitch for an imagined 'religious vote'. This pathetic attempt to appease a dogmatic and vocal minority left Britain's majority of non-religious voters with no choice at this year's general election; a situation where all three main parties were supporting 'faith schools'. It is truly bizarre that the number of such schools is already over 7,000 and rising when Britain is one of the least religious countries in the world.

Following the general election, the Liberal Democrats appeared to back-pedal somewhat. A press statement (23 August 2005), in response to a Guardian opinion poll (of which more later), said that the party would not want to see any more faith schools in the country as they could foster divisions in society. An unnamed spokeswoman said the party would not seek to close any existing faith schools but would not like to see any new ones emerge. She said the party did not believe in "segregation in education" – a position apparently at odds with Willis's clear commitment in February.

So the Liberal Democrats are at sixes and sevens – no change there. Given the obvious muddle, what ought to be the party's position?

The Liberal Democrats have rightly recognised the paramount importance of education because of its capacity to liberate the individual. But education is also fundamental to the enlightenment project. In a year in which ugly religious intolerance is back in fashion – from the fanatical protests against the Sikh play *Bezhti* and Jerry Springer – *The Opera*, through to the July 7 bombings – enlightenment values are at risk. As if that were not bad enough, Britain's education policy has been entrusted to a member of the extremist cult Opus Dei. In such dangerous times, Liberals would do well to remember Victor Hugo's maxim, "There is in every village a torch – the teacher; and an extinguisher – the priest."

It is obvious why the churches want more 'faith schools'. But why should anyone else? Such schools are allegedly 'popular' and 'successful' but both claims turn out to be bogus. In any case, the notion of 'faith schools' is fundamentally wrong in principle.

The first principled objection is a belief in the secular state – indeed, it is fundamental to civil society, which can function properly only on the basis of pluralism and rational debate. Liberals, whatever their personal religious views, must accept this principle because only individuals can have religious faith and the inanimate state cannot 'believe'. Further, religion must remain a personal matter because all religions have at their heart a dogma that necessarily precludes other beliefs. When religion is established within the body politic and there is only one 'truth', it leaves little room for argument.

Opposing 'faith schools' should be all of a piece with opposition to an established church, to blasphemy laws and to the proposed 'religious hatred' legislation. In a Liberal society, no-one should suffer discrimination or oppression for their religious views but, equally, no religion should enjoy any statutory privilege or state subsidy.

State funding for 'faith schools' is tantamount to spending taxpayers' money on religious proselytising. The state should not ban religious schools but there is no reason why the state should subsidise them.

The second principled Liberal objection to 'faith schools' is that, far from promoting 'diversity' as their defenders claim, they enforce sectarianism by segregating children according to their parents' superstitions. They pin religious labels on children too young to be capable of making any meaningful choice. The disastrous experience of segregated education in

Northern Ireland appears to have taught the British political establishment nothing.

Sectarianism is not confined to Ulster. Lord Ouseley's report into the Bradford riots of 2001 warned, "There are signs that communities are fragmenting along racial, cultural and faith lines. Segregation in schools is one of the indicators of this trend. There is virtual apartheid in many secondary schools."

After riots the same year in Oldham, there was another official investigation and another warning. David Ritchie (chair of the investigation) warned in his independent review that local 'faith schools' were "contributing institutionally to divisions within the town."

If parents genuinely wish to provide religious education to their children, and if churches wish to offer it, that is their right. But it should not be done at the taxpayers' expense. Nor should the state endorse segregation as public policy; publicly funded education should be secular and open to all children regardless of their parents' beliefs.

The third principled Liberal objection to 'faith schools' is that of choice. Promoters of 'choice' within the state education system hold out the prospect of a veritable smorgasbord of educational options. Instead of the 'bog standard comprehensive', you may choose from dozens including a Catholic school, a Shi'ite grammar school, a Vegan secondary modern or a City Academy specialising in macramé.

In reality, even in densely populated urban areas, parents are unlikely to find more than two or three schools within convenient reach. In rural areas, there is unlikely to be more than one. To hand over control of state schools to a management with a religious agenda inevitably restricts available choice for the majority of parents who would prefer something a little more impartial.

What's that? Did I say "majority"? Don't most parents like 'faith schools'? Actually they don't. An opinion poll published by the *Guardian* (23 August 2005) found that 'faith schools' are opposed by almost two-thirds of the public. 64% agreed with the proposition that "the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind". A MORI poll for the TES in November 2001 produced similar results.

Little wonder. It turns out that almost half the government's planned new flagship city schools are sponsored by religious organisations. Over 40% of the sponsors for the 'academies' due to open over the next two years are faith-based charities, Church of England figures or well-known evangelicals.

At least one of this next wave of privately funded city academies is a school planning to teach children creationism. The Grace Academy, due to open in Solihull this year (with another to come in Coventry) is sponsored by millionaire car dealer and born-again Christian Bob Edmiston, founder of the evangelical broadcasting organisation Christian Vision. He has reportedly dismissed evolution as a theory that "came from one guy called Darwin".

In a democratic and pluralist society, people are free to hold whatever beliefs they like. But 'creationism' – the dogma that the world was created 6,000 years ago – is demonstrably false and bad science, and it would be professional malpractice to teach it in school science lessons.

But in Blair's Britain, this seems not to matter. If you've got a nutty idea or an axe to grind, a state school can be yours for just two million pounds. In an age when only about 7% of the population regularly attends any form of worship,

the church seeks to impose by force what it cannot win by argument.

But let's leave aside religion for one moment. Who would want to dismantle the best schools in the country? Aren't 'faith schools' supposed to be better? Isn't this why they are popular, despite parents' lack of religious faith?

The government and many parents are wedded to the idea that 'faith schools' achieve superior results. At first glance, the league tables of examination results seem to bear this out. We should examine these statistics more closely.

The right-wing think tank Civitas did just that. Supporters of 'faith schools' tend to attribute the superior performance of these schools to the educationally beneficial effects of their having a religious ethos. Civitas found that 'faith schools' achieve superior results for one simple reason: they cream off the best and the brightest middle class children and tend to reject the less intelligent, the less motivated and the poorer children who would require more work.

In other words, there is 'choice' but it is the schools rather than the parents who are doing the choosing. And even then, 'faith schools' are not all they are cracked up to be. The Civitas pamphlet *Faith in Education*, published in 2001, reported on standards in Roman Catholic and Church of England schools and found "staggeringly large" variations in average standards between the best and the worst. It added that the problems of bad teaching, low standards and low morale are just as acute in the worst church schools as they are in the worst state comprehensives.

Overall, 'faith schools' on average performed only slightly better than conventional state schools, and the extent of under-achievement was still on the rise. 'Faith schools' are clearly not centres of excellence and do not warrant the disproportionate support they receive from the government or the ill-informed enthusiasm of some parents.

When you factor in the selective policies of these 'faith schools', it is clear that they are under-performing. But it is also clear that these schools have little sense of any Christian charity. Bring me your poor? Not if it affects their league table rankings.

Janet Dobson, writing in the *Guardian* (29 November 2005), remarked, "Church schools that select their pupils carefully from a wide area have exceptional exam results and parents queuing down the street; those that fulfil their Christian mission by recruiting from the bottom of the social pile, do not."

Each person should be free to pursue his or her religious beliefs but one's faith should be a matter of private conscience, not state policy. Charles Kennedy and Phil Willis, in their statements earlier this year, placed their party on a slippery slope, in what appeared to be an ill thought-out piece of shabby populism.

The party would do better to oppose strongly the government's massive expansion of 'faith schools'. It would be a popular policy, it would be distinctive and, more to the point, it would be right. All it needs is some testicular fortitude on the Liberal Democrat front bench.

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