

Transcript of House of Lords Debate on 18th January on 'Living with Difference', the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

2.51 pm

Tabled by Lord Harries of Pentregarth

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their response to the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life Living with Difference published on 7 December.

Baroness Butler-Sloss (CB): My Lords, on behalf of the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in his name on the Order Paper.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Baroness Williams of Trafford) (Con): My Lords, the Government note

this report and its contribution to the debate on faith in Britain today. We continue to celebrate the role of faith in society, with a particular emphasis on co-operation between different faiths as a way of breaking down barriers and strengthening communities. The report raises a number of questions for a range of organisations. I will ensure that all government departments consider the recommendations relevant to their individual policies.

Baroness Butler-Sloss: I thank the noble Baroness. I declare an interest as chairman of the commission. Will the Government consider organising, or allowing to be organised, a meeting of senior civil servants from the relevant departments to discuss some of the implications of our report?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I am certainly happy to volunteer my services, together with officials from different departments, and meet with the noble and learned Baroness.

Baroness Afshar (CB): My Lords, is it acceptable to talk of celebrating differences while, at the same time, Muslims in particular are being demonised at every turn? Is it not a question of celebrating differences but of recognising what all religions have in common and not choosing some as terrorists and others as friendly people?

18 Jan 2016 : Column 511

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The noble Baroness makes a very good point. We can celebrate differences while also celebrating our similarities, particularly the values of faith that unite us in so many ways.

Baroness Whitaker (Lab): Can the Minister say how the Government will respond to the point made by the report that, UK wide, there has been a lack of movement in education policy to implement the Equality Act's requirement for all schools to foster good relations between people of different backgrounds? The noble Baroness's fine words do not talk about implementation.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: My Lords, while this is not an official report, I can certainly say that from my own department's point of view, and certainly from my personal point of view, there are very good examples of schools—particularly faith schools—that do much to foster understanding and relationships between other faiths. I am sure there may also be examples where schools could do that better.

Lord Cormack (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend for her comments about faith schools and for reinforcing the point that this report, welcome as it is as a contribution to debate, is not an official report. The Government have no obligation to respond to it, and many people feel that it does not have the balance entirely right.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I thank my noble friend for that comment. He is right; it is not an official report but I have undertaken to meet the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Butler-Sloss, and officials to discuss it. However, the noble Lord is absolutely right that it is not an official report.

The Lord Bishop of Durham: My Lords, does the Minister agree that the recommendation around religious literacy is of particular note? Does she recognise that, at local and national government levels, there is a serious problem with religious literacy that the Government may seek to help address?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The right reverend Prelate makes a very valid point, which was one of the recommendations of the report. I am very happy to work with him and other organisations and faiths to see whether we can make progress in this area.

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, the focus of the questions so far has been very much around faith, but the title of the report is about religion and belief. What are the Government doing to ensure that all schools teach a wide-ranging RE and belief curriculum, including academies and free schools?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: My Lords, it is an expectation that at all key stages schools should have a curriculum around religion and belief. I can get back to the noble Baroness in due course on some of the details of that, if she wishes.

18 Jan 2016 : Column 512

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, while we are on that subject, when the Minister writes to the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, will she also comment on the fact that it will be quite difficult for schools to tackle the important issue of religious literacy and literacy with regard to belief raised by the right reverend Prelate if we cannot improve access to a significant number of well-trained teachers in this area? What will the Government do to make that issue more of a priority?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: My Lords, I totally agree with the noble Baroness that, unless we have decent teachers, we cannot have high-quality education. I cannot disagree with that point.

Lord Popat (Con): Does my noble friend the Minister agree that the Prayers we have here before our business begins are not just energising but a stark reminder that we are here to represent something bigger than ourselves and our respective political parties? Therefore, the Prayers are not just complementary to other faiths but very much inclusive of them?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: My noble friend makes a very good point. When I stand at Prayers, my noble friend is often there, as are members of other religions and myself as a Catholic. I commend the fact that the Bishops conduct the Prayers in such an inclusive way. That is why I think so many Members of your Lordships' House attend Prayers, as it is a lovely time of reflection.

Lord Woolf (CB): My Lords, I declare my interest as patron of the Woolf Institute, which promoted the inquiry chaired by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Butler-Sloss. Does the Minister agree that the inquiry is an excellent example of people of different faiths coming together to discuss critical problems which face this country, as differences between faiths are very complex? The inquiry drew representatives with different views from all sections of the community, who produced an excellent report.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The credits at the back of the report—if you can call them credits—certainly indicate an incredible number of contributions of people, from across society, of all faiths and none.

Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton (Lab): My Lords, would the Minister please care to reply to the question about what the Government are doing to increase the supply of suitably qualified teachers? Among the considerations they ought to take into account is that no member of the Government should run down the many thousands of excellent teachers in all schools, not just free schools and academies.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: My Lords, I hope I have not run down any teachers, or given any notion of doing so. The schools in this country are very well served by teachers. I will certainly be replying to the noble Baroness.