



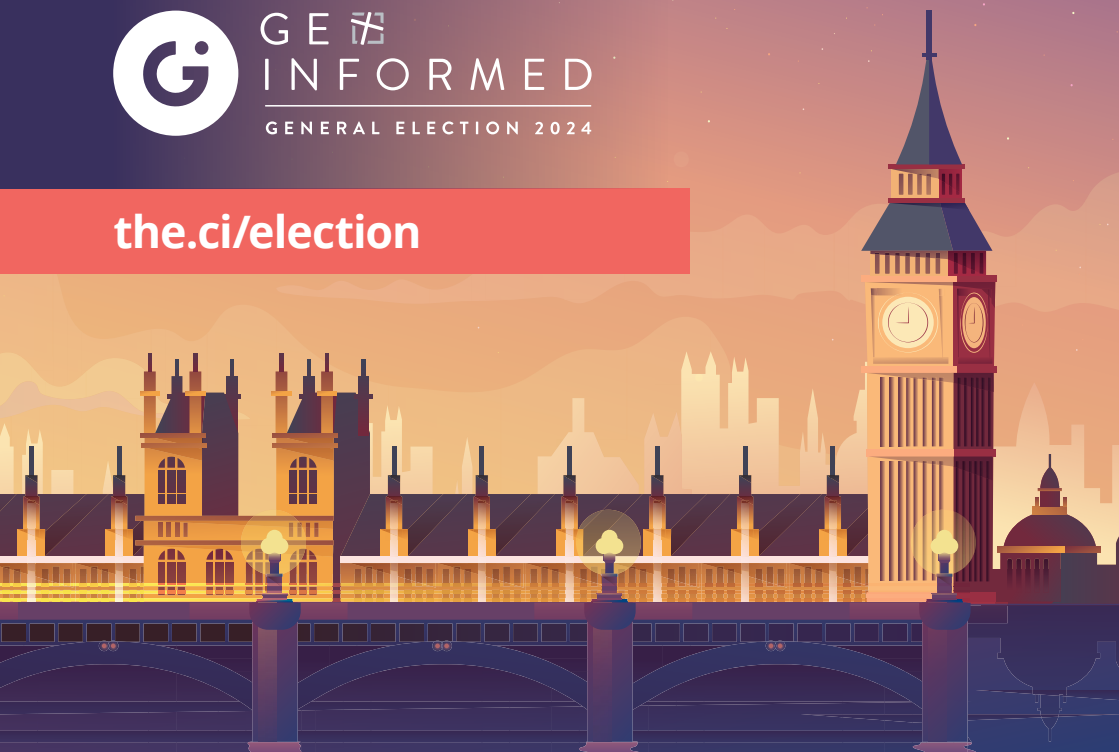
Election Briefing 2024

AN ANALYSIS OF PARTY POLICIES ON KEY
ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE TO CHRISTIANS



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Contents

3		Introduction
8		Conservatives
14		Labour
19		Scottish National Party
22		Liberal Democrats
26		Plaid Cymru Party of Wales
28		Green Party
30		Reform UK
31		More information about legislation and public policy
42		References

Key resources at ***the.ci/election***



Voting records of MPs

This covers a specific range of moral issues. There may well be other matters you want to think about. Our voting records only apply to MPs from the Parliament just dissolved. There are some MPs who are standing down.¹ You will want to ask the views of the other candidates in your constituency.



Questions for Candidates

Questions to help Christians find out key views of candidates. You can also get copies from our office on request – email info@christian.org.uk or call 0191 281 5664.



Election Briefing

Order from our office or download an updated version as manifestos are released – ***the.ci/election***



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Introduction



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ELECTION 2024

As Christian citizens, we should think carefully about how we vote in the General Election on 4 July 2024.

The Christian Institute is a registered charity and we cannot tell you how to vote. What we can do in this briefing is address:

- why you should vote
- biblical priorities
- issues on the horizon
- two key factors in voting
- speaking to candidates
- party policies on key issues
- background information on public policy

Our analysis of party policies covers many issues where important Christian principles are at stake. They tend to be issues where biblical standards, particularly the Ten Commandments, directly apply. In modern Britain they can be among the most controversial subjects, yet in our view the Bible is perfectly clear about them.

We cannot be exhaustive. There will be other areas of concern where much material is available elsewhere or where there is honest disagreement among Christians holding to the Bible as their authority, such as the environment.

WHY SHOULD YOU VOTE?

The State is a means of God's 'common grace'. The Bible is very clear that the governing authorities act on God's behalf to restrain evil and promote what is good (Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2). This benefits all people, not just Christians.

As a general rule Christians follow Jesus' command to: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21, KJV).² Christians are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and also of an earthly nation. The Christian's duty is to obey the governing authorities. The exception is where they forbid what God requires, or require what God forbids (Acts 5:29). It is our earnest prayer that Christians will have freedom to share the Gospel and live out the Christian life (1 Timothy 2:1-4). In praying "deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13) we are praying against the persecution of the Church as well as against personal temptation.

Common grace and the privilege of voting

Romans 13 makes clear that God has ordained the governing authorities in every country whether they are Christian or not. Thanks to God's common grace, there are many non-Christians who take the right view on a range of issues. Nobody's thinking

is wrong at every point. Politicians who disagree with Christians about redefining marriage can still be strongly against assisted suicide or liberalising cannabis laws. Some atheists will strongly defend the free speech of Christians. The Christian Institute can testify that there are men and women of integrity in parties across the political spectrum.

Like the prophet Daniel, God's people must encourage leadership which promotes truth and righteousness, such as when he said to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed" (Daniel 4:27).

Unlike Daniel, Christians in the UK today get to play a part in electing their leaders. In our democracy we all have the legal right to vote. Billions of people around the world do not enjoy the freedoms we have in the UK. We elect Members of Parliament and so ultimately the Government. We help choose 'Caesar'. So voting is a privilege and a serious responsibility.³

The General Election provides an opportunity for Christians to speak out and play their part by voting. Governments can make it easier or harder to live freely as a Christian or to share the Gospel. Believers have to make a judgement about how their vote can be used to best effect.

BIBLICAL PRIORITIES

When it comes to matters of public policy, Christians have to assess biblical priorities. We can distinguish those political issues on which the Bible is absolutely clear from those on which it is not.

For instance, the Bible is not clear on how to improve access to GPs or the most

appropriate level of university tuition fees. To decide on these issues involves a detailed assessment of the facts and the exercise of judgement based on experience. Many situations we encounter in ordinary life are at this level, and so are many political issues.

But at the other end of the spectrum the Bible is "clear, direct, and decisive"⁴ about a whole host of political issues. For example, a vote for abortion or euthanasia is a vote to break the Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13). These are the kinds of issues that we mainly focus on in this briefing – straightforward matters of right or wrong.

For a very large proportion of political issues, making a Christian judgement depends on the wise assessment of several biblical principles. This can result in Christians arriving at different conclusions. For example, we know for certain that the State has a right to levy taxes (Romans 13:7). But Christians who hold to biblical truth can legitimately disagree on the level of individual taxes.

One clear biblical priority is for God's people to meet together (Hebrews 10:25). During the Covid lockdowns, it was clear that this was not understood by the majority of politicians. Quite apart from any question over whether it was legitimate or necessary, the closure of churches during the pandemic should have been treated as a far weightier issue than it was. Garden centres were open when churches were closed.⁵ This displayed a lack of religious literacy that is a recurring problem in our national life, perhaps most clearly seen now with the issue of 'conversion therapy'. However, since there was such a strong party-political consensus on the matter of lockdown, it is not covered in this briefing.

ISSUES ON THE HORIZON

The new Parliament elected on 4 July 2024 could vote on laws affecting religious liberty, freedom of speech, transgenderism, abortion, assisted suicide, drugs legalisation and gambling. More information about legislation and public policy on these and other issues is given on page 31 onwards.

These are all issues of concern to Christians. Some are 'conscience votes', where MPs are free to vote without a party whip, which underlines the importance of finding out what individual election candidates think.

Biblical Christians believe that the Gospel is paramount. Salvation is only found in Christ, not in any political programme. Yet followers of Christ are to care about their world, being salt and light in our society. And in order for that to happen, and for evangelism, there has to be freedom for the Gospel. Religious liberty is a crucial issue.

Christians in Britain have enjoyed remarkable freedom for centuries, which was hard won down the years. Many Christians elsewhere in the world do not have such freedom and we must pray for them. Our political leaders must do more to combat the persecution of Christians abroad.

Yet here in the UK religious liberty is being increasingly challenged. Street preachers have been arrested. Christians have lost their jobs for answering questions about their faith or for taking an ethical stand. Christians in business have come into conflict with equality laws and faced fines for holding to the belief that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Many Christians are also gravely concerned about legislative proposals that intrude into ordinary family life, evangelism

and the running of the local church. Christians believe that governing authorities are established by God, but at the same time the Government is not responsible for everything. Indeed, if there is to be freedom, it must not be.

It is important to say that society is more than the State. Society is made up of families and many institutions and organisations between the State and the citizen. In the UK, we do not equate society with the State. Government by itself cannot solve all our problems or even come remotely close.

TWO KEY FACTORS IN VOTING: CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

In the 'first-past-the-post' system for Westminster elections you vote for a particular candidate. So there are two key factors we all must consider when deciding who to vote for. We must consider both our local candidates and the parties they represent.

It is very important to know what is going on in your parliamentary constituency and to find out who your candidates are. The key to identifying your candidates is to be sure which constituency you live in. Most constituency boundaries have changed for this election. This website is helpful:

whocanivotefor.co.uk

i Remember: this is the first General Election at which you will need to show photo ID in order to vote.

A lot may hinge for you on the individual views of your candidates. In some constituencies there will be the option to vote for a candidate who takes the right stance on moral issues.

In casting a vote, Christians are not necessarily endorsing every policy of the party they vote for. You may decide to back a particular political party that most approximates to where you stand. Or you may consider it better to vote for an exceptional candidate who shares your Christian views across a range of moral issues, even if they are standing for a party you would not naturally support. You may decide the most important consideration is to vote for the candidate who is standing for a party which in your view represents the 'least-worst' option. You may think it better to vote for one of the Christian political parties which may happen to stand in your area.

Sadly, in some constituencies, Christian believers may be in what feels like an impossible position. These are decisions which ultimately only you can make. Christians should prayerfully exercise their Christian conscience in these matters. Just because your parents or your colleagues vote in a certain way does not mean that you need to do the same. It is your choice.

But you cannot make an informed decision without knowing what the parties and the candidates stand for. Christians should make it their business to find out the policies of each candidate and party. You should seek to find out their positions on key moral issues.

It is unlikely that you will find a party or a candidate you believe has all the right views. For many Christians there is a genuine dilemma over choosing a party or a particular candidate. Whatever your decision it is relevant to consider how the parties fared in the last election in your constituency.⁶

SPEAKING TO CANDIDATES

Candidates or their canvassers may come to your door, call by telephone or stop you in the street to ask how you intend to vote. This presents an ideal opportunity to find out where the candidate stands on key moral issues. His or her opinions on these issues can be quite different from the position of their party.

More than at any other time, the candidates will be open to listening to your views. Should they be elected, they will be representing you in Parliament. In 'safe seats', where the party of your current MP is expected to win, raising issues with candidates could have an even greater influence than your vote.

The Christian Institute has suggested Questions for Candidates (we can send them to you – just contact our office). Think through two or three issues and have the questions ready in case canvassers call or stop you while out shopping. Limit yourself to two or three issues with which you are most concerned. Be prepared to give a reason for your view. This Election Briefing will help you get to grips with the issues you are interested in.

If you speak to the candidate, ask if he or she is willing to raise your concerns in Parliament if elected. If they say they will, you can hold them to this promise should they be elected.

If you speak to someone canvassing on behalf of the candidate, ask for your concerns to be passed on. The very act of asking these questions is a Christian witness.

CONTACTING YOUR CANDIDATES

You can contact your candidates by letter or email, or on social media, in order to raise your concerns. This way you can be sure that

all the candidates have been made aware of the issues important to you.

For contact information about candidates, use this website: whocanivotefor.co.uk

Election literature put through your letterbox will also give the local addresses for your candidates. If your MP is standing again you may want to see how he or she has voted in the past, since this is a matter of public record (see the.ci/election). If you contact a candidate, keep things short, but do raise specific points. Make sure you tell them that you are a constituent. You could swap notes with other Christian friends who have had contact with a candidate.

There are many ways of being a Christian citizen, but a General Election provides an excellent opportunity for Christians to be salt and light in our society. We must pray for wisdom and speak out for the truth.

THE POLICIES OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

Since its inception, The Christian Institute has sought to promote the Christian faith in the public square in six main areas – education, marriage and the family, medical ethics, religious liberty, matters of public morality, and constitutional issues.

Within these broad areas, this Election Briefing highlights some of the policies of the four main political parties at Westminster – the Conservatives, Labour, the SNP and the

Liberal Democrats. We also include some of the known policies of other parties expected to have candidates standing in all, or close to all, constituencies.⁷ Space and time constraints do not permit us to cover other parties.

The parties set out their policies in their manifestos, official policy documents, or resolutions determined by their party conferences. The Christian Institute's election website will link to the 2024 General Election manifestos of the parties covered in this publication as they become available: the.ci/election

Obviously the Government's actions are there for all to see. Since the opposition parties have not been in a position to implement their ideas, we can only note what they have said and the way they have voted.

Christians must weigh the evidence and exercise their Christian conscience, remembering that: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

i For contact information about candidates visit: whocanivotefor.co.uk

i For MPs' voting records, party manifestos (as available) and other election information visit: the.ci/election



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After the 2019 General Election the Conservative Party formed a Government with a majority of 80. Between 2017 and 2019, the Conservatives were the largest party and formed a minority Government, reaching a 'confidence and supply' agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party. The Conservatives were also in Government from 2015 to 2017, with a majority of 12. From 2010 to 2015 they were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative Party had 345 MPs at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024.

Conservative Prime Ministers since the 2010 General Election:

🕒 **David Cameron**, May 2010 to July 2016

- 🕒 **Theresa May**, July 2016 to July 2019
- 🕒 **Boris Johnson**, July 2019 to September 2022
- 🕒 **Liz Truss**, September to October 2022
- 🕒 **Rishi Sunak**, from October 2022

CONSERVATIVE PARTY RECORD IN GOVERNMENT: 2015-2024

Conversion therapy – The Government consulted in 2021 on a new law against so-called conversion therapy. The proposals risked restricting biblically faithful preaching, prayer, pastoral care and parenting. No consultation outcome was published, but the Government remained publicly committed to publishing a Bill up to the election being called.⁸ In January 2023, Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch pledged to ensure that parents, teachers and church leaders who uphold the Bible's teaching on gender and sexual ethics would not be criminalised.⁹

The Conservative

manifesto says it is a "very complex issue" and "it is right that we take more time".^{9a}

Online Safety Act 2023 – In 2022 the Government brought forward the Online Safety Bill, including measures to tackle 'legal but harmful' online content. This part of the legislation was dropped after concerns were raised about the potential threat to free speech.

Pornography – The Government's Digital Economy Act 2017 would have imposed age-verification checks on pornographic websites. After several delays, it was announced in October 2019 that those provisions would not be brought into force. The Government said the objectives



🕒 Prime Minister Rishi Sunak



would be delivered through other means.¹⁰ However, some commercial pornographic content was not covered by the draft Online Safety Bill, and it lacked clear standards for age checks. Amendments to strengthen the Bill were later added by the Government, under significant cross-party pressure. It remains to be seen how robustly Ofcom will enforce the age-verification requirements.

Relationships and sex education – The Government created new compulsory subjects for England: Relationships Education for primary and Relationships and Sex Education for secondary. It commissioned a review in 2023 after concerns over use of inappropriate materials, and parents being sidelined.¹¹ The Government published draft guidance for consultation in May 2024, setting age restrictions on some topics, stating that gender ideology should not be taught as fact and emphasising the role of parents.¹² The consultation closes after the election.

The Conservative manifesto promises new legislation on parents’ “right to see what their child is being taught in school”.^{12a}

Same-sex marriage – In July 2019 the Government allowed time for amendments to be discussed that led to same-sex marriage being legalised in Northern Ireland. Conservative MPs were given a free vote. Rishi Sunak did not vote.

Divorce – The Government’s Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020, which came into force in April 2022, brought in ‘no-fault’ divorce in England and Wales.

Heterosexual civil partnerships – The Government supported legislation, passed in March 2019, requiring the law to be changed to allow opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships.¹³

LGBT rights envoy – In 2021 the Government appointed a Special Envoy on LGBT+ Rights to lead “efforts to champion LGBT+ equality in the UK and abroad”.¹⁴

Transgenderism – The Government consulted in 2018 on amending the Gender Recognition Act 2004 to ‘streamline’ and ‘de-medicalise’ the process of changing legal sex.¹⁵ This policy was dropped in 2020.¹⁶ In 2023, Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch said that the Government “does not recognise self-identification for the purpose of obtaining a gender recognition certificate”.¹⁷ In 2023 the Government used a constitutional power to stop the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill becoming law, partly due to concerns over its impact on equality legislation, which is a matter reserved to Westminster.¹⁸

Cass Review – The Government welcomed the Cass Report on NHS England’s approach to gender-questioning

children.¹⁹ The Conservative manifesto promises to “complete the implementation of the Cass Review, protecting young people questioning their gender from ideologically-driven care”.^{19a}

Schools guidance – In December 2023, the Government published draft guidance for schools on gender-questioning children.²⁰ It said schools should give great weight to parents’ views, single-sex spaces should be protected, and a change of pronouns should only rarely be agreed – and never in primary schools.²¹ The consultation closed in March 2024 and the final guidance was not published before the election. The Conservative manifesto says “we will pass legislation to ensure schools must follow our guidance for teachers on how best to support gender questioning students”.^{21a}

Abuse of trust law – The Government’s Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 made it illegal for sports coaches or religious leaders to take sexual advantage of 16 and 17-year-olds under their supervision or instruction.

Free speech – The Government’s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 creates duties on universities and students’ unions to secure freedom of speech for staff, students and visiting speakers.

Hate crime – In 2016 the Government published a four-year hate crime action plan for England and Wales. This required the police to record all reported incidents, and, for the first time, record hostility to ‘transgender identity’ as an aggravating factor.²² In 2018 the Government asked the Law Commission to review hate crime legislation, including whether it should

cover more protected characteristics. The Commission’s report in December 2021 recommended that hate crime legislation should be extended. The Government did not respond. In 2023 the Government published a code of practice on recording non-crime hate incidents stating that any interference with a person’s “right to freedom of expression” needs to be “proportionate and necessary”.²³

Extremism – Conservative Government policy seeks to tackle ‘non-violent extremism’. In 2024, it defined extremism as “the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance” that aims to “negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others”, or “undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights”.²⁴

Ofsted inspections of churches – In April 2018 the Government formally dropped the proposal, first consulted on in late 2015, that any group teaching a child for six or more hours in any week should have to register and be subject to Ofsted ‘British values’ inspections.²⁵

Home education – In 2022 the Government’s Schools Bill included a duty on local authorities to create registers of children not in school and to provide support to home educators.²⁶ This Bill was dropped, but the Conservative manifesto says “we will legislate to create a register of children not in school”.²⁷

Abortion – In July 2019 the Government allowed time for amendments to be discussed that led to abortion being legalised in Northern Ireland. Conservative MPs were given a free vote. Rishi Sunak did not vote.

'Buffer zones' – Conservative MPs were given a free vote in 2022 on a backbench amendment introducing "Safe Access Zones" around abortion venues nationwide, with 113 Conservative MPs voting in favour and 104 against.²⁸ Rishi Sunak did not vote. Draft Home Office guidance on the operation of the zones was published for consultation in 2023, including some protections for free speech and the right to protest.²⁹ The final guidance has not been published.

Home abortions – During the pandemic the Government changed the law to allow women in England to have an early abortion at home without an in-person consultation with a doctor.³⁰ On a free vote, MPs voted to make this permanent in England and Wales in March 2022, with 72 Conservative MPs voting in favour and 177 against.³¹ Rishi Sunak did not vote.

Organ donation – The Conservative Government backed a Private Member's Bill moving England to a presumed consent system for organ donation. The law passed in March 2019 and came into force in spring 2020.

Gambling – The Government lowered the maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) from £100 to £2 in April 2019. Following a review of the Gambling Act 2005, the Government published a White Paper in April 2023 setting out plans to "reform the regulation and legislation governing the gambling sector".³² The measures were subject to further consultation and most were not implemented before the election.³³

Drugs – In 2021 the Government published a ten-year drugs strategy for improving treatment as well as deterring

recreational drug use and expressly rejecting decriminalisation.³⁴ However, first-time offenders would face a drug awareness course as an alternative to prosecution.³⁵ This was considered by some to be a step towards decriminalisation.³⁶

Sunday trading – In 2015-16 the Conservative Government attempted to liberalise Sunday trading rules. The plans were voted down in the House of Commons. In 2020, the Government said it had "no plans" to increase Sunday trading hours.³⁷

Persecution of Christians – In 2019 the Government accepted the recommendations of a report on the persecution of Christians abroad. Christian MP Fiona Bruce was appointed the first Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief in December 2020.³⁸

Faith schools – In May 2024 the Government published a consultation on removing the rule that a free school with a religious character can only apply faith criteria to 50 per cent of its intake.

Religious Education – In June 2022, a Government minister spoke against an attempt to rename RE lessons as 'Religion and Worldviews' and include atheist teaching.³⁹ The Government also defended the requirement for schools to have Christian assemblies.⁴⁰

Human Rights Act 1998 – The Government brought forward legislation in June 2022 to replace the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights. It proposed to give greater weight to protecting free speech, but also risked damaging religious liberty. The Bill was later dropped.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY POLICIES

This section includes policies not part of the Government's record because they were free vote issues or are proposals for the future. Older information shows the party's response to actions taken by the previous Labour Government (see pages 17 and 18).

Abortion – In 2024 Conservative MPs were promised a free vote on backbench amendments aimed at decriminalising abortion, but no votes took place.⁴¹

The Conservatives allowed a free vote on Fiona Bruce's amendment in 2015 to explicitly ban sex-selective abortion. It was defeated by 292 votes to 201.

In October 2018 Conservative MPs voted 108 to 15 against Diana Johnson's Ten Minute Rule Bill supporting the removal of all criminal laws relating to abortion. Rishi Sunak did not vote.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act

2008 – Conservatives were allowed a free vote on animal-human hybrid embryos, 'saviour siblings', keeping the 'need for a father' requirement in IVF and lowering the abortion time limit.

Assisted suicide – The Conservatives had a free vote on Rob Marris's Bill to legalise assisted suicide in 2015.⁴² Rishi Sunak did not vote. He has said he is "not against it in principle".^{42a} The Conservative manifesto says it is a matter of conscience for MPs.⁴³

Under Michael Howard there was a free vote for Conservative MPs on the **Civil Partnership** and **Gender Recognition** Acts in 2004, though the frontbench spokesmen supported both.

Hate crime – Rishi Sunak has stated that people "should not be criminalised for stating simple facts on biology".⁴⁴ The Scottish

Conservatives have urged the Scottish Government to scrap its controversial Hate Crime and Public Order Act.⁴⁵

Incitement to religious hatred – The party backed House of Lords amendments in 2006 to narrow the scope of the offence and include a robust free speech protection.⁴⁶

'Incitement to homophobic hatred' – The Conservatives allowed a free vote on the issue when in opposition. Their Shadow Cabinet supported including a free speech clause.

Islamophobia – The Conservatives do not agree with the definition of Islamophobia proposed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims.⁴⁷

Sexual Orientation Regulations (SORs) 2007

– A third of Conservative MPs at the time voted for the SORs, meaning that Roman Catholic adoption agencies had to secularise or close.⁴⁸ Conservative MPs and Peers were given a free vote.

Equality Act 2010 – Conservative MPs and Peers were whipped to support an amendment by Baroness O'Cathain maintaining existing employment exemptions for churches, but the party gave its support to the legislation as a whole.⁴⁹ The Conservative manifesto promises to: "Protect female-only spaces and competitiveness in sport by making clear that sex means biological sex in the Equality Act."⁵⁰

Named Person – The Scottish Conservatives repeatedly spoke out against the statutory Named Person scheme, saying that it was "completely unworkable and unwanted".⁵¹

Smacking – The Conservatives have

consistently upheld the right of parents to reasonably chastise their own children, including opposing the moves to ban smacking in Scotland and Wales.⁵²

House of Lords – The party believes that the current parliamentary system “can serve us well in the future”.⁵³

THE RECORD OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT: 2010-2015

The General Election in 2010 was the first since 1974 to provide no overall majority for any one party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition Government, led by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, consisting of 306 Conservatives and 57 Liberal Democrats.

Same-sex marriage – The Coalition passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 for England and Wales. The Government gave a free vote, but there were reports of undue pressure put on Conservative MPs.⁵⁴ At Second Reading, more Conservatives voted against same-sex marriage than for it. The Liberal Democrats allowed their MPs a free vote.⁵⁵ Four Lib Dem MPs voted against the Bill at Second Reading.

Marriage allowance – The Government introduced a tax break for married couples in April 2015, currently worth up to £252 a year. Despite describing the measure as “patronising drivel” before entering into coalition, the Lib Dems agreed not to block its introduction.⁵⁶

Legal rights for cohabitants – The Government declined to introduce Law Commission proposals for new legal rights for couples who cohabit.⁵⁷

Abortion – The Department of Health confirmed the biggest liberalisation of abortion practice in England and Wales since 1967, in updated guidance published in May 2014. The document for abortion providers said there is “no legal requirement” for doctors to see women seeking an abortion before approving it.⁵⁸

GM babies – The Coalition passed regulations legalising genetically modified babies with three or four parents, making Britain the first country in the world to officially permit the practice.⁵⁹

Free speech – In 2013 the Government accepted reform of Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 so that it no longer covers “insulting” words or behaviour.⁶⁰ Later in 2013 the Government proposed to create injunctions against “conduct capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to any person” in public as a replacement for Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). After a big defeat in the House of Lords, the Government effectively dropped its plans.⁶¹

Lobbying Act – In January 2014 the Coalition passed a law restricting the legitimate campaigning activities of charities and other organisations during elections.

Modern Slavery Act 2015 – The coalition Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which gives greater protection to victims of human trafficking.

Council prayers – In 2012 the Government fast-tracked legislation to restore the right of local councils in England to hold prayers as part of their formal meetings.⁶²



Labour had 205 MPs at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024.
The Labour leader is **Sir Keir Starmer**.

LABOUR PARTY POLICIES

Conversion therapy – Labour’s manifesto promises to introduce “a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, while protecting the freedom for people to explore their sexual orientation and gender identity”.⁶³ Shadow Equalities Minister Anneliese Dodds stated that “any ban must not cover legitimate psychological support and treatment, non-directive counselling, or the non-directive pastoral relationship between teachers and pupils and religious leaders and their worshippers, nor should it cover discussions within families”.⁶⁴

Online Safety Act 2023 – Labour has committed to introducing further online safety legislation to cover ‘legal but harmful’ content.⁶⁵

Pornography – Labour supported the stronger age-verification requirements on sites with pornographic content that were added to the Online Safety Act.⁶⁶

Relationships and sex education – Labour supported the Government’s statutory Relationships Education subject for primary schools.⁶⁷ The party welcomed some aspects of the draft RSE guidance published in May 2024, including “the

principle that parents should have an explicit right to know what their children are being taught”. However, it raised several concerns, including that “potentially drawing down the shutter on discussing different types of relationships and the lived experiences of those who are transgender means that some children may grow up with a narrow, potentially prejudiced, view”.⁶⁸

Same-sex marriage – Labour strongly supported the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2013. It did not formally impose a whip, though there were reports of MPs coming under pressure from the leadership at the time to support the Bill.⁶⁹

Northern Ireland – Labour MPs had a free vote on the amendment to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. The Labour frontbench spoke in favour.⁷⁰ No Labour MP voted against it and 222 supported it, including Keir Starmer.⁷¹

Divorce – Labour supported the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020, which brought in ‘no-fault’ divorce in England and Wales.⁷²

Heterosexual civil partnerships – The party supported the 2019 legislation

extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples.⁷³

Marriage allowance – Labour published a funding report with plans to scrap the marriage tax allowance alongside its 2019 manifesto.⁷⁴

Legal rights for cohabitants – Labour's manifesto says it will "strengthen the rights and protections available to women in cohabiting couples".⁷⁵

Transgenderism – The party's manifesto pledges to "modernise, simplify, and reform the intrusive and outdated gender recognition law" and also to continue to support the implementation of the single-sex exceptions under the Equality Act 2010.⁷⁶ Having previously supported legal sex change by self-declaration, Keir Starmer said in July 2023: "We don't think that self identification is the right way forward."⁷⁷ Earlier in the year he had said "99.9 per cent of women... haven't got a penis".⁷⁸

Cass Review – Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said the Cass Review raised "some serious concerns that are pretty scandalous". He said a Labour government would work to bring in the recommendations.⁷⁹ Labour welcomed "the decision by NHS England... to stop the routine prescription of puberty blockers to under-18s".⁸⁰

Schools guidance – Labour welcomed the consultation on guidance for schools on gender-questioning children.⁸¹

LGBT rights envoy – Keir Starmer said Labour would appoint an international LGBT+ rights envoy.⁸²

Extremism

Ofsted inspections of churches – In 2016 a Labour spokesman said the Government's plans for registration and inspection of out-of-school groups were unnecessary and would only impose an additional bureaucratic burden on Sunday Schools.⁸³

Prevent – Labour supports the Prevent scheme, but wants to see it "improved, updated and scrutinised".⁸⁴

Hate crime – Labour's manifesto says it will "protect LGBT+ and disabled people by making all existing strands of hate crime an aggravated offence".⁸⁵

Islamophobia – The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims' definition of 'Islamophobia' has been endorsed by the Labour Party.⁸⁶

Home education – The Shadow Education Minister said Labour would pass a law to "register and count the children being taught at home".⁸⁷

Smacking – Keir Starmer has called for England and Northern Ireland to follow Scotland and Wales by criminalising parental smacking.⁸⁸

Abortion – Labour has pledged to: "Provide parliamentary time for free votes on modernising abortion law".⁸⁹ In July 2019 the Labour frontbench spoke in favour of the move to legalise abortion in Northern Ireland, though MPs had



🕒 Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer

a free vote.⁹⁰ Keir Starmer voted for it.

In 2015 the Labour leadership strongly opposed Fiona Bruce's amendment to explicitly ban sex-selective abortion. The then Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, wrote to the party's MPs urging them to vote against it, but MPs had a free vote. Some 178 Labour MPs voted against the amendment, while 27 voted for.

In October 2018 Labour MPs voted 179 to 7 in favour of Diana Johnson's Ten Minute Rule Bill supporting the removal of all criminal laws relating to abortion. Keir Starmer voted in favour.

'Buffer zones' – Labour supported the introduction of 'buffer zones' around abortion clinics.⁹¹

Home abortions – In a free vote in March 2022 on permanently allowing early at-home abortion without an in-person consultation, 127 Labour MPs voted in favour and four voted against. Keir Starmer did not vote.

Assisted suicide – Labour allowed its MPs a free vote on Rob Marris's Bill to legalise assisted suicide in 2015.⁹² Keir Starmer voted in favour. He says he supports changing the law and has committed to allowing parliamentary time to debate the issue.⁹³

Organ donation – Welsh Labour introduced a system of presumed consent for organ donation in 2015, a first for the UK.⁹⁴ Labour also supported legislation creating a presumed consent system in England.⁹⁵

GM babies – Labour gave its MPs a free vote on the plans to allow genetically modified babies with three or four parents.⁹⁶

Drugs – Keir Starmer said he has "no intention" of changing drug laws, and said an anti-drugs approach is "settled and not really a subject of great debate even within the Labour Party".⁹⁷

Modern Slavery Act – Labour supported the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which gives greater protection to victims of human trafficking.⁹⁸

Gambling – Labour supported the reduction in the maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) from £100 to £2.⁹⁹ Labour has promised to "update analogue gambling laws that are not designed for the digital age".¹⁰⁰ Labour's manifesto says it is "committed to reducing gambling-related harm" and "will reform gambling regulation, strengthening protections".¹⁰¹

Sunday trading – In 2016 Labour voted against the Government's plans to liberalise the law and promised in its 2019 manifesto to "keep restrictions on Sunday trading in place".¹⁰²

Human Rights Act 1998 – Labour says it will: "Protect and promote the Human Rights Act".¹⁰³

House of Lords – Labour's manifesto promises to modernise the House of Lords by removing hereditary peers, introducing a mandatory retirement age and reforming the appointments process. It also says it is "committed to replacing the House of Lords with an alternative second chamber that is more representative of the regions and nations".¹⁰⁴

THE PREVIOUS LABOUR GOVERNMENT: 1997-2010

This section records Labour's actions when it was most recently in Government.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 – The Act:

- legalised the creation of **animal-human hybrid embryos** for research;
- allowed the creation of **'saviour siblings'**;
- abolished the **'need for a father'** consideration before commencing IVF treatment.

Labour allowed its MPs a free vote on these three issues, though they were whipped to support the Bill as a whole.

Abortion – The embryology Bill also saw votes on lowering the 24-week limit for abortion. Labour MPs were allowed to vote according to their conscience.

'Gay rights' – From 1997, Labour pushed through various measures, including

homosexual adoption, the Civil Partnership Act and reducing the **homosexual age of consent** to 16. In 2003 Labour repealed **Section 28** for England and Wales (the law which stopped the promotion of homosexuality in schools).

Gender Recognition Act 2004 – The Act gave people the right to change their legal birth sex.

Age of consent – In 2009 the Labour Government resisted calls to lower the age of heterosexual consent from 16.¹⁰⁵

Sexual Orientation Regulations (SORs) 2007 – The SORs banned any adoption agency from refusing to place children with same-sex couples. Since then all Roman Catholic adoption agencies in England have become entirely secular bodies or closed. The SORs were also used to sue Christian



◉ Former Prime Ministers Gordon Brown and Tony Blair

B&B owners for operating a 'married couples only' policy for double rooms.

Equality Act 2010 – The Act consolidated all discrimination laws, including the SORs, into a single Act. The Bill as introduced would have narrowed the employment freedom of churches and religious organisations but was amended by the House of Lords. The Act also places an equality duty on public bodies – like schools and the police – covering homosexual and transgender rights, as well as other protected characteristics.

Incitement to religious hatred – In 2005 Labour tried to outlaw incitement to religious hatred. After strong opposition from Christians, the House of Commons substantially narrowed the offence, adding a robust free speech protection.

'Incitement to homophobic hatred' – In 2007 Labour introduced an offence of incitement to hatred on grounds of sexual orientation. The original draft paralleled the religious hatred law as amended by the Commons, but with no free speech protection. However, a free speech clause was added by the House of Lords.

Cannabis – In 2004, Labour downgraded cannabis to a class C drug, on a par with sleeping pills. However, in response to overwhelming evidence of cannabis damaging mental health, the Labour Government restored the drug to class B in 2009.

Gambling Act 2005 – The Act provided for a massive deregulation of the gambling industry, introducing Las Vegas-style casinos to Britain and allowing for a great multiplication of betting shops, slot machines, gambling adverts and internet gambling. The Act formally legalised fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) in high street betting shops. In 2008, Gordon Brown scrapped plans to create a super casino.

Alcohol – The Licensing Act 2003 allowed for 24-hour drinking in England and Wales, which came into force in 2005.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has been in Government in Scotland since 2007. From August 2021 to April 2024 the SNP had a power-sharing agreement with the Scottish Greens. The leader is **John Swinney MSP**, Scotland's First Minister. The party had 43 MPs in Westminster at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024.

SNP POLICIES

Some older information shows the party's response to actions taken by the previous Labour Government (see pages 17 and 18).

Conversion therapy – The Scottish Government published a consultation in January 2024 proposing a new 'conversion practices' offence.¹⁰⁶ The proposals risk restricting biblically faithful preaching, prayer, pastoral care and parenting. The maximum sentence would be seven years in prison and/or an unlimited fine. The consultation closed in April 2024.

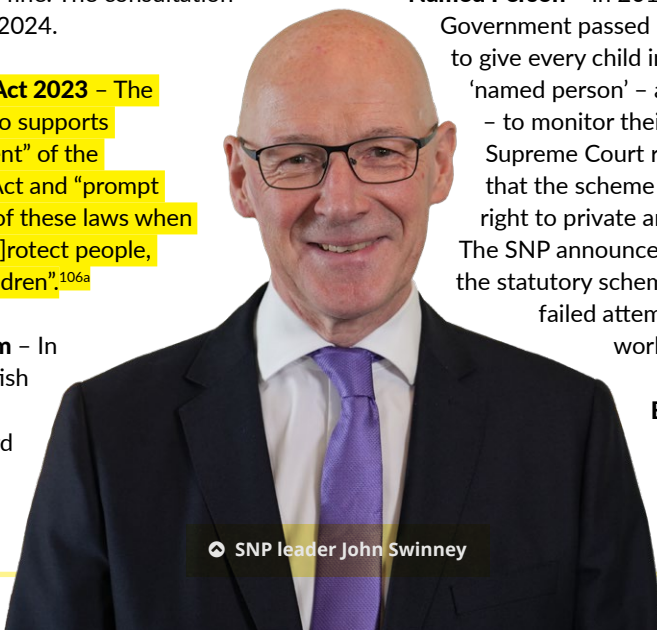
Online Safety Act 2023 – The SNP's manifesto supports "full enforcement" of the Online Safety Act and "prompt strengthening of these laws when required" to "[p]rotect people, particularly children".^{106a}

Transgenderism – In 2022 the Scottish Government brought forward legislation allowing

those over the age of 16 to change legal sex by self-declaration without a medical diagnosis. It passed the Scottish Parliament but the Westminster Government used a constitutional power to prevent it becoming law, partly due to concerns over its impact on equality legislation reserved to Westminster.¹⁰⁷ The Scottish Government wants the Bill to become law.¹⁰⁸

Named Person – In 2014 the SNP Government passed legislation to give every child in Scotland a 'named person' – a state employee – to monitor their happiness. The Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that the scheme breached the right to private and family life. The SNP announced the repeal of the statutory scheme in 2019, after failed attempts to make it workable.¹⁰⁹

Education – In November 2018 the SNP Government



SNP leader John Swinney

announced that Scotland would be the first country in the world to embed LGBT education across the curriculum. This began to be rolled out nationally in 2021.¹¹⁰ Government draft statutory guidance published in August 2023 for Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) states that LGBT Inclusive Education will reflect “healthy relationships within diverse sexual and gender identities, and family types”.¹¹¹

LGBT rights – The SNP supported the appointment of a special envoy to promote LGBT rights as an integral part of foreign policy.¹¹² The manifesto says the party “has a proud record of advancing and championing LGBTI rights in government”.^{112a}

Same-sex marriage – An SNP Government Bill to introduce same-sex marriage was passed in the Scottish Parliament in 2014. SNP MSPs were given a free vote on the Bill. SNP ministers said there was no need for amendments to improve protections for religious liberty and freedom of speech.¹¹³

Civil partnerships – The party welcomed the principle of the Civil Partnership Bill in 2004.¹¹⁴ All SNP MPs voted for the Bill at Westminster. The SNP Government’s Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2020 made civil partnerships available to heterosexual couples.

Gay adoption and fostering – The SNP supports adoption by same-sex couples. It introduced fostering rights for homosexual couples in September 2009.¹¹⁵

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 – SNP MPs had a free vote on the Bill, including on abortion.¹¹⁶

Abortion – The Scottish Government announced in May 2022 that early home abortions introduced in March 2020 as a temporary measure during the pandemic would become permanent.¹¹⁷ The Scottish Government has pledged to undertake a review of abortion law “to ensure that abortion services are first and foremost a healthcare matter”.¹¹⁸ In June 2023, an SNP spokesperson at Westminster supported decriminalising abortion.¹¹⁹

‘Buffer zones’ – The Scottish Government supports a backbench Bill to create 200-metre buffer zones around all abortion centres in Scotland.¹²⁰

Organ donation – The SNP Government introduced presumed consent for organ donation in 2021.¹²¹

GM babies – When the House of Commons voted on plans to allow genetically modified babies with three or four parents, four SNP MPs voted in favour; two voted against.

Assisted suicide – SNP MSPs are expected to have a free vote on Liam McArthur’s Bill to legalise assisted suicide in Scotland.¹²²

Hate crime – The Scottish Government’s Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 extended the law on ‘hate crime’, to include religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity. New ‘stirring up hatred’ offences were criticised for endangering free speech.¹²³ The Government agreed to amend the Bill during its passage, including requiring intention to stir up hatred for an offence to be committed.¹²⁴ The legislation remained controversial when implemented in April 2024.

Free speech – The SNP's Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill in 2009 and anti-sectarianism Bill in 2011 gave rise to serious free speech concerns, but were amended during their passage to include protections. The Sectarianism Bill was later repealed by MSPs against the wishes of the SNP.

Islamophobia – The SNP has adopted the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims' definition of 'Islamophobia'.¹²⁵

Lobbying – The party's 2015 manifesto said: "We support strict rules on lobbying but believe that campaigning charities should be allowed straightforward access and restrictions on their activities as 'non-party campaigners' should be removed."¹²⁶ In Holyrood a Government Bill to introduce a lobbying register was passed in 2016.¹²⁷

Smacking – The SNP strongly supported the Bill that criminalised parents for reasonable chastisement.¹²⁸ It came into force in November 2020.

Home education – Guidance published by the Scottish Government upholds the right of parents to home educate.¹²⁹

Prostitution – The SNP describes prostitution as "a form of gendered violence" and is in favour of criminalising the purchase but not the sale of sex.¹³⁰

Gambling – The SNP pushed for the reduction of the maximum stake on FOTs.¹³¹ The SNP has called for tougher measures to protect children from the harms of gambling, including online.¹³² The manifesto says problem gambling should be treated as a public health matter, impacts of gambling

advertising should be tackled and a levy on gambling companies is "long overdue".^{132a}

Drugs – In 2021 the Scottish Government pledged extra funding for improving drug-recovery services.¹³³ In 2023, the Scottish Government backed the introduction of a pilot drug consumption room in Glasgow and called for the UK Government to decriminalise all drugs for personal use.¹³⁴ The SNP Government announced new limits to tackle drug-driving in October 2019.¹³⁵ The SNP's manifesto says it "would decriminalise drugs for personal use and introduce a framework to allow Supervised Drug Consumption Facilities".^{135a}

Alcohol – The SNP Government implemented a minimum price per unit on alcohol in 2018.¹³⁶

Sunday trading – In 2016 SNP MPs voted against the UK Government's plans to relax Sunday trading.¹³⁷ The party supports Sunday trading in principle, but did not want Scottish workers to be adversely affected by the legislation for England and Wales.¹³⁸

Constitution – The SNP's manifesto promises to strongly oppose any attempts to withdraw the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights or change the Human Rights Act.¹³⁹ It supports a proportional representation electoral system.¹⁴⁰

House of Lords – The SNP commits in its manifesto to abolishing the "undemocratic" House of Lords.¹⁴¹



The Liberal Democrats had 15 MPs at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024. The party leader is **Sir Edward Davey**.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS PARTY POLICIES

Some older information shows the party's response to actions taken by the previous Labour Government (see pages 17 and 18).

Conversion therapy – The Liberal Democrats' manifesto says they will: "Ban all forms of conversion therapies and practices."¹⁴² The party's Lords spokeswoman for equality brought forward a Private Member's Bill making 'conversion therapy' a criminal offence with an unlimited fine. Conversion therapy was defined as "any practice aimed at a person or group of people which demonstrates an assumption that any sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently preferable" and which has the intended purpose of attempting to change or suppress a person's expression of sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁴³

Online Safety Act 2023 – The Liberal Democrats' manifesto promises "a Digital Bill of Rights to protect everyone's rights online, including the rights to privacy, free expression, and participation without

being subjected to harassment and abuse."¹⁴⁴

Pornography – The Liberal Democrats supported the stronger age verification requirements on sites with pornographic content that were added to the Online Safety Act.¹⁴⁵ It had opposed similar provisions in the Digital Economy Act 2017.¹⁴⁶

Relationships and sex education – It is Lib Dem policy to have mandatory sex education in primary schools. The party welcomed Relationships Education, the Government's statutory subject for primary schools.¹⁴⁷ Its 2019 manifesto said teaching on LGBT+ relationships, sexual consent and "issues surrounding explicit images and content" will all be included in sex and relationships education.¹⁴⁸

Transgenderism – The party's manifesto promises to: "Reform the gender recognition process to remove the requirement for medical reports" and "recognise non-binary



◉ Liberal Democrats leader Ed Davey

Identities in law¹⁴⁹ It would also introduce an 'X' gender option on passports.¹⁵⁰ The Lib Dems opposed the UK Government's use of a constitutional power to stop the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill becoming law.¹⁵¹

Drugs – The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for a radical liberalisation of the UK's drugs laws.¹⁵² The party's manifesto says it would introduce a "legal, regulated market for cannabis" in the UK, including making it available through licensed outlets.¹⁵³

Abortion – The party's manifesto pledges to: "Protect everyone's right to make independent decisions over their reproductive health without interference by the state and ensure access to high-quality reproductive healthcare, including enforcing safe access zones around abortion clinics and hospitals".¹⁵⁴ Ed Davey voted in 2022 to make DIY home abortions permanent in England and voted in 2020 for legalising abortion in Northern Ireland, which were free votes for Lib Dem MPs.

Assisted suicide – The party supports legalising assisted suicide.¹⁵⁶ Its manifesto says it would: "Give Parliament time to fully debate and vote on legislation on assisted dying for terminally ill, mentally competent adults with strict safeguards, subject to a free vote."^{156a} In September 2015 the Lib Dems gave their MPs a free vote on Rob Marris's Bill. Lib Dem MSP Liam McArthur has brought forward a Bill in the Scottish Parliament to legalise assisted suicide.

Extremism – The Liberal Democrats criticised the Government's new definition of extremism in March 2024, saying it "is at best vague, and at worst risks sowing even more division".¹⁵⁷

Incitement to religious hatred – It was party policy to oppose the Labour Government's incitement to hatred proposals. In 2005-6, the Lib Dems supported amendments made in the House of Lords, including a robust free speech protection.¹⁵⁸

Hate crime – The party wants to extend hate crime laws to cover "all forms of hate activity", including an 'incitement to hatred' offence covering transgenderism.¹⁵⁹ The 2019 manifesto promised to make all 'hate crimes' "aggravated offences".¹⁶⁰

Sexual Orientation Regulations (SORs)

2007 – The party supported the Labour Government's SORs,¹⁶¹ which closed down Roman Catholic adoption agencies in England.

Equality Act 2010 – The Liberal Democrats welcomed the Equality Act. They voted to narrow employment protections for churches and religious organisations.¹⁶²

LGBT rights – The party's manifesto says it will: "Respect and defend the rights of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including trans and non-binary people."¹⁶³

Divorce – The Lib Dems supported the introduction of 'no-fault' divorce.¹⁶⁴

Same-sex marriage – The Liberal Democrats viewed the same-sex marriage legislation as a great achievement.¹⁶⁵ In its 2019 manifesto the party committed to removing provisions that prevent same-sex weddings within the Church of England and Church in Wales.¹⁶⁶ Ed Davey voted in favour of legalising same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

The Liberal Democrats strongly supported **adoption by homosexual couples**, the **Civil Partnership Act**, **Gender Recognition Act** and the introduction of **heterosexual civil partnerships**.

Smacking – Frontbench Lib Dem MSPs co-sponsored the legislation criminalising parents in Scotland who smack their children

Legal rights for cohabitants – The Lib Dem manifesto commits to: “Extending limited legal rights to cohabiting couples, to give them greater protection in the event of separation or bereavement.”^{166a}

Home education – The Liberal Democrats manifesto promises “a register of children who are not in school”.¹⁶⁷

State-funded Christian schools – A party conference motion passed in 2017 said that every church school should lose its freedoms i) to choose Christian staff, except for religious instruction, and ii) to select pupils on the basis that they agree with the school's ethos.¹⁶⁸

Prostitution – The party's 2017 manifesto said it would: “Decriminalise the sale and purchase of sex”.¹⁶⁹

Gambling – The Liberal Democrats backed the reduction to a £2 maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs).¹⁷⁰ Its manifesto promises measures to combat “harms caused by problem gambling”,

including restricting gambling advertising and introducing a compulsory levy on gambling firms.¹⁷¹

Alcohol – The party's 2017 manifesto promised to introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol.¹⁷²

Sunday trading – When the Government proposed in 2016 to liberalise Sunday trading, Lib Dem MPs were given a free vote.¹⁷³

Organ donation – The party supported the introduction of a presumed consent organ donation system.¹⁷⁴

Islamophobia – The Liberal Democrats have adopted the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia.¹⁷⁵

Persecution of Christians – The 2019 manifesto promised to: “Protect, defend, and promote human rights for all, including LGBT+ individuals who are persecuted across the world as well as those persecuted for their religion or belief.”¹⁷⁶

Human Rights Act 1998 – The party says it will: “Champion the Human Rights Act and resist any attempts to weaken or repeal it.”¹⁷⁷

Constitution – The party's manifesto supports a proportional representation system for electing MPs and wants to “reform the House of Lords with a proper democratic mandate”.¹⁷⁸



David Cameron and Nick Clegg formed a coalition Government in 2010.

RECORD IN COALITION GOVERNMENT: 2010-2015

For the Liberal Democrats' record in coalition Government with the Conservatives from 2010 to 2015, see page 13. On some of the issues we have included, the Lib Dems disagreed with the coalition Government's approach. Some of these are mentioned here:

Marriage allowance – The party's 2019 manifesto promised to scrap the tax allowance for married couples.¹⁷⁹

Lobbying Act – The Liberal Democrats have said they will examine the effects of the Act on charities and may amend it in future if in Government.¹⁸¹



Plaid Cymru had three MPs in Westminster at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024 and it has 12 Members of the Welsh Parliament. The leader of Plaid Cymru is **Rhun ap Iorwerth MS**.

PLAID CYMRU PARTY POLICIES

Some older information shows the party's response to actions taken by the previous Labour Government (see pages 17 and 18).

Conversion therapy – Plaid Cymru's manifesto says it would: "end so-called conversion therapy practices related to sexuality and gender identity".^{181a}

Transgenderism – The party's manifesto says: "Plaid Cymru will seek the powers to present the Senedd with a proposal for a simplified, demedicalised gender self-identification system."¹⁸² It is in favour of "full recognition and protection from discrimination for non-binary people under the law".¹⁸³

Relationships and sex education – The party says: "We would ensure that relationships and experiences of the LGBT+ community – including the trans, nonbinary, and asexual communities are included in the statutory element of Relationships and Sex



◀ Rhun ap Iorwerth, leader of Plaid Cymru

Education of the new curriculum, in all school settings, and that teacher training is available."¹⁸⁴

Same-sex marriage – All three Plaid Cymru MPs at the time voted in favour of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill.¹⁸⁵ Then leader Leanne Wood objected to the exemption for the Church in Wales which prevents them conducting same-sex weddings.¹⁸⁶ All Plaid MPs voted to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

Abortion – One Plaid Cymru MP voted for Fiona Bruce's amendment to explicitly ban sex-selective abortion; one voted against. Plaid Cymru supported the legalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland and all four MPs at the time voted for it.¹⁸⁷

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 – Two of the then three Plaid Cymru MPs in 2008 voted in favour of animal-human embryos, saviour siblings and keeping the abortion limit at 24 weeks. One Plaid MP voted to keep the 'need for a father' requirement in IVF treatment.

GM babies – Two Plaid Cymru MPs voted in favour of genetically

modified babies; the third was absent or abstained.

Assisted suicide – None of the then three Plaid MPs voted on Rob Marris's assisted suicide Bill in September 2015. In December 2014, seven Plaid Assembly Members voted in favour of the principle of legalising assisted suicide in Wales; one voted against and two abstained. Asked whether assisted suicide should be legal for the terminally ill, Rhun ap Iorwerth said: "we should be having that debate".¹⁸⁸

LGBT rights – Plaid Cymru's manifesto states:

"We reaffirm our commitment to ensure that LGBTQ+ voices and experiences are heard and will continue to actively promote LGBTQ+ rights. We will promote LGBTQ+ inclusion throughout society, including all workplaces and participation in sport, as part of a broader effort towards healthier lifestyle."¹⁸⁹ The party voted in favour of lowering the age of homosexual consent to 16, civil partnerships, adoption rights for lesbian and gay couples, the repeal of Section 28, the Sexual Orientation Regulations 2007 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004.

Incitement to religious hatred – Plaid Cymru opposed the introduction of an incitement to religious hatred law in 2006.¹⁹⁰

'Incitement to homophobic hatred' – From 2008 to 2009, Plaid Cymru MPs consistently voted against a free speech clause in the incitement to homophobic hatred offence.

Equality Act 2010 – The party welcomed the Equality Act,¹⁹¹ and all three of its MPs at the time voted in favour of restricting the freedoms of churches and other religious organisations to employ people in accordance

with their beliefs. Plaid says it supports efforts to include 'gender identity' as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act.¹⁹²

Home education – Plaid says it would: "Make new laws to protect the rights of children who are home educated".¹⁹³ Plaid previously backed requiring parents to register home-educated children with their local authority and children to be "seen and spoken to annually".¹⁹⁴

Smacking – Plaid Cymru supported the legislation to ban smacking in Wales.¹⁹⁵

Gambling – In 2004-5 all of the four Plaid Cymru MPs at the time voted against the Gambling Bill. The party supported the reduction in the maximum stakes on fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) from £100 to £2.¹⁹⁶

Drugs – Plaid's manifesto supports "a policy of soft drugs decriminalisation" and would welcome an independent review of drug policy and policing.¹⁹⁷ It also says: "Introducing drug consumption rooms across Wales will facilitate a more humane and sustainable approach to addiction issues."¹⁹⁹

Alcohol – Plaid Cymru supports the introduction of a minimum pricing policy for alcohol.²⁰⁰

Sunday trading – Two of the then three Plaid MPs voted against liberalising Sunday trading in 2016; the other did not vote.

Constitution – In its manifesto, Plaid Cymru supports using proportional representation for UK elections and abolishing the House of Lords.²⁰¹



The Green Party had one MP, Caroline Lucas, at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024. Its co-leaders are **Carla Denyer** and **Adrian Ramsay**. The Green Party only operates in England and Wales.

GREEN PARTY POLICIES

Conversion therapy – The Green Party supports a ban on ‘conversion therapy’, covering sexual orientation and gender identity.²⁰²

Transgenderism – The manifesto says: “The Green Party supports self-ID, so that trans and non-binary people could be legally recognised in their chosen gender through self-declaration. We also support ending the spousal veto so that married trans people can acquire their gender recognition certification without having to obtain permission from their spouse, and to change the law so an X gender marker can be added to passports for non-binary and intersex people who wish to use it”.²⁰³

Education – Caroline Lucas described the Government’s introduction of mandatory Relationships Education for primary schools as “wonderful news”.²⁰⁴ She said the Government’s plans to stop sex education for under-9s were “ill-informed”.²⁰⁵ The party would abolish the requirement for Christian school assemblies.²⁰⁶ The Greens support the right of parents to educate their children at home.²⁰⁷

Same-sex marriage – The Green Party welcomed the introduction of same-sex marriage and Caroline Lucas voted for its legalisation in Northern Ireland in July 2019.²⁰⁸ The party believes same-sex marriages should be allowed in Anglican churches.²⁰⁹

Heterosexual civil partnerships – The party supported the introduction of heterosexual civil partnerships.²¹⁰

Equality law – The party’s position is that: “Opt-outs from equality and discrimination laws by religious organisations will not be allowed”.²¹¹

Free speech – Caroline Lucas spoke out against anti-extremism measures that would have restricted civil liberties.²¹² She also supported reform of Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 so that it no longer covers “insulting” words or behaviour. The manifesto says elected Greens will: “Protect the right to religious expression”.^{212a}

Extremism – The party's manifesto says it would scrap Prevent.²¹³

Abortion – The party wants the remaining criminal laws relating to abortion to be removed.²¹⁴ It would prevent pro-life advice being advertised in any state-funded school or institution.²¹⁵

GM babies – When the House of Commons voted on plans to allow genetically modified babies with three or four parents, Caroline Lucas voted in favour.

Assisted suicide – The Green Party's manifesto says: "Elected Greens will back changing the law on assisted dying."²¹⁶

Drugs – The party's manifesto says elected Greens will "push to decriminalise personal possession of drugs, diverting people from the criminal justice system towards support with addiction, housing and employment, from health workers focused on drug harm reduction."²¹⁷ The party has said it would consider making drugs like crack cocaine and heroin available on NHS prescription.²¹⁸

Prostitution – The Green Party's manifesto says elected Greens will push to decriminalise "sex work".²¹⁹

Smacking – The party wants to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement, criminalising parents who smack their children.²²⁰

Gambling – Caroline Lucas opposed fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) and asked the Government to review the Gambling Act 2005.²²¹

Sunday trading – In 2016 Caroline Lucas voted against liberalising Sunday trading.

Human Rights Act 1998 – The party's manifesto promises to "Defend the Human Rights Act".^{221a}

Constitution – The Green Party's manifesto supports a proportional representation electoral system for parliamentary and council elections and replacing the House of Lords with an elected second chamber.²²² It also wants: "A Constitutional Commission to start a vital national conversation about a new constitutional settlement."²²³





Reform UK was formed in November 2018 as The Brexit Party, changing its name in January 2021.²²⁴ It had one MP, Lee Anderson, at the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024. Its leader is **Nigel Farage**.

REFORM UK POLICIES

Online Safety Act 2023 – Reform's manifesto says it would review the online safety legislation, stating social media companies "should have no role in regulating free speech".²²⁵

Transgenderism – The manifesto promises to ban transgender ideology in primary and secondary schools.²²⁶ It says schools, public toilets and changing areas must provide single-sex facilities.²²⁷

Marriage – Reform's manifesto proposes to support marriage through the tax system by raising the transferable marriage tax allowance from 10 to 25 per cent "as soon as finances allow".²²⁸

Free speech – The manifesto promises a "Comprehensive Free Speech Bill" and funding cuts for universities that undermine free speech.²²⁹

Hate crime – Reform's manifesto says it would change the definition of hate crime: "Members of the British public

must not be investigated because 'any' person 'perceives' that a hate crime has been committed."²³⁰

Drugs – In 2014, Nigel Farage said he supported drug decriminalisation.²³¹ In 2021 he said he hates drugs but thinks "the war on drugs has been lost and it may be better if we regulate it in some way".²³² Reform's manifesto says: "Drug dealing and trafficking will get mandatory life imprisonment. A new offence of Substantial Possession of Drugs will meet heavy fines."^{232a}

Prostitution – In 2010, Farage said he wanted prostitution "decriminalised and regulated".²³³

Human Rights Act 1998 – The party's manifesto supports leaving the European Convention on Human Rights and reforming the Human Rights Act. It proposes a British Bill of Rights.²³⁴

Constitution – Reform UK's manifesto says it would replace the House of Lords "with a much smaller, more democratic second chamber" and calls for a referendum on using proportional representation for Westminster elections.²³⁵



◉ Reform UK leader Nigel Farage

Background information on the policy issues in this briefing

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN THE UK

‘Conversion therapy’

Efforts to legislate on so-called conversion therapy, also known as ‘conversion practices’, risk restricting the freedom of parents and churches that uphold biblical teaching on gender and sexual ethics. Abusive and coercive practices are already illegal.

Conversion therapy is usually defined as attempts to “change or suppress” a person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Encouraging celibacy outside marriage has been described as a conversion practice.²³⁶ Activists believe that even “gentle, non-coercive prayer” should be covered by a ban.²³⁷ In Victoria, Australia, a conversion therapy law means it is illegal to give pastoral advice or pray with an individual in a way that is not ‘LGBT-affirming’.²³⁸

The Westminster Government first promised to “end” conversion therapy in 2018.²³⁹ Since then it has become a prominent focus of LGBT activists and some parliamentarians.

The Westminster Government consulted in 2021 on its proposals for a legislative ban, but no outcome of the consultation was announced.²⁴⁰ Draft legislation for pre-legislative scrutiny was promised but never published.²⁴¹

Two Private Members’ Bills were brought forward in the 2023-24 session of Parliament. Women’s groups became increasingly vocal in their opposition because of the likely impact on conversations about gender. Neither Bill progressed. In the

months before the election, a succession of amendments on conversion therapy were tabled. These were not debated by the time Parliament was dissolved for the election. Legal advice for The Christian Institute said all these proposals breached the European Convention on Human Rights.²⁴²

The Scottish Government consulted in 2024 on its plans for a new law on conversion practices.²⁴³ The proposals were criticised by senior lawyers as ‘legally incoherent’, “impossible to grasp” and “fundamentally illiberal in intent”.²⁴⁴ The consultation closed in April 2024.

Online Safety Act 2023

The Online Safety Bill was introduced to Parliament in May 2022. Alongside welcome measures aimed at keeping people safe online, the original Bill contained a dangerous category of ‘legal but harmful’ material. This was aimed at content deemed to be harmful to adults even though it did not break any laws, and which social media companies would have been expected to police. It led to fears that social media companies would go far beyond what the law set out. Traditional views on marriage, sexual ethics and gender could have been seen as valid targets for censorship, leaving free speech far more restricted online than offline.

The Government dropped the ‘legal but harmful’ provisions and the Bill became law on 26 October 2023.

Counter-extremism strategy

The Government’s counter-extremism strategy goes beyond tackling terrorism and

violence to address 'non-violent extremism'. In 2011 this was defined as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs".²⁴⁵

Concerns were raised that this definition was too vague and subjective. The difficulty in agreeing a legal definition of extremism reportedly led to the Government abandoning a proposed counter-extremism Bill.²⁴⁶ David Anderson KC, the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, said an early draft extremism Bill was the most alarming document he saw in his time in the role, because of its implications for freedom.²⁴⁷

In 2024 the Government published a new non-statutory definition of extremism: "the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance" that aims to "negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others", or "undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights".²⁴⁸ The new definition was intended to be used to determine who the Government would engage with. The Government said it was "the first in a series of steps to promote social cohesion, democratic resilience, and to counter extremism and religious hatred".²⁴⁹

The Government's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall, warned the new definition risks covering "people who think bad things or have a bad ideology" rather than those "who are doing bad things".²⁵⁰

'British values' in schools – In 2014 Ofsted inspectors began carrying out 'British values' checks on schools across the education system in England. There were multiple reports of Ofsted inspectors failing to understand or respect the ethos of Jewish and

Christian schools. Intrusive questions were asked of children and teachers about issues like same-sex marriage and transgenderism.

Ofsted inspections of churches – The 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy proposed that out-of-school institutions teaching children would in future have to register with the State. The Government consulted on giving Ofsted legal power to investigate any setting in England that provides instruction to children for more than six to eight hours in any week. The proposals stated that any "extremist" or "undesirable" teaching which is incompatible with 'British values' would be prohibited.²⁵¹

The plans could have encompassed various forms of church youth work, such as Sunday Schools, holiday Bible clubs, church weekends away and some summer camps. Potential sanctions included banning leaders from working with children. Failure to register would have been a criminal offence. In April 2018 the plans were formally dropped.

Prevent – The Prevent strategy was first introduced under Labour after the July 2005 London bombings. After the coalition Government reviewed the strategy in 2011, it began to focus more on non-violent extremists. The Prevent strategy has been controversial. Sir William Shawcross's independent review, published in February 2023, concluded that Prevent has had 'positive impacts' as well as failures and areas for improvement.²⁵² He said Prevent "must ensure a consistent and evidence-based approach to setting its threshold and criteria".²⁵³

Reform of Section 5

The misuse of Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 led to several instances of Christians being arrested, detained and even prosecuted simply for expressing their religious beliefs.

In December 2012 the House of Lords overwhelmingly supported former police Chief Constable Lord Dear's amendment to remove the word "insulting" from the scope of Section 5, voting 150 to 54. In January 2013, the Government conceded defeat.²⁵⁴ The reform officially came into force on 1 February 2014.

Injunctions to Prevent Nuisance and Annoyance (IPNAs)

Under Clause 1 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill 2013, Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were set to be replaced by IPNAs. The proposed injunctions would have outlawed "causing nuisance or annoyance to any person" in a public place and were widely criticised as being too vague.²⁵⁵

In January 2014 the House of Lords voted to replace the proposed threshold with the safer, longstanding threshold of causing "harassment, alarm or distress". The Government subsequently backed down and agreed to accept the basis of Lord Dear's amendment.²⁵⁶

'Hate crime' and aggravated offences

Certain racially and religiously aggravated crimes automatically carry a tougher penalty in English law. Crimes motivated by hostility to sexual orientation and transgenderism can also receive a more serious sentence. Aggravated offences can be seen as undermining the notion that justice is blind, and creating a hierarchy of victims.

Stand-alone hate crimes, such as 'incitement to hatred' offences, pose a major threat to religious liberty.

Incitement to religious hatred law – The Labour Government passed an incitement to religious hatred offence in the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. After an extensive campaign, vital safeguards were

introduced to protect, amongst other things, religious debate and evangelism. As amended, the law (which has a maximum seven-year prison sentence) only outlaws threatening words or behaviour intended to stir up hatred, and there is an explicit protection for free speech and evangelism. The Government opposed these safeguards, which were introduced by the House of Lords, but MPs voted in January 2006 to keep them.

'Incitement to homophobic hatred' law

– An 'incitement to homophobic hatred' offence was created by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. It outlaws any threatening words or behaviour intended to stir up hatred on grounds of sexual orientation and carries a maximum seven-year prison sentence. The then Labour Government drew up the offence along the same lines as the law against inciting religious hatred, but did not include an explicit free speech protection. In response, the late Lord Waddington tabled a cross-party amendment in the House of Lords to protect free speech. The Labour Government was defeated in four separate votes in the Lords. Ministers finally conceded defeat and brought the new incitement law into force with the free speech clause in March 2010.

Scotland – Until 2024, the stirring up hatred offence in Scotland only covered race. The Scottish Government's Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, which came into force in April 2024, created a new offence covering religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity. After concerns were raised about free speech, the Government agreed to amend the Bill, including lifting the threshold so that intention to stir up hatred is required for an offence to be committed. Specific free speech provisions were also strengthened. There were over 7,000 hate

crime reports to Police Scotland in the first week of implementation.²⁵⁷

Islamophobia

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims published a definition of 'Islamophobia' in November 2018: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".²⁵⁸ This was adopted by several political parties but rejected by the Conservative Government. An open letter to the Home Secretary criticised the definition as not being fit for purpose and at risk of being used to "shut down legitimate criticism and investigation". Signatories included the National Secular Society, Richard Dawkins, Peter Tatchell, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali and Baroness Cox.²⁵⁹

Employment laws

In 2003 the Labour Government introduced special employment rights for homosexuals. After a long campaign by church schools, churches and Christian organisations, the Government added an exemption so that such bodies are not forced to employ practising homosexuals.

Nevertheless, the legislation makes it more difficult for church schools, churches and Christian organisations to refuse to employ staff whose conduct does not match their Christian profession.

Also in 2003, the Government introduced similar regulations covering 'religion or belief', removing the absolute discretion of churches to employ believers in whatever posts they see fit. In theory the regulations give employment protection for religious believers in secular workplaces. But the greatest concern has been the potential to restrict the freedom of Christian organisations to employ believers.

Equality Act 2006

The Equality Act made it unlawful to discriminate against someone on the grounds of religion or belief in the provision of goods, facilities and services. It contained some exceptions for churches and religious organisations, but did not adequately protect the rights of conscience of individuals in business. The Act also established the Equality and Human Rights Commission and allowed ministers to introduce the Sexual Orientation Regulations.

Sexual Orientation Regulations 2007 (SORs)

The Labour Government introduced the Sexual Orientation Regulations in April 2007. The SORs outlawed discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of goods, facilities and services. The SORs were used to fine Christian owners of a bed and breakfast for operating a 'married couples only' policy for double rooms. The 2006 Northern Ireland SORs led to the court case against Ashers Baking Company for declining to produce a cake with the slogan 'Support Gay Marriage'. The SORs also forced all Roman Catholic adoption agencies in England to either close or secularise.

Equality Act 2010

The Labour Government's Equality Bill debated by Parliament in 2009-10 sought to consolidate all discrimination laws, including the Equality Act 2006 and the SORs, into a single Act. As introduced it would have narrowed the employment freedom of churches and religious organisations even further than the 2003 employment laws (see above). However, this was prevented when the Government was defeated three times in the House of Lords.

Lobbying Act 2014

The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 changed electoral law. It does not target professional lobbyists but instead hinders the work of voluntary groups and grassroots organisations, including Christian groups.

During the passage of the Bill, some 130 groups supported the Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement. The pressure generated by this campaign led to various Government concessions in the Bill.

EDUCATION

i *Education policy is devolved to both Scotland and Wales.*

Sex education (England)

In September 2020 the Conservative Government introduced a new statutory subject of 'Relationships Education' to primary schools in England. Young children are taught about homosexuality, transgenderism and same-sex marriage. Parents have no right of withdrawal. A secondary school subject called Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) – covering "sex, sexuality, sexual health and gender identity" – includes a partial right of withdrawal. Department for Education (DfE) guidance says schools "are free to determine" how they address LGBT content but it should be "fully integrated" when taught.²⁶⁰ The DfE says secondary schools should cover LGBT content and that primary schools are "strongly encouraged" to do so.²⁶¹

Controversy over inappropriate content being used in schools – and parents being refused access to the material – led the

Government to commission an independent review in 2023.²⁶² The findings of the review were never published, but informed new draft statutory guidance published for consultation in May 2024. This guidance sets age restrictions on some topics. Puberty should not be taught about before year 4 and sex education should not be taught before year 5. Explicit discussion of sexual activity should not take place before year 9.²⁶³ The draft guidance adds that the concept of gender identity and the idea that 'gender is a spectrum' should not be taught at all. It also says schools should ensure that RSE teaching materials are available to parents and that parents are aware of what is being taught.²⁶⁴ The consultation closes on 11 July 2024.

Religious education and school assemblies (England)

The law in England requires the main content of religious education in non-denominational schools to be devoted to the study of Christianity.²⁶⁵ There must also be a daily act of collective worship in schools that is "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".²⁶⁶ Teachers and pupils can opt out of the act of worship.

Home education (England)

In law, parents are responsible for ensuring their children receive a suitable education, at school or otherwise. Education is compulsory, but school is not.

There have been growing calls for the regulation of home education. Senior Ofsted and local authority figures have made a link between home education and unregistered schools.

The Schools Bill 2022 included a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of school-age children not attending school. Parents would have been required

to supply the information for the register to the local authority.

The Bill was dropped in December 2022.²⁶⁷

Promoting homosexuality in schools

In 2003 Labour repealed 'Section 28' – which stopped the promotion of homosexuality in schools – for England and Wales. Section 28 was repealed in Scotland in 2000.

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Same-sex marriage

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 introduced same-sex 'marriage' in England and Wales from March 2014.

Religious groups can opt in to conduct same-sex weddings if they wish but the Act specifically excludes same-sex weddings within the Church of England and the Church in Wales.²⁶⁸ It also states that no church or church minister can be compelled "by any means" to carry out a same-sex wedding.²⁶⁹ The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced same-sex 'marriage' in Scotland, with similar protections for church ministers who disagree with it.

After the collapse of devolved government, MPs at Westminster voted in July 2019 to impose same-sex marriage on Northern Ireland.²⁷⁰

Civil partnerships

In 2005 the UK's Civil Partnership Act came into force, allowing same-sex couples to legally register their relationship. The rights and privileges of marriage and civil partnership are virtually identical. It was seen by many as paving the way for same-sex marriage.

The Supreme Court ruled in June 2018 that it was unlawful that heterosexual couples could only marry while same-sex couples had the choice of marriage or civil partnership. Following this, the UK Government agreed to support a Private Member's Bill requiring civil partnerships to be extended to heterosexual couples by the end of 2019.²⁷¹ The Scottish Government also introduced opposite-sex civil partnerships in 2020.²⁷²

Marriage tax breaks

In April 2014 MPs voted in favour of a tax break for married couples and civil partners. The transferable tax allowance is worth up to £252 in 2024-25.²⁷³

Divorce

In April 2022, the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 came into force, introducing easier 'no-fault' divorce in England and Wales. Prior to this, one of five 'facts' had to be proven to show that a marriage had broken down irretrievably. These included matters of fault, like adultery, as well as separation of the parties.

Under the new system, a person can get a divorce in six months without having to give a reason and without their spouse being able to contest it.

Parental smacking

The defence of reasonable chastisement protects a parent from being wrongly prosecuted for assault for disciplining their child with a light smack on the hand or bottom. This defence is still the law in England and Northern Ireland. Crown Prosecution Service guidance for England says anything that causes "more than temporary reddening of the skin" is not reasonable and is therefore criminal.²⁷⁴ Acts abolishing the reasonable

chastisement defence in Scotland and Wales came into force in November 2020 and March 2022 respectively, criminalising all parental smacking.

Adoption

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 legalised joint adoption by cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples in England and Wales. Before this, some 95 per cent of all adoptions were by married couples and the other five per cent were by single persons.²⁷⁵ In England and Wales in 2022-23, over a fifth of adoptions were to same-sex couples.²⁷⁶ The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 legalised joint adoption by cohabiting and homosexual couples in Scotland.

Transgenderism

The UK's Gender Recognition Act 2004 allows an adult who has been diagnosed with "gender dysphoria"²⁷⁷ by two doctors and has lived for two years as if the opposite sex to change legal sex, including on their birth certificate.

There is pressure to liberalise the 2004 Act, so people can change legal sex without any need for a medical diagnosis (gender 'self-ID' or 'self-declaration'). There have also been calls for the minimum age to be reduced from 18 to 16, and for legal recognition for those who say they are neither male nor female ('non-binary').²⁷⁸

The UK Government consulted on changing the Act for England and Wales in 2018. Its stated aim was to make it "less intrusive and bureaucratic" to change legal sex.²⁷⁹ The Government announced in September 2020 that the substantive changes to the Gender Recognition Act would not go ahead.²⁸⁰ Instead, the process was moved online and the fee reduced from £140 to £5.

In 2017 the Scottish Government consulted on a proposal to allow self-ID. A further consultation on a draft Bill was held in 2020.²⁸¹ The Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill completed its passage through the Scottish Parliament in December 2022. In addition to allowing change of legal sex by self-declaration, it reduced the minimum age from 18 to 16. But citing various concerns, including the impact on reserved equality legislation, the Westminster Government exercised its power under Section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 to prevent the legislation receiving Royal Assent.²⁸² The legislation has therefore not become law. This is the only time Section 35 has been used. In December 2023, following a legal challenge by the Scottish Government, Scotland's Outer House of the Court of Session ruled that the UK Government had acted lawfully.²⁸³

Cass Review – In 2020, NHS England commissioned an independent review of its Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) for children and adolescents, managed by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. The review, led by Dr Hilary Cass, came after a sharp increase in the number of referrals to GIDS, from 77 in 2009-10 to 2,728 in 2019-20.²⁸⁴

Following the Cass Review's interim report in February 2022 stating GIDS was "not a safe or viable long-term option", it was announced that GIDS would close and be replaced by services taking a more holistic approach.²⁸⁵

The final Cass Report was published in April 2024. It concluded that giving gender-confused children puberty blockers was based on "remarkably weak evidence".²⁸⁶ Cass urged the NHS to review its use of cross-sex hormones and ensure that gender-confused children receive a holistic

assessment of all their needs.²⁸⁷ The report left open the possibility of drugs for some “for whom medical intervention is clinically indicated” but said: “For the majority of young people, a medical pathway may not be the best way to manage their gender-related distress.”²⁸⁸ Cass recommended a cautious approach to social transition, including clinical involvement from properly trained staff.²⁸⁹

NHS England stopped the routine prescription of puberty blocker treatments to under-18s and is reviewing all treatment provided to those identifying as transgender, including adults.²⁹⁰ NHS Scotland’s only specialist gender service for under-18s has also paused prescribing puberty blockers.²⁹¹

MEDICAL ETHICS

Abortion

The present law allows abortion up to 24 weeks’ gestation for a wide range of reasons, but permits abortion up to birth where the child may have ‘a serious handicap’. ‘Serious handicap’ has not been defined. The diagnosis of a comparatively trivial condition, such as a cleft palate, has been used as a ground for an abortion.²⁹² In 2022 in Great Britain, over 98 per cent of the 268,718 legal abortions were carried out for ‘social reasons’.²⁹³

In 2008 pro-life MPs sought unsuccessfully to reduce the 24-week limit.

The coalition Government stated on numerous occasions that sex-selective abortion is illegal in Britain. However, the head of British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) claimed that the “law is silent on the matter of gender selection”.²⁹⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* carried out an investigation

in 2012 that caught two doctors offering abortions to women who said their babies were the ‘wrong sex’.²⁹⁵ The CPS did not charge the two doctors, saying it was not in the public interest.²⁹⁶ In February 2015, MPs rejected an amendment proposed by Conservative MP Fiona Bruce to clarify that abortion on the grounds of sex alone is illegal.

Department of Health guidance on abortion released in May 2014 said there is “no legal requirement” for doctors to see women seeking an abortion before approving it. It suggested that nurses could see the patient instead. The guidance also suggested doctors could talk to the patient over the phone or via a webcam.²⁹⁷ This was seen by some as the biggest liberalisation of abortion practice in England and Wales since the 1967 Abortion Act.

In 2017 and 2018, rules were changed in Scotland, Wales and England to allow women to take the second abortion pill, Misoprostol, at home rather than in a clinical setting.²⁹⁸

In March 2020, temporary provision was made because of COVID to allow women to take both abortion pills at home during the first trimester after a phone or video consultation with a doctor. This was made permanent in England, Wales and Scotland in 2022, despite concerns about policy and examples of women taking the pills well after the first trimester.²⁹⁹ Carla Foster procured an illegal at-home abortion while 32-34 weeks pregnant, and was initially imprisoned before being given a suspended sentence on appeal.³⁰⁰ Her case became a *cause célèbre* for those seeking to liberalise abortion law, with amendments tabled in 2024 to the Government’s Criminal Justice Bill aimed at full decriminalisation. These amendments fell with the Bill when the election was called.

‘Buffer zones’ – Some local councils used powers under the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2014 to create ‘buffer zones’ around abortion clinics, preventing any pro-life presence. In 2018 the UK Government reviewed whether it should create buffer zones for all abortion venues nationwide, but said that doing so would not be “proportionate”.³⁰¹

In 2022, a backbench amendment to the Public Order Bill created a 150-metre buffer zone around every abortion centre in England and Wales. The legislation has not yet come into force. The Home Office published draft non-statutory guidance for consultation in December 2023.³⁰² The final guidance has not been published.

Gillian Mackay MSP’s Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill will introduce 200-metre buffer zones around every abortion venue in Scotland.

Northern Ireland – In July 2019, MPs at Westminster voted to make abortion law in Northern Ireland the most liberal in the UK. Abortion is now allowed in Northern Ireland up to 12 weeks gestation without giving a reason and – as with the rest of the UK – up to 24 weeks for most reasons and up to birth on the grounds of disability.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) Act 2008

The HFE Act liberalised UK law on the use of embryos. The most controversial elements included allowing scientists to create animal-human hybrid embryos, permitting the selection of embryos to be born as ‘saviour siblings’ for a child with a serious medical condition, and abolishing ‘the need of a child for a father’ requirement in IVF.³⁰³ The work on animal-human hybrids was abandoned as a failure a year after the Act was passed.³⁰⁴

GM babies

The HFE Act permitted future regulations allowing scientists to create genetically modified children for women who have mitochondrial disease. The coalition Government introduced these regulations in February 2015, making the UK the first country in the world to legislate for techniques to create GM children with three or four parents.³⁰⁵ The procedures involve germline modification, which could affect future generations in unknown ways. The first licence to create three and four-parent babies was granted by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in March 2017.³⁰⁶

Assisted suicide/euthanasia

Euthanasia by acts of commission, such as by administering a lethal injection, is illegal in the UK, as is assisting someone to commit suicide. Pro-euthanasia campaigners have made repeated attempts to change the law.

In 2015, Labour MP Rob Marris introduced a Private Member’s Bill to legalise assisted suicide in England and Wales. In September 2015 it was defeated in the Commons, by 330 votes to 118.

MSPs rejected the Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill in May 2015 by 82 votes to 36, but new legislation brought forward by Liam McArthur MSP is currently before the Scottish Parliament.

In June 2014 the UK Supreme Court dismissed an appeal to allow doctors to assist in suicides. Judges upheld an earlier decision by the High Court, saying that it is a matter for the UK Parliament to decide.³⁰⁷ The European Court of Human Rights has confirmed that the law on assisted suicide is a matter for Member States.³⁰⁸ In December 2019, the High

Court in London denied a paralysed man, the late Paul Lamb, permission to judicially review the law on assisted suicide. The Court of Appeal also rejected his appeal.³⁰⁹

Organ donation

Presumed consent systems for organ donation, also known as 'opt out', have been introduced throughout Great Britain. They replaced the previous 'opt-in' framework. The law in Wales changed in 2015, in England in 2020 and in Scotland in 2021.

Under this system, a competent adult who has not recorded an opt-in or opt-out decision may be deemed after their death to have authorised the donation of their organs and tissue for transplantation.

Some argue that presumed consent systems increase organ donation rates. Others believe that this is doubtful and that improving staff training and infrastructure, and increasing public awareness, are more effective.

Opt-out systems may be seen as increasing the power of the State at the expense of individuals and families.

PUBLIC MORALITY

Drugs

The law categorises illegal drugs as either class A, B or C according to their harmfulness. The classification determines the criminal penalties for possession and supply. The most harmful drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, are class A. Class B includes cannabis and speed (amphetamines) and class C includes sleeping pills.

In November 2003 the Government reclassified cannabis from class B to class C. This came into force in 2004 across

the whole of the UK. However, the drug was restored to class B in 2009 due to overwhelming evidence of cannabis damaging mental health.³¹⁰

There is an ongoing campaign to dismantle the UK's drugs legislation. Two House of Commons committees – the Health and Social Care Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee – have called for possession of drugs for personal use to be decriminalised.³¹¹

'Drug consumption rooms' allow addicts to bring their own drugs and take them under supervision. The first such facility in the UK is due to open in Glasgow this year. In Scotland there were more than 1,000 drug-related deaths in each of the last six years.³¹² It has the worst drug-death rate in Europe.³¹³

Gambling

In 2005 the Labour Government passed the Gambling Act. It removed restrictions controlling some of the worst excesses of casinos, betting shops and slot machines. It formally legalised 'virtual casino' machines, known as fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs), in betting shops and elsewhere. The Act also greatly reduced restrictions on opening new casinos, repealed the 24-hour membership requirement and lifted the general ban on all gambling advertising. In addition, slot machines with unlimited stakes and prizes were allowed for the first time.

Licences were granted for 16 huge new casinos – with the smallest of them considerably bigger than most that existed before the Act. As Prime Minister, Gordon Brown rejected plans for the one super casino allowed by the legislation.³¹⁴

In October 2016 the Conservative Government announced a review of gaming machines, asking whether changes should

be made to maximum stakes or prizes. FOBTs have been called the ‘crack cocaine’ of gambling and allowed gamblers to stake £100 every 20 seconds – up to £18,000 an hour. In May 2018 the Government announced that the maximum stake on FOBTs would be reduced from £100 to £2. This was implemented from April 2019.³¹⁵ The Scotland Act 2016 devolved power over the number of FOBTs allowed per betting premises licence – but only for future licences. The Wales Act 2017 gives equivalent power to the Welsh Parliament.

Following a wider review of the Gambling Act 2005, the Government published a White Paper in April 2023 setting out plans to “reform the regulation and legislation governing the gambling sector”.³¹⁶ These included stake limits on online slots, strengthening informational messaging about gambling risks and allowing some casinos to have more gambling machines. The measures were subject to further consultation and most were not implemented before the election.³¹⁷

Sunday trading

Sunday trading was legalised in England and Wales in 1994, when the Sunday Trading Act allowed six hours of unregulated trading for large stores.

In 2015-16, the Government sought to further liberalise the law by giving local authorities or mayors the power to extend Sunday trading hours in their area. In March 2016 the proposed legislation was defeated in the Commons following cross-party opposition.

Deregulation undermines Sunday as a day of rest. It would also put further pressure on employees to work on Sundays. Employee protections in the legislation have proved to be weak.

Online pornography

There has been increasing concern about children accessing pornographic content online. A study for the Children’s Commissioner found that children as young as nine were being exposed to pornography, with half of 13-year-olds having seen it.³¹⁸

The Digital Economy Act 2017 would have required pornography websites to have age-verification checks to prevent under-18s accessing the content. Although Parliament passed the legislation, it was not brought into force by the Government, and was formally dropped in 2019. Ministers said future online harms legislation would include similar protections.³¹⁹

However, the draft version of the Online Safety Bill first presented to Parliament in 2021 did not cover content created by porn companies themselves or contain clear standards for age checks. Significant amendments to make the regime more robust were later added by the Government under significant cross-party pressure.

The final legislation requires both social media and pornography websites to implement measures that are “highly effective at correctly determining whether or not a particular user is a child”. The Online Safety Act became law in October 2023, but Ofcom’s enforcement regime is not yet in place. Ofcom’s weak track record enforcing a parallel system for video-on-demand services, as well as the scale of its responsibilities under the new Act, has led to fears over how effective the Act will be.

THE CONSTITUTION

The constitutional settlement in Britain provides that Britain is not a secular State. The [Protestant Reformed] Christian nature of the constitution is evident not only in the

monarch's coronation oath, but also in the establishment of the Church of England.

Council prayers

In February 2012, a High Court judge ruled that local councils had no lawful power to hold prayers during official business. In response, the coalition Government fast-tracked the commencement of new laws which overtook the Court's ruling. The Localism Act restored the right of councils to hold prayers as part of their formal meetings. The later Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act 2015 was supported by the coalition Government and the Opposition and provided the legal right for smaller councils not covered by the Localism Act to hold prayers at the start of their meetings.

Parliament

Christians should be concerned about any 'party list' system which concentrates

power in the hands of the political parties and prevents the public from voting for a particular candidate. Many Christians may want to vote for a person whose views on moral issues are not the same as party policy, but such a system would compel them to vote for the party as a whole. Christians often tell the Institute they are disappointed that their MP feels pressured to follow the party whip. In a 'party list' system of proportional representation, a political representative is entirely dependent on the party for his or her position, meaning such pressure can only grow.

Clearly there is no uniquely biblical model for the existence of a second chamber or how one should be organised. However, it is worth noting that in recent years it has been the House of Lords, not the Commons, which has been the more effective protector of religious liberties.

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Election Briefing 2024



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- biblical priorities
- issues on the horizon
- two key factors in voting
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