

William Hague addresses a landmark Conservative faith communities conference

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by William Hague

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In this speech, to leaders of Britain's main faiths, William Hague set out his agenda for strengthening the family, renewing civil society by encouraging voluntary and faith-based organisations, and denationalizing compassion.

Thank you for being here to be part of this forum on Values for the Twenty-First Century. I hope today will be as useful to you as I am sure it will be for the Conservative Party.

No political party has ever before held such a joint public forum with Britain's Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and other faith communities. I am holding this forum because I respect the huge contribution that religious people make to the life of this nation and because I believe that faith communities can play a still larger role in our country's future.

Today, across the western world, we enjoy unprecedented prosperity and security. These are achievements to protect and cherish. But they are not enough.

Looking ahead, people will still be concerned about their families' standard of living, their healthcare, and their children's education. But new concerns are rising up their agenda. People worry about the spread of drug addiction and crime. They want the best possible care for elderly relatives. They seek to improve and conserve their local environment. And they want their children protected from the worst influences of the new media.

How do we ensure that when we look at these problems in ten years' time we can point to real progress?

Building for the future

At the heart of the Conservative response is a programme for a steady renewal of the institutions of civil society. Alongside the family, the local school and charities, faith communities are often best placed to demonstrate real compassion to neighbours in persistent need. So churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship lie at the core of civil society.

I want to denationalise compassion. For I have seen civil society succeed in so many areas where state programmes have floundered. And these aren't ideological prejudices: the only ideologues are those who stubbornly support bureaucratic programmes in the face of irresistible evidence that alternatives work best.

Let me give you three examples of social engagement driven by religious faith that has helped vulnerable people.

First, in urban regeneration. Yesterday I visited the Kingsmead Housing Estate in Hackney. The 1930s-built blocks had been badly maintained and over many years have housed some of our most seriously disadvantaged people. Its reputation further worsened because of the activities there of the paedophile Sydney Cook in the mid-1980s.

Nearly three years ago the Christian Shaftesbury Housing Group took over the estate and its nearly 2,500 residents from hugely varied ethnic backgrounds and languages. Yesterday I saw the dramatic improvements that Shaftesbury have made to the built fabric.

But Shaftesbury know that the physical environment is not the only problem. They are also treating the residents as real people with real needs. Working with residents and the local

school and church, Shaftesbury are helping to provide a range of services: debt counselling, IT and catering training, clothes banks, childcare and a community alarm system to deal with problems of racial and domestic violence. Today, Kingsmead has a long waiting list of people who want to live there. I feel sure that the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury as a committed Conservative and Christian who gave most of his life to caring for the urban poor and mentally ill, would have been proud of a charity that bears his name today.

Secondly, by helping disaffected young people. The Lubavich Youth Organisation is a fine example from part of Britain's Jewish tradition that provides support on the streets for young people in Central London. The team of Rabbis operates in a dangerous environment, sometimes long into the night, to deliver care and counselling to young people in need. OFSTED recently praised its non-judgemental attitude. The approach of Rabbi Sudak, who leads the group, is simple - everyone in need gets individual, undiluted attention, whatever their background.

We need diversity to meet the needs of our country's children. That means finally abandoning the one-size-fits-all approach to education. For it is clearly failing our children. OFSTED's "Educational Inequality" report last week strikingly revealed how the current system fails children from ethnic minority backgrounds. In this regard I salute the work of the member churches of the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance from whom we will be hearing from later today.

Thirdly there is the menace of the drug culture. Last December I visited Yeldall Manor and spent time meeting men who had suffered from serious drug addictions. They had often come from backgrounds without the support and love that most of us have grown up with. Many of these men had been through numerous state rehab programmes but only at Yeldall had they found the chance of starting their lives afresh. For their problem was not seen just as a medical addiction but a reflection of deeper problems requiring a deeper form of healing.

I am going to continue to visit outstanding projects in order to profile the great work undertaken by people of all faiths. Next Monday I shall speak at the launch of Islamic Awareness Week and soon I shall be speaking to Jewish Care and affirming their sterling work. I also plan other opportunities to see and learn from other religions. The basis for today is an invitation.

Denationalising compassion

Lest anyone tries to tell you otherwise, I will defend free healthcare and schooling; I will maintain and strengthen social security. But I want to denationalise compassion where the state is failing to deliver results. I want to roll back the frontiers of the state so that more work of faith and secular community-based initiatives can flourish. I want to expose the one-size-fits-all heresy. And I believe that public opinion is on my side.

Those who defend the status quo aren't defending the people they claim to support. For uniform state provision has grotesquely failed tens of thousands of children in care. State programmes are not turning the tide on drugs. Homeless people require more than a giro cheque. The loneliness of so many elderly citizens demands a renewed sense of neighbourliness and a respect for the contribution that they have made to the rich freedoms we enjoy today.

We will extend opportunities to voluntary groups on the basis of step-by-step co-operation. I do not support discrimination for, or discrimination against, faith-based institutions. I am interested in results. Where you can succeed where the state has failed, you will be given great opportunities to do new work. For governing for all lies at the heart of the Conservatism that today's forum will help to shape and colour.

There will be some journalists who will attack the very fact that we have come together in this forum today. Some of them do not like the idea of religious groups having a say in the affairs of this country.

My reply to those people is clear. Religious people have as much right to a place in public life as any other citizen of our great country. Religious people pay their taxes and vote just like everyone else. Why should the religious voice not be heard along with everyone else when decisions are made about schooling, healthcare or social services? In many ways the contribution of faith communities to national life is disproportionate to their size. A disproportionate number of volunteers and charities are religious. Religious schools appeal to parents who may rarely attend a place of worship. The stability of family life within faith communities and their respect for the sanctity of life benefits the whole of our country.

I welcome the contribution made by members of minority faiths to national life. British Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others are increasingly playing a full part in commerce, the professions, politics and the arts. You have religious and moral ideas, traditions of family and community from which we can learn.

But to affirm the rightful place of each of the major world religions in our national life does not detract from the central Christian character of our country. That character is partly reflected in today's programme and the share given to Christian voices on the five panels. Our greatest literature and works of art; our laws and customs; our democratic traditions and work ethic owe much to the teachings of Christianity. And the established Church provides a space for religion in our public life - as the Chief Rabbi tells us "An established church places faith at the centre of our national symbols".

Today's forum is about public policy rather than theology. It is about exploring common ground - not well-rehearsed differences. The purpose of today's forum is to learn more about how best we might practically address some of our country's pressing social challenges. We want to learn more about how faith communities can jointly and individually contribute to the common good.

I am particularly delighted, therefore, to be back in the Emmanuel Centre where in November 1998 I launched the Conservative Christian Fellowship's 'Listening to Britain's Churches' consultation. This ongoing consultation has involved over 300 meetings. The Conservative Party has also included leading members of other faith traditions in our policy renewal process. We have produced reports on the family, international development and the role of faith communities in promoting social inclusion. Many of these ideas are included in 'Believing in Britain', an outline of my Party's programme for Government.

Renewing the family

This forum's first session is the family. The family lies at the heart of my programme for civic renewal. Can you imagine if scientists today announced the invention of a new model of personal relationship that helped children to succeed in school, that cut crime, increased individual happiness and helped knit neighbourhoods together? Politicians and policymakers would be falling over each other in the rush to claim the innovation.

Marriage does all of these things. It is the essential building block of a stable society. It is the foundation on which all the other institutions of a free society depend. But the Conservatives are the only party with serious policies to support it. I want to hear your views on how we can further promote marriage in the years ahead.

And on the subject of the family I would like to thank those religious leaders who are fighting to retain Section 28. I am delighted that representatives of the Christian Institute and Iqbal Sacranie of the Muslim Council of Britain are here with us today. Britain's Muslims are standing tall in this campaign and millions of parents are grateful for that.

Voluntary renewal

The Conservatives' Common Sense Revolution will also encourage volunteers, voluntary bodies and faith-based institutions. We want them to have more independence, fewer

regulatory burdens and a stronger leadership role. We will make it simpler to apply for government grants. We will reform the tax system to help people give to charities. The next Conservative government will end discrimination against religious organisations by public funding and regulatory bodies. We will allow religious broadcasters fair and equal access to national licence applications.

In education, we will give churches and other faith communities new opportunities to establish their own schools with their own ethos and their own priorities. Close to their communities and offering role models that pupils can identify with, they would be one sure way to guarantee diversity, increase standards and give children the values they need. Theresa May, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, will listen carefully to your contributions.

Overseas we will declare war on the corruption and the political correctness that prevents aid reaching the very poorest people with whom we share God's earth. We will empower and work through those relief agencies which have superior local knowledge. Gary Streeter, our International Development spokesman, who is co-chairing today with Peta Buscombe, will look forward to hearing your comments on this key topic.

Those are my opening thoughts. They are not final reflections on a listening process that has been already completed. They are my contribution to a continuing and deepening conversation between the Conservative Party and people from all faiths. I have asked a number of members of my Shadow Cabinet and frontbench team to be with you today, to listen to you and to reply to the discussion which will follow. I am very pleased to see such nationally acknowledged experts in their fields among our panellists and I anticipate an exciting day ahead.

Today's Conference has been organised jointly by the Conservative Party's Cultural Unit, Christian Fellowship and the new Renewing One Nation social policy team. The Cultural Unit has been involving members of Britain's ethnic communities at all levels in the party. And dialogues have been established with organisations working with those communities, such as the Commission for Racial Equality. Sabeeha Mannan, the National Organiser of the Cultural Unit, is here today and I hope you will have an opportunity to meet her.

Renewing One Nation

Last Thursday, at the Charities Aid Foundation Conference I launched the prospectus of the Renewing One Nation team. Renewing One Nation is an independent initiative within the Conservative Party, chaired by our home affair's spokesman David Liddington, which will build relationships with charities, voluntary groups, churches and other faith communities who have front line experience of rebuilding community life. The members of this team - Robert Halfon, Guy Hordern, Tim Montgomerie and Karen West - are also all here and with Sabeeha will support members of the Shadow Cabinet in taking forward your contributions. In your conference pack we are asking you how we might best continue this conversation.

At the next General Election the Conservative Party's appeal to voters will not be based upon claims to superior spiritual insight but on practical policies. So by holding today's conference I do not claim that Conservatism uniquely encapsulates religious values. But I do sincerely hope that the Conservative Party's agenda on family life, freedom of religion, international development and values-based schooling will address your communities' interests.

And it is an agenda that has appeal beyond people with religious faith. In *The Politics of Hope* Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, wrote that most of us still accept the virtue of honesty, keeping out of crime, parental responsibility and fidelity. A still, small voice inside still speaks, quietly but consistently, against those instincts that would harm our neighbours. In a challenge to all policymakers, the Chief Rabbi warned that too much public policy undermines these virtuous instincts.

The values we address today do not only resonate with people with deeply held religious conviction. They are the values of the mainstream majority. And we must

fight to put them back at the heart of our nation's life.