
Scotland's Kate Forbes and the March of Secularism

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After Kate Forbes announced her intention to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as leader of the Scottish National Party, information started “coming to light” about her religious beliefs. As a member of the Free Church of Scotland, her convictions include opposition to same sex marriage, sex outside marriage, and abortion. On these matters (none of which are live political issues in Scotland) — not her plans to govern Scotland — much of the media attention seems to have dwelled, fueled by new revelations ([such as her internal letters to the church](#)) on the one hand, and [shock](#) from her colleagues on the other. This saga is a reminder of the state of religious freedom in Britain, and yet can anyone claim to be surprised?

The Test Act, which epitomised anti-Catholic prejudice, was repealed just under 200 years ago, and yet again in Britain, religious freedom is besieged by inquisitorial secularists who rule the airwaves. Indeed, it seems that issues like same sex marriage and abortion are litmus tests of this epoch. Passage of the Test Act, like the Glorious Revolution, was irresistibly popular in Parliament; its shadow, likewise, is long, bitter, and divisive. The very label of a Jacobite—or worse, papist—would have been anathema to anyone’s political career, even after one’s view of 1688 could have a bearing on the issues of the day. Opposition to that particular settlement was associated with treason, non-conformity, and all the historical prejudice constructed against ‘popery’ for a century and more. Many were banished to the political outer darkness on religious grounds while the Test Act stood sentry.

Opposition to same sex marriage has acquired similar connotations. It is not unusual for the Guardian and Sky News to grill public figures over their private convictions, then to feign innocence in the face of the public outrage they stirred. Repeal of same sex marriage or the current divorce and abortion laws is politically impossible for any First Minister of Scotland: the socially liberal landscape could not conceivably permit it. No treason against the new settlement lurks over the water. Yet all the same, modern secularism pervades the new social orthodoxy. Nothing demonstrates this more than the case of Forbes. The media reaction was no longer calling her a bigot or explaining how such private convictions are incompatible with leading the Scottish Nationalists; instead, it is a sort of bemused consternation. “Why did she [torpedo her own career?](#)” asks the Guardian. “[She has f****d it](#)”, says a member of her campaign. “Just so you know...”, the Mirror headline seems to whisper, “she says [it’s wrong to have children outside marriage.](#)” Notably, the comment isn’t made with sternness or outrage, as one might expect in response to such moral faux pas, but with a sort of disapproving pity from a distant uncle.

The secular consensus is such that it is no longer necessary to point out her errors. The silliness of defying that consensus is just so plain that it does not even merit outrage. Aasmah Mir, who is presumably briefed on Forbes’s religious background as an experienced radio host, would know the sort of answer she is likely to give. Yet in the spirit of the Test Act she pressed on her enquiries into

Ms Forbes's conception of sin. When a reasonably standard Christian answer was given, Ms Forbes was said to have "[dodged](#) the question."

There is the contention of unfair treatment of Christians, recalling the media treatment of Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron in the 2017 campaign. [Questions are being raised](#) about the lack of such scrutiny on Forbes's main rival, Humza Yousaf, a self-professed social liberal who also 'dodged' the vote. Yet to dwell on uneven scrutiny into religious convictions is to miss the broader point: thresholds of convictions are rising around public life, maintained not by statute, but by aggressively secular assumptions widely held by many in the media. To journalists reared by a PR diet of Malcolm Tucker, this is indeed one of those 'gaffes' that would spark a foul-mouthed tirade from her spin doctor. Of course, what they observe might be right, Ms Forbes may have a better chance in winning this election if she avoids stating her religious convictions. More conveniently, perhaps she would be even better off if she does not have such convictions at all, as little as they have to do with governing Scotland.

Secularism had sought to separate religious and secular spheres, but it now not only seeks to confine religion to private life, but also from time to time to drag it out into the open for a humbling such as this. In this instance, political and spiritual leaderships are conflated. The implication is that spheres of religious and public life are once more inextricable; orthodox Christian beliefs would be frowned upon by both. In politics, an act or conviction of faith, however private, would be scrutinised *ad nauseam*.

Emperor Trajan wrote to Pliny that though early Christians should not be hunted out, they are to be punished for their beliefs if they refuse to make a prayer to Roman deities. This vision of aggressive Secularism leaves no room for religious freedom. In it there are sinister echoes of Roman persecutions, of the Test Act, and of myriad other repressions against religious communities around the world today. Methods might be less severe and less violent, but common intolerance against dissenters to 'social orthodoxy' is evident for all to see. The impact of such hostility may be limited in this case, one pollster still marks Forbes as the [favourite](#) of the race, yet the implication of such targeting is rather more worrying.

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