

The Archbishop of Canterbury and Sharia Law

A letter to the Herald, Feb 2008

Sir,

The words of Archbishop Rowan Williams about the ‘inevitability’ of incorporating parts of Sharia law into English law were astonishing. I have no doubt that as a devout cleric, his intervention in this debate was well-intentioned. But it was also, as my party leader put it, “unhelpful”.

These are sensitive subjects. Politicians in all mainstream parties recognise their responsibility not to exacerbate differences or inflame feelings on issues of race, religion and community cohesion.

But there is sensitivity and responsibility required in another way too. I know from many doorstep conversations, letters and emails how many people feel that ‘multi-culturalism’ has gone too far, and that rational debate on this is stifled.

Britain has a proud, centuries-long tradition of welcoming newcomers from elsewhere. When this occurs in a gradual way, the new communities can integrate well, and contribute greatly to the cultural richness of the land.

But the integration is key. Trying to create or maintain too much separateness can cause resentment, and is a dangerous path. Alongside the English language and a sense of fair play, one of the most basic tenets of Britishness is that all are equal before one code of law.

The Americans have a motto, “e pluribus unum” – “out of many, one”. It is a good principle to pursue.

Sincerely,

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