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The two largest political parties in the United Kingdom have pledged to support persecuted Christians in manifestos released this week ahead of May's general election.

The Labour Party on Monday committed itself to establish a "Global Envoy for Religious Freedom" as well as a multi-faith advisory council on religious freedom within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Chris Whitehouse, chairman of the Whitehouse Consultancy, which has worked for several years with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom, welcomed the proposal as "one small but important step to address the modern global holocaust of violence and persecution on the basis of faith".

The following day the Conservatives promised "to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions – and non-religious people – to practise their beliefs in peace and safety", with explicit reference to Christians in the Middle East.

However faith schools in the UK looked to be under threat from two parties, with the Liberal Democrats pledging to end faith-based admissions while broadly supporting the existence of religious schools.

Its manifesto supported schools' right to appoint only people of faith as religious education teachers, but called for an end to "unfair discrimination on grounds of faith" among other staff. This policy is at odds with targets set by the Catholic Education Service, which requires Catholics to be appointed to leadership positions such as head teacher.

Although it titled its manifesto “For the Common Good”, the Green Party said it would phase out public funding for faith schools entirely. “Schools may teach about religions, but should not encourage adherence to any particular religious belief,” the Green Party said. Elsewhere the manifesto recalled some aspects of Catholic Social Teaching by pledging to prioritise individual need over market economics, for example by increasing the minimum wage.

For their part, the United Kingdom Independence Party criticised the schools’ inspectorate, Ofsted, for unduly criticising faith schools. The inspectorate should focus on combating radicalisation, it said, “rather than criticising widely-held Judeo-Christian beliefs”.

Meanwhile, a poll last week revealed that Catholics, more than any other Christian group in the UK, are likely to vote Labour.

The YouGov survey showed that while 42 per cent of Catholics intended to vote for Ed Miliband, only 31 per cent would support David Cameron and the Conservatives. Liberal Democrats fared badly with Catholics too, garnering less support than Ukip, with 12 per cent backing Nigel Farage, compared to just 4 per cent supporting Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

Liz Dodd, Paul Wilkinson - The Tablet