Eric Pickles’ dictatorial disregard for the law is dangerous in a democracy

Posted: Mon, 7th Apr 2014 by Terry Sanderson

Eric Pickles, the Dickensian-style Communities Minister, has announced that Britain is a "Christian nation" and anyone who disagrees needs to "get over it".

He has the usual easy pop at "militant atheists" and dismisses anyone who opposes what he does as "politically correct."

He also reportedly says that "I've stopped an attempt by militant atheists to ban councils having prayers at the start of meetings if they wish. Heaven forbid. We're a Christian nation. We have an established church. Get over it. And don't impose your politically correct intolerance on others."

He was referring, of course, to the National Secular Society's 2012 High Court case that ruled that it is illegal for local councils to include prayers as part of their official agenda.

After that decision, Mr Pickles rushed to bring forward by a few weeks the Localism Act and in doing so announced that councils could now keep prayers on their agenda if they want to.

There is no mention in the Localism Act of council prayers, nor was there any in the parliamentary debates leading up to it. And the Act was given Royal Assent long before the High Court judgment was issued.

In that case, the High Court ruling stands and Mr Pickles' contention that it doesn't has never been tested in court.

Mr Pickles' seems to be taking the Alice in Wonderland approach to the law, as to paraphrase Humpty Dumpty "the law means what I want it to mean".

The NSS has told Mr Pickles repeatedly that he is misrepresenting the facts of this case and yet he continues to do it. We never said that all prayers in Town Halls should be banned. We simply said that it shouldn't be part of official business so that everyone, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, atheist or anyone else - of whatever religion or non-religion - could serve on the council in good conscience and without intimidation.

Many councils now have prayers before the meeting agenda begins, and we have no objection to that.

Mr Pickles is entitled to be as enthusiastic an evangelical Christian as he wants to be, but we live in a democracy, not a theocracy. He cannot – as he has done – simply place his personal beliefs before the law.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

- Share on What's App
- Share on Facebook
- Share on Twitter
- Share on Email
- Subscribe to RSS Feed

Tags: Disestablishment, FoRB, Government prayers

Related Campaigns

- #### Disestablish the Church of England

  A state religion has no place in a 21st century democracy.

  Read More

- #### Freedom of religion or belief

  Secularism protects freedom of religion or belief for all.

  Read More

- #### End prayers in parliament and councils

  Prayers aren’t government business.

  Read More

Related Articles

Established church hinders religious freedom, NSS tells UN expert

The NSS has told a UN expert that lack of separation between Church and state is undermining freedom of religion or belief in the UK. Read More »

Tackling CofE privilege unites Anglicans and atheists at NSS event

Politicians and priests united to challenge Church of England privileges at a National Secular Society event in parliament... Read More »

Eric Pickles' 'evangelical charter' on its way to becoming law

A small group of Christians in parliament are changing the law to give local authorities the power to summon councillors... Read More »

Religious people should recognise that secularism benefits them, too

The outcry against not having prayers during council meetings is presented as some huge attack against Christianity.... Read More »

Prime Minister’s dissembling, hypocritical and disingenuous speech to religious leaders

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave an Easter reception for Christian leaders at Downing Street this week at which... Read More »