

Christian MPs accuse Charity Commission of having “secularising agenda”

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Nick Hurd, the Government minister for civil society, fended off a barrage of criticism this week over the Charity Commission's decision not to grant charitable status to the Plymouth Brethren.

In a debate in Westminster Hall about the use of the public benefit test for religious charity registrations. Christian MPs lined up to express their anger at the Charity Commission. Robert Halfon, Conservative MP for Harlow, called for an inquiry into the Commission's decision and said it "puts the tax status of hundreds of charities in doubt".

He said: "The Brethren are trying to deal with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on the question of how each hall should communicate with its donors—thousands of people making donations with gift aid declarations, and making claims with their self-assessment returns. The charities do not know what to tell them. What has happened is unjust and inconsistent and is creating fear in many churches, not just in Harlow but across the country."

Last Monday Halfon, Fiona Bruce, Conservative MP for Congleton and Stephen Pound, Labour MP for Ealing North had a meeting with William Shawcross, Charity Commission chair. Pound said Shawcross had "sought to reassure us that there is no anti-Christian bias in the Charity Commission, although I suspected some of us were slightly more convinced than others".

Stewart Jackson, Conservative MP for Peterborough said: "This is about a battle, about the secularisation of society and about calling a spade a shovel, which is quango activism," he said.

But Nick Hurd said that the Charity Commission was an independent organisation, not under the control of the government. "It is not subject to ministerial direction or control," he said. "It is an independent registrar and regulator. Its independence is set out in statute, and ministers and the government have no power to intervene in Charity Commission decisions."

Throughout the debate the Commission was subject to a tirade of abuse from some of the 40 MPs who attended. They called it "'Rotten', 'discriminating', 'a bureaucratic bully crushing the little guy', 'a hidden agenda', 'unjust', 'inconsistent', 'arbitrary', 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'.

Mr Hurd said: "There were concerns that the Charity Commission is pursuing an anti-Christian agenda. I am satisfied that that is not the case. As a public body, the Charity Commission is bound by equalities duties and by law must not discriminate in its dealings with different religions or faiths. A fact that has not emerged from the debate is that the Charity Commission continues to register hundreds of Christian charities each year, including charities that were previously excepted. That fact has to be reconciled with various statements—some of them quite wild—about the Commission discriminating."

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