

MPs support bid to restore 'public good' presumption of religion

Posted: Thu, 20th Dec 2012

MPs have backed a bid by Conservative MP Peter Bone (right) to amend the Charities Act to restore the presumption that all religious groups are for the public benefit and therefore can be charities.

Mr Bone's Ten Minute Rule bill is aimed at protecting religious groups like the Preston Down Trust, a member of the Plymouth Brethren, who recently had its charitable status removed by the Charity Commission after it decided that the exclusivity with which the Church conducts many of its activities, did not provide sufficient benefits to the wider public.

Writing on the [Conservative Home](#) website, Peter Bone, an active member of the Church of England, said: "This is another sign of a growing secular movement against religious groups in this country and another example of the state interfering with the church. "

Introducing his bill to Parliament, he said: "What is happening is creeping secularism in society. With just a few days before we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, and in recognition of religious freedom, I urge right hon. and hon. Members to support my ten-minute rule Bill."

166 MPs voted in favour of Mr Bone's attempt to introduce the bill, with just 7 voting against.

Bills introduced under the ten-minute rule are generally used only as a means of making a political point as there is little parliamentary time available to pass the bill into law.

The move comes after a letter signed by 113 MPs in support of the Plymouth Brethren was delivered to the Prime Minister on Monday. An additional letter demanding that ministers take action, signed by 53 MPs, including 45 Conservatives, was [published in the Telegraph](#) on Wednesday.

The decision not to grant charitable status to the Plymouth Brethren led to Christian MPs to accuse the Charity Commission of having "[secularising agenda](#)". Conservative MP Charlie Elphicke accused the Charity Commission of trying to suppress religion and predicted that the Plymouth Brethren case, where the organisation has been refused charity status, will be the first of many.

The Charity Commission chair, William Shawcross, has [described](#) such accusations as "quite simply, wrong."

After a series of recent parliamentary debates on the issue, a [report](#) detailing reasons why the Plymouth Brethren do not meet public benefit requirements was published by Paul Flynn, the Labour MP for Newport West.

The report, written by John Weightman, a former member of the Brethren, has also been submitted to the Charity Commission and the Public Administration Select Committee, of which Flynn is a member.

Mr Bone's motion was also opposed by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

Elizabeth Chamberlain, policy officer at NCVO, said: "Public benefit is what makes a charity a charity, and most are keen to demonstrate the value of their work.

"Peter Bone's plan risks downgrading religious charities in the public mind. They would become unique among charities in not having to show how they are of benefit to the public."

In a recent [Lords debate](#) about the role of religion in public life, Baroness Berridge, who has family members in the Exclusive Brethren, questioned whether religious groups that 'harm health and split families' should be allowed to be charities. The Conservative peer called for a former Archbishop to set up a church-led inquiry into the theological and psychological implications of Exclusive Brethren beliefs.

You can read the introduction of the bill and a full breakdown of how MPs voted on [Hansard](#)

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Charity](#), [Public services](#)

Related Campaigns

•

[Keep public services secular](#)

Public services intended for the whole community should be provided in a secular context.

[Read More](#)

•

[Reform charity laws](#)

All charities, religious or not, should be held to the same standards.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

[Time to bring policies on religion in line with public opinion](#)

As yet another study confirms Brits aren't keen on religion, Megan Manson says politicians should reflect public opinion by reeling in religious privilege. [Read More »](#)

Government terminates funding of “hate speech” Christian group

The government has ended its funding agreement with a charity whose chair called Islam "demonic" after the National... [Read More »](#)

Council reviews funding of Christian group accused of “hate speech”

A council is conducting an "urgent review" of its relationship with a Christian charity that the government criticised... [Read More »](#)

Government funds charity bringing “biblical truth” to sex workers

The National Secular Society has criticised the government for funding a faith group which aims to bring "biblical... [Read More »](#)

NSS urges Scotland to ensure food banks are inclusive

The National Secular Society has advised the Scottish government to address discrimination in religious charities... [Read More »](#)