

Four NI councils hold prayers before meetings

Posted: Thu, 16th Nov 2017

Four of Northern Ireland's 11 councils still hear prayers before their monthly meetings, according to information [released](#) by the *Belfast Telegraph*.

The revelation comes after a motion to replace council prayers with a period of 'silent reflection' at Ards and North Down Borough Council's meetings was defeated in a committee this week.

The other three councils to hold prayers are Castlereagh Borough and Lisburn City Council, Causeway Coast and Glens Council and Antrim and Newtownabbey Council.

Councils such as Mid and East Antrim do not hear a prayer or scripture reading before business. In Belfast council policy is that the Lord Mayor may read a short passage from the scriptures at the start of each meeting. Nuala McAllister, the current Lord Mayor and first citizen who recently [held](#) her inauguration dinner without inviting anyone to say grace, has chosen not to do a reading.

At Tuesday night's meeting of the Corporate Committee in Ards and North Down, Councillor John Barry of the Green party proposed replacing council prayers with a period of 'silent reflection'. The committee voted it down by ten votes to three. A final decision on the proposal will be taken at a meeting of the full council on 29 November.

Councillor Barry [said](#) "no strong arguments" had been made for continuing the current practice. "What we had were that 'majority rules' and the fact that it was 'traditional practice' as the reasons."

He added that his motivation had been questioned and he had faced personal smears in response to his proposal. "There was an attempt to deflect completely from the issue by personalising the debate, to deflect from addressing the issue.

"The motivation behind the notice of motion was secularism and democracy, not atheism and anti-Christianity – despite the disgraceful attempts by some members in the debate to suggest the opposite.

"I was accused of hypocrisy while my party was associated with authoritarian communism... I suppose this is to be expected of those bereft of strong arguments."

During the debate the councillor told his colleagues that his measure was "a threat to no-one" and said if their faith was strong they would "not need the support of the state".

"But perhaps for some equality is experienced as a loss, a taken-for-granted traditional experience of privilege that is now threatened.

"As I said in the debate when I asked those of a faith belief to ask themselves: is my Christian faith dependent upon the state and the inclusion of my religious views via state power? Is my faith not strong enough to thrive, live and sing in a moment's silent reflection?"

Ards and North Down mayor Robert Adair was among those to criticise the motion, which he described as an "attack by the Green Party on Christianity".

The National Secular Society campaigns for prayers to be separated from official council business. In 2012 the High Court [ruled](#) that saying prayers in council time was unlawful. The ruling applied to councils in England and Wales, though in 2015 the Government responded by changing the law in England. The ruling does not apply in Northern Ireland.

A spokesperson for the NSS said: "It is encouraging that most of Northern Ireland's councils do not hold prayers before meetings. Councils shouldn't be cosy clubs for people from a particular faith denomination. But the evidence from Ards and North Down this week is disheartening. The four councils which retain prayers before meetings need to be held to account for defending indefensible vestiges of religious privilege."

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