

Are parliament's theocrats about to have their day?

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When the Conservative-led coalition Government came to power at the last election we braced ourselves for a raised profile for religion in matters of state.

What transpired, though, were several confrontations between religious groups and Mr Cameron's "modernising" administration. On the issue of same-sex marriage, the Government has faced down (so far) a concerted attack on its plans by religious forces. Its lawyers have argued in the European Court of Human Rights that religious people cannot have *carte blanche* at work to do as they please, and that employers must have some rights to run their workplaces in the way that is best for efficiency and safety.

These confrontations have upset the right wing of the party and Mr Cameron is under increasing pressure.

His cabinet reshuffle last week promised to push the Government further to the right in order to pacify the reactionary backbenchers, and now might be the moment we have been dreading, the moment when right-wingers feel empowered to bring forward religious doctrines to be enshrined in law. We will be watching closely over the coming months for the inevitable attacks on the abortion law and on restrictions on free expression.

Although there was a sense of relief when news came through that Baroness ("This Government does do God") Warsi had been sacked from her job as Party Chair, it was soon tempered by the news that she has been made Minister for Faith – the first time such a post has existed.

Previously religious issues have been dealt with through the departments dealing with security or community cohesion, but Baroness Warsi's role will have a much wider remit. It is significant that she also has a role at the Foreign Office.

Earlier this year, Baroness Warsi had a meeting with the Pope at the Vatican and spoke at the time about what she perceived to be the dangers of secularism.

One Whitehall source has been quoted as saying that the creation of a Minister for Faith is an attempt to build bridges with religious leaders who have felt at odds with the Government. "It's tactical," he said.

But Francis Davis, who was formerly Faith and Communities Adviser to the Secretary of State at the Department for Community and Local Government, told the *Tablet* magazine: "Some of us have been arguing for over a decade that there was a need for a serious cross-cutting office to co-ordinate the fact that the Churches and faith communities are all involved in activities that reflect the interests of every department of state. The combination of the Foreign Office and the DCLG provide that platform making the Coalition the most pro-faith government in the West."

Meanwhile the Women and Equalities brief (and thus responsibility for pushing forward equal marriage) has moved from the Home Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Where

previously Theresa May and Lynne Featherstone were in charge, the legislation is now to be championed by MPs Maria Miller (Basingstoke, Con) and Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald, Con).

There were immediate fears within the gay community about Maria Miller, who, according to the politics website PublicWhip.org.uk, since becoming an MP in 2005, Mrs Miller has either voted against or been absent from all major LGBT rights votes in the House of Commons.

She was absent from the vote on the Equality Act of 2007, and she voted against allowing same-sex couples access to fertility treatment in 2008.

In an interview with the *Sunday Times* about the coalition's promise to introduce civil marriage equality by 2015, Mrs Miller said the change is needed to ensure marriage "remains as a relevant and vibrant institution".

She added: "Look, I think everybody should be married. It's something which creates strength in our society and whether it is two men, two women or a man and a woman, it is something which is a way for us to strengthen our society further".

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.

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