

End Government prayers

We don't think religious worship should play any part in the formal business of parliament. We want to see parliamentary and local government meetings conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, irrespective of their personal beliefs.

What's the problem?

Sittings in both the House of Commons and the Lords begin with Anglican prayers. MPs and peers stand for prayers facing the wall behind them – a practice thought to have developed due to the difficulty Members would historically have faced of kneeling to pray while wearing a sword.

When the Chamber is at its busiest, parliamentary prayers act as a bizarre and antiquated seat reservation system, and even MPs and peers who are slated to speak have no option but to attend prayers in order to reserve a seat.

Whilst this may be viewed by some as an important tradition, it also serves to assert the superiority of Christianity and the Church of England in particular at Westminster. Although the 'appeal to tradition' may be persuasive to some, we regard parliamentary prayers as an anachronism – inimical to a modern pluralistic secular democracy.

Parliamentarians who wish to pray are free to do so. However, prayers should not form part of the official business of Parliament.

In the Scottish Parliament, Tuesday afternoon sessions begin with 'Time for Reflection', with faith representatives invited in to addresses members for up to four minutes. The Northern Ireland Assembly begins formal business with a period of two minutes of silent prayer or contemplation. The Welsh Assembly has adopted no such rituals.

Council prayers

A number of local authorities in Britain also begin their meetings with prayer.

Local democracy should be equally welcoming to all sections of society, regardless of their individual religious beliefs or lack of belief. Council meetings should be conducted without anyone feeling compelled to participate in prayers, or feeling excluded, or that they have to absent themselves from any part of the meeting.

The Local Government (Religious Etc. Observances) Act enables a majority of councillors to impose their beliefs and acts of worship on other councillors, and can, in effect, impose religion by 'tyranny of the majority'. Simply because a majority of councillors wish to impose their beliefs on other councillors does not make it legitimate for them to do so.

Whilst prayers as part of council meetings may not seem like a great imposition to those who are not involved with or do not enjoy the prayers, it can be alienating for those who do not believe, or who hold faiths different to those of the religion invoked by the prayers in question.

The absence of prayers from the formal business of meetings in no way impedes the religious freedoms of believers or denies anybody the right to pray. However, the inclusion of organised worship in secular settings leads to believers imposing acts of worship on those that do not share their faith. It is therefore clear that the inclusion of acts of worship in the formal business of council

meetings is incompatible with a genuine commitment to religious freedom.

There is a history of local councillors being bullied and marginalised for challenging council prayers and we fear this legislation opens the door to wholly unnecessary conflict and sectarian squabbles within local authorities.

This legislation was not properly debated, nor did it receive serious scrutiny or consideration in parliament, with MPs on the Public Bill Committee failing in their duty to properly consider the implications of this wholly unnecessary and divisive legislation.

If local authorities wish to hold a moment of silent reflection at the beginning of a meeting, or if councillors wish to meet for prayers prior to the meeting, they should be at liberty to do so but no change in the law was necessary to facilitate this.

I do not think that the 1972 Act, dealing with the organisation, management and decision-making of local Councils, should be interpreted as permitting the religious views of one group of Councillors, however sincere or large in number, to exclude or, even to a modest extent, to impose burdens on or even to mark out those who do not share their views and do not wish to participate in their expression of them. They are all equally elected Councillors.

The equality based ruling the Local Government (Religious Etc. Observances) Act overturned

Judges' service

To mark the official opening of the legal year, an annual Anglican service is held at Westminster Abbey for judges to pray for guidance. The service is conducted according to the rites of the Church of England and the judges attend it fully robed, in their official capacity and during working hours.

Not only is the Judges' Service incompatible with the generally accepted objective of achieving and demonstrating diversity in the judiciary, it also raises serious questions about the perception of neutrality and independence of the judiciary. The service perpetuates the medieval belief that church and state are closely intertwined, and serves only to privilege the Church of England. Additionally, the services are a burden on the taxpayer.

What are we doing?

- In 2012 we won a legal challenge at the High Court, which ruled that local councils did not have the authority to include prayers on the agendas of council meetings.
- However, following the ruling a small group of Christian MPs mobilised in parliament to introduce a backbench bill, supported by the then evangelical Communities Secretary (and Minister for Faith) Eric Pickles, to once again include prayers or other religious observance in the meetings of local councils or other public bodies in England.
- Despite the new law, many local councils recognise the validity of our arguments and have now either ended the practice of saying prayers, or moved them away from the official business of their meetings.

- We have written to the lord chancellor to call for the Judges' Service to be abolished. If judges wish to pray, they should do this in their own time, away from their official duties.
- We are sometimes contacted by councillors and others who are concerned with prayers taking place within their own council meetings. If you would like advice with this issue, [please get in touch](#).

What you can do:

End parliamentary prayers: ask your MP to sign the motion!

An Early Day Motion (EDM) has been tabled in parliament calling for an alternative to parliamentary prayers, to make parliament welcoming to people of all faiths and none. Please enter your postcode and urge your MP to sign the EDM!

Enter Postcode: _____

Find my MP

Take action

If your local Council is making religious activities part of their official business and you want our help in challenging it, please get in touch.

- [Contact us](#)

[Prayers are personal and shouldn't be an official part of government business or council meetings. Let's keep parliament and local government secular.](#)

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Are prayers government business?

We think local government meetings should be conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, regardless of their individual religious beliefs or lack of belief. We therefore argue that religious worship should play no part in the formal business of council meetings.

The Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act made provision for the inclusion of prayers or "other religious observance" or "observance connected with a religious or philosophical belief" at local authority meetings.

The law was written to negate a High Court ruling that "The saying of prayers as part of the formal

meeting of a Council is not lawful under s111 of the Local Government Act 1972, and there is no statutory power permitting the practice to continue."

That judgement followed a Judicial Review initiated by the National Secular Society to challenge the practice of saying prayers as part of the formal business of council meetings in Bideford Town Council (Devon).

The ruling was an important step in recognition of secularism as a basis for equality in public life and public office. Simply, it ensured that all elected councillors, whatever their religious beliefs, would be treated with equal respect at council meetings.

The Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act was sponsored by Conservative MP Jake Berry, a supporter of the Conservative Christian Fellowship, but was prepared by the Department for Communities and Local Government, led then by the evangelical Eric Pickles who insists Britain is a "Christian country".

The Act's supporters claim that the Bill promotes religious freedom. We believe the opposite to be true.

Allowing acts of worship to be imposed in a secular environment, as the Act does, is incompatible with a genuine commitment to religious freedom. The Act enables a majority of councillors to impose their beliefs and acts of worship on other councillors, and can, in effect, impose religion by 'tyranny of the majority'.

Religious freedom protects both freedom of religion and belief. It protects an individual's rights to manifest their religion, but should not extend to allowing believers to impose acts of worship on those that do not share their faith.

The absence of prayers from the formal business of local authority meetings doesn't impede the religious freedoms of believers or deny anybody the right to pray. The former legal position simply prevented local authorities from summoning councillors to religious observance at council meetings and imposing it on those that do not wish it.

Local politics should be equally welcoming to all sections of society. Local government meetings should be conducted without anyone feeling compelled to participate in prayers, or feeling excluded, or that they have to absent themselves from any part of the meeting.

We fear this legislation opens the door to wholly unnecessary conflict and sectarian squabbles within local authorities.

This legislation was not properly debated, nor did it receive serious scrutiny or consideration in parliament, with MPs on the Public Bill Committee failing in their duty to properly consider the implications of this wholly unnecessary and divisive legislation.

If local authorities wish to hold a moment of silent reflection at the beginning of a meeting, or if councillors wish to meet for prayers prior to the meeting, they should be at liberty to do so but no change in the law was necessary to facilitate this.

- [Council prayers briefing](#) (PDF, 668 Kb)

- [Challenging council prayers](#)

If your local council is making prayers as part of its business you can challenge it.

[Read More](#)

While you're here

Please consider a donation to enable us campaign for the separation of religion and government. Together we can make a fairer more secular state.

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