

# End Government prayers

We don't think religious worship should play any part in the formal business of the state. 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 address 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.

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.

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.

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 2019 NSS honorary associate Crispin Blunt MP tabled an [Early Day Motion](#) (EDM) to end parliamentary prayers. Our members helped to raise awareness of the EDM among MPs; as a result, the EDM attracted support from representatives of Conservatives, Labour, Lib Dems, SNP and the Green Party, as well as an independent MP.
- 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: Write to your MP

Please enter your postcode and urge your MP to support an alternative to parliamentary prayers, to make parliament more welcoming to people of all faiths and none.

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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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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