

No plans to create public holidays to mark more religious festivals

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The government has rejected calls to make Hindu and Muslim religious festivals public holidays after the National Secular Society lobbied against the idea.

The issue was [debated in parliament](#) on Monday following petitions to the government calling for occasions such as Diwali and Eid to be marked with public holidays.

Rejecting the calls, the government said it was committed to "a fair and flexible workplace for all". It said it supported "bringing people together in strong, united communities" but rejected calls for religious festivals to be marked with public holidays pointing to the "considerable" costs that would be involved.

The NSS [briefed MPs](#) ahead of the debate and its intervention was cited on numerous occasions to highlight reasons for resisting the calls.

Martyn Day MP, a member of the petitions committee, reiterated concerns raised by the NSS that workers are not automatically entitled to time off on bank holidays.

Day quoted the NSS's briefing to point out that "a likely result of increasing the number of public holidays by including Muslim, Hindu, or other religious festivals would be a decrease in the number of discretionary holidays workers can take".

He also highlighted the need to achieve social cohesion across multicultural societies without causing any resentment and inadvertently hampering it. Although the petitions focussed on Muslim and Hindu festivals, he said "there are many other religions in the UK with smaller faith communities, and that their festivals are equally important to their individual worshippers."

He said the NSS had summed up the situation well: "The UK's religious landscape is in a state of continuous change. Our population is more irreligious, yet more religiously diverse, than ever before. A multi-faith approach to holidays can therefore never serve the individual needs of the many different people who make up the UK, or adequately keep abreast with the changes in the UK's demographics.

"A more practical and equitable approach is to give workers greater flexibility, where their work allows, to take holidays on the specific days that matter to them."

Day said this was a "pragmatic suggestion", but said petitioners had complained of a "lack of awareness" in society and among employers of the "significance of religious occasions".

Bob Blackman, the MP for Harrow East, called for "more public holidays, where people can take time off with their families" and said these should be determined "on a religious basis", following consultations with communities "and particularly their leaderships".

In addition to national public holidays for the Muslim festivals of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha and the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Dassera, he called for a holiday based around Judaism to fall on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

Backing calls for more religion-based public holidays, Labour MP for Harrow West Gareth Thomas suggested that as Eid al-Adha honours "the willingness of Ibrahim — Abraham — to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command, even those of us of a Christian faith can recognise the significance... without too much thought or effort."

Labour's shadow business minister Justin Madders said the debate was a reminder of the need to "recognise the importance of respecting and facilitating the opportunity for people of all faiths to observe their religious festivals". But he said a better approach is to ensure that all employers "are as flexible as they can be, to accommodate the beliefs of their employees".

"When one considers that one in four people does not subscribe to any faith at all — they are by far the biggest group in this country after Christians—arguments on the basis of numbers begin to look slightly less robust."

Responding on behalf of the government, small business minister Kelly Tolhurst MP said employers should "respond flexibly and sympathetically to any requests for leave, including for religious holidays". She said whilst she understood there would be "disappointment" that the government was unable to support calls for public holidays for Eid and Diwali, it was committed to "a fair and flexible workplace for all".

[Speaking](#) to the *Metro* newspaper ahead of the debate, a number of Muslims suggested making Eid a public holiday would be a "logistical nightmare", bad for the economy and "not conducive to a cohesive society".

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "The government has got this right. Rather than burdening citizens and the economy with additional public holidays to mark the many festivals of different religious sects, employees should be given as much flexibility as is practical to take annual leave on the days that matter most to them.

"If new public holidays are created they should be justified on a secular basis and promote a spirit of common citizenship rather than serve sectional interests. It is perfectly possible to have an awareness and appreciation of the religious diversity around us without organising our society around it."

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