

Review prayers in parliament, NSS urges new Commons speaker

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The National Secular Society has urged the new speaker of the House of Commons to support a review of the practice of opening sittings in the house with Christian prayers.

In a letter to Lindsay Hoyle, the NSS said ending parliamentary prayers would "represent a positive step forward for modernity, equality and freedom of conscience".

The society urged Hoyle to work with the Commons procedure committee to review the current arrangement. Sessions in both houses of parliament currently open with Christian prayers.

The NSS said parliamentary prayers were "unfit for a modern legislature and at odds with an egalitarian society which respects the important principle of freedom of religion or belief".

It added that at busy times prayers act as a de facto seat reservation system.

The NSS also highlighted a motion which it backed in January 2019, in which MPs from across the political spectrum [called](#) for an end to parliamentary prayers.

Explaining the decision to write the letter, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Opening parliamentary sessions with Christian prayers is an exclusionary and divisive practice.

"Ending it would provide a statement that anyone is welcome in parliament, regardless of their religious beliefs or background, and that parliamentary procedures respect freedom of conscience.

"We urge the new speaker to bring whatever influence he can to bear to ensure parliament is open and welcoming to people of all religious beliefs and none."

Motion on parliamentary prayers

The motion tabled on parliamentary prayers last year, [EDM 1967](#), said:

- religious worship should play no part in the formal business of the Commons;
- parliamentary meetings should be conducted "in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, irrespective of their personal beliefs";
- parliamentary prayers were "not compatible with a society which respects the principle of freedom of and from religion".

At the time the chair of the procedure committee, Charles Walker, told the NSS he was "content to discuss" the proposal with the committee "once we have disposed of currently pressing business".

The NSS [campaigns for](#) an end to government prayers at both a national and local level.

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Image: Official portrait of Lindsay Hoyle, © [Chris McAndrew](#) [CC BY 3.0]

Write to your MP: end parliamentary prayers

Sittings in both the House of Commons and the Lords begin with Christian prayers, led by Church of England bishops. Ask your MP to support the end of this practice.

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