

challenging religious privilege

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The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
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Dear Mr Javid

Ceremony of Remembrance

As Secretary of State at the department responsible for arranging the annual Ceremony of Remembrance at the Cenotaph, we would like to raise with you some concerns we have about the relevance and appropriateness of parts of the ceremony to large parts of the population. With this in mind we would like to share some ideas as to how the ceremony could become more inclusive.

The Department has commendably signalled its intention to ensure we celebrate and commemorate important dates “as a nation”, and we call on you to reconsider how this can best be achieved in respect of the national remembrance ceremony.

Our citizens will have many shared aspirations, values and experiences – and hopefully a shared sense of mutual commitments and obligations. One such obligation is remembrance, which is in many ways one of our most important duties as citizens. For this reason we consider it vital that the ceremony at the Cenotaph reflects the society it serves and feels as relevant and profound today as when it was first conceived.

The nation’s religious composition has changed significantly over the past century since the start of remembrance ceremonies. The religious make-up of the UK is diverse, complex and multicultural; we are paradoxically now both one of the most religiously diverse and least religious countries in the world. Large sectors of the population – around a half – do not hold or practise religious beliefs.

Despite this, the ceremony has changed little since it was first introduced in 1921. It is dominated by the Church of England and a significant proportion of the ceremony still resembles a religious service. Exclusively Christian rituals are prominent, and hymns are sung. A religious procession is led by a cross with a bishop invoking the 'Lord Jesus Christ' in a prayer.

As you will be aware, the Cenotaph itself was designed at the direction of the Cabinet by Edwin Lutyens as a national secular memorial bearing no religious symbols, in recognition of the religious diversity of the fallen.

The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, also insisted on a secular monument, in recognition of the many non-Christians who had fallen. He explicitly rejected an alternative proposal for a large cross at Admiralty Arch, and – also in tune with popular sentiment – rejected the Church’s proposal for the annual ceremony to be at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster. The Cabinet directed that this too be without religious symbolism, but this was countermanded.

The Cenotaph is therefore a state memorial, rather than a religious one, and the rationale of it being so is even more resonant today. We simply argue that the ceremony itself, for the same reasons, should also be secular – inclusive of all religions and beliefs – but privileging none.

Fewer citizens than ever are active believers in the Christianity espoused by the Church of England, and on a normal Sunday, only around 2% of the population attend an Anglican church.

There is therefore a real danger that by allowing the Church and its representatives to continue to dominate, and by refusing to admit a secular presence at the ceremony, the ceremony will be diminished or even ignored by modern Britons. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. This would be a high price to pay for the sake of tradition.

Many feel alienated by religious services, and even more by a Christian ones and dignified and moving remembrance ceremonies are equally possible without them. France's are led by civic and national dignitaries without any religious element.

We therefore call on you to acknowledge the inappropriateness of a religious ceremony and the Church of England playing such a prominent role, and urge you to bring forward proposals for a more secular and inclusive Ceremony of Remembrance.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss this further.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Keith Porteous Wood
Executive Director