



National Secular Lobby

Advancing Australia's Secular Agenda

National Secular Lobby
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Clerk of the Senate
Parliament House, Canberra

The **National Secular Lobby** (NSL)⁽¹⁾ is a secular, non-profit organisation, supported by pro-secular groups across Australia. The NSL — underpinned by Section 116 of the Constitution — aims to identify and promote social and political discussions and actions pertinent to the protection of separation of Church and State.

Preamble

When parliamentary prayers, consisting of the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer and a modified version of "A Prayer for the High Court of Parliament", were first introduced in 1901, 97% of the population of Australia identified as Christian. To this day, these prayers still call upon the Christian God to "...direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory...".

In the 2016 census, "No religion" was, for the first time ever, the most popular individual response given to the question of religious affiliation⁽²⁾. Australia today has a significantly more varied and less religious population that no longer relies exclusively on a Christian concept of morality for guidance. It is therefore no longer appropriate for our senators, many of whom are themselves atheist, agnostic or followers of non-Christian faiths, to be called to order with an entreaty to a Christian God.

A 2016 national Ipsos survey⁽³⁾ showed that 78% of Australians believe that it is important to "separate personal religious beliefs from the business of government". It is time now that our parliament properly represented the views of today's diverse Australia.

¹ The National Secular Lobby: <https://www.nationalsecularlobby.org/>

² ABS: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7E65A144540551D7CA258148000E2B85>

³ Ipsos survey: <https://www.nationalsecularlobby.org/ipsos-2016-secularism-survey-data/>

Amendment to Standing Order 50

On the issue of the modification of Senate standing order 50 to call for an “invitation to prayer or reflection” instead of a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, we consider the following points to be arguments for change:

1. **Using prayers as a means to call the Senate to order is inconsistent with the degree of atheism and agnosticism now found in the community that MPs are elected to represent.**

The 2016 Census showed that 30% of Australians have no religion, the largest single response group. It is no longer appropriate for government proceedings to be called to order in the name of a God that a significant proportion of the population do not believe exists.

2. **Having parliamentary prayers based on one religion only is inappropriate for the religious diversity now present in Australia as it favours one religion over all others. The current prayers refer to MPs as servants of a Christian God.**

The current prayer excludes and devalues those that do not identify with or belong to the Christian religion. Federal Parliament should not endorse or promote a particular religion. Sectarian prayers, in place since 1901 when the landscape of belief was very different, are inconsistent with the religious diversity of modern Australia. They are outdated, divisive, and indeed seen as discriminatory and offensive by many Australians.

3. **Current prayers may breach the Constitution's requirement of separation of church and state in regards to not "imposing any religious observance".**

The Constitution prohibits imposing religious observances, yet it can be argued that standing order 50 does just that. Currently, both the President and the Speaker are compelled to recite the existing prayers. It is highly possible in future that one of these positions will be held by someone of another faith, or of no faith at all, in which case forcing them to recite Christian prayers would constitute a violation of their “freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief” described in Article 18 of the ICCPR⁽⁴⁾, of which Australia is a signatory.

⁴ ICCPR Article 18: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/freedom-thought-conscience-and-religion-or-belief>

Conclusion

The National Secular Lobby wholeheartedly endorses the proposal to modify Senate standing order 50 to consist of a call to “prayer or reflection”. We believe the current practice of calling upon a Christian God to direct the work of the Senate is no longer appropriate given the religious diversity now found in Australian society, and now serves only to divide the community.

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