

Subject: Submission: Proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection
Phil Browne

Mr Richard Pye
Clerk of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Pye,

Please accept my submission into the Senate committee inquiry - **Proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection.**

I'm sure citizens and politicians will agree that it's vital that Parliament is seen as being impartial, and without favour or prejudice.

The reciting of a religious prayer during Parliamentary proceedings puts the perceived impartiality of Parliament at risk.

If we lived under a theocratic government - such as Iran, for example - then Yes, we should expect to see the Parliament promote the state religion. However, Australia is a secular democracy. We do not have a state religion, as confirmed by the Constitution. Australians are free to practice their privately held religious beliefs in their homes and in churches, but when our secular government is potentially seen to be promoting religion by reciting aloud a religious prayer, then this is a problem.

Plus, an increasing number of Australians hold no religious belief, choosing to record "No Religion" in the latest census.

Secular governments and Parliaments must remain neutral on matters of religion. There must be no prejudice, nor favouritism, shown toward any (of the many) religions. For the Parliament to take a stand on religion muddies the waters regarding separation of church and state. It raises questions of potential interference by religion into politics, government policy and even legislation.

In our progressive Australia, with a secular system of government:

- **Why is our secular Parliament showing this bias toward religion?**
- **Why is the Christian religion favoured over non Christian religions?** (this could be offensive to the growing number of Australians who adhere to non-Christian religions)
- **Why has the separation between state and church been blurred?**

The Australian Senate (and all state/territory and federal Parliaments) should cease the verbal recital of the Lord's Prayer during Parliamentary proceedings.

I fully support the proposed wording being used, instead of a religious prayer being recited:

"Senators, let us, in silence, pray or reflect upon our responsibilities to all people of Australia, and to future generations"

All Australians should be proud of either holding - or not holding - private religious

beliefs.

What is at question is whether privately held religious beliefs should be demonstrated publicly inside Parliament - whether privately held religious observances should be allowed to potentially bring into question the impartiality of Parliament?

I respect the right of individual members of Parliament to practice a religion - whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Bahia or Shinto. I support these MPs being given an opportunity to recite their respective prayers **in silence**.

I also bring to your attention the Parliamentary Petition tabled in Queensland Parliament in 2017, with petitioners requesting "***the House to remove religious prayers from all parliamentary business thereby confirming government impartiality in matters of religious belief.***"

The petition wording concisely states why Parliament should not appear to promote any religion, nor prayers be recited.

TO: The Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland

Queensland residents draws to the attention of the House that a prayer is recited during Parliament.

- *The Queensland Constitution does not state that Queensland is a Christian state.*
- *Our secular system of government requires separation of church and state.*
- *Prayers during Parliament are imposing the beliefs of one religion in an elected public forum. This compromises government impartiality.*
- *Taxpayers don't expect to pay elected representatives to say prayers during Parliament.*
- *A Christian prayer may be inappropriate to MPs, parliamentary staff and citizens of other faiths, or none.*
- *Census results show the decrease of Christianity and an increase of non-Christian religions in Australia. Why does Parliament publicly favour Christian over non-Christian religions?*
- *Census results show increasing numbers of Australians have no religion. Only 5% of Australians regularly attend church services and less than 30% of weddings are performed in churches.*
- *The Canadian Supreme Court in 2015 ruled unanimously that Saguenay Council reciting a prayer during official meetings is unlawful.*

The judgement said the state must "remain neutral" in matters of religious belief.

"This neutrality requires that the state neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief. It requires that the state abstain from taking any position and thus avoid adhering to a particular belief."

Your petitioners therefore request the House to remove religious prayers from all parliamentary business thereby confirming government impartiality in matters of religious belief.

Source: <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-assembly/petitions/petition-details?id=2680>

Sincerely
Phil Browne

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"I always wondered why somebody doesn't do something about that. Then I realised I was

somebody": Lily Tomlin