

Submission to Senate Enquiry on the proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection

1. This really is a no-brainer. It is surprising that the Senate has taken so long to deal with it. There is no justification for beginning a session of the Parliament of Australia with a religious observance that only relates to some of the country's population. Even a non-sectarian religious observance would be problematic since, according to the last census, about 30% of the population now have no religion. The proposal to begin sessions with a time of general "prayer and reflection" is long overdue.
2. The argument that a Christian prayer is appropriate because Australia is a predominantly Christian country is not valid. One of the great values of the democratic tradition is the respect for minorities and the provision of safeguards protecting minority groups from being discriminated against by majorities. We have a number of laws and institutions that implement this value. Indeed the Senate itself, with its States' rights perspective and proportional representation, is a bastion of the democratic value of acknowledging minority rights. It would be ironic, given this, if the Senate itself perpetuated the privileging of one religious tradition over others.
3. The argument that Standing Order 50 has been with us virtually since Federation and is thus a "time-honoured tradition" is not valid either. Even setting aside the consideration that "time-honoured traditions", such as misogyny, slavery and racism, have a bad habit of becoming dishonoured in the light of on-going moral and social progress, it is arguable that the standing order was never justifiable, since even though the Christian religion was much more dominant a century ago than it is now, there were still non-Christian Australian citizens whose beliefs were unacknowledged by the Standing Order. If it was wrong then, it is wrong now.
4. Although a Standing Order is not a Law, it does have quasi-legal status within the Chamber. Thus, while not specifically covered by Section 116 of the Australian Constitution, which prohibits **laws** "imposing any religious observance", Standing Order 50 would seem to be at the very least against the spirit of that Section.
5. I therefore support the proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection and suggest to any dissenting Senators that they review their position in the light of the above considerations and of their own commitment to the democratic value of inclusiveness.

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