

Parliament and Prayer

Ian Hunter

Not all Parliaments in Australia have said Parliamentary prayers since their establishment. But the practice gradually became established and is now the norm. As I will outline, this practice didn't meet universal approval when first instituted – and it is increasingly being brought into question in modern times.

Why all the fuss? Why should we bother to challenge this archaic practice that is just like so many other parts of the old fusty traditions of Parliament that are pretty much ignored by most people? Aren't there more important things to be getting on with?

One can easily dismiss the issue as one of little importance, but at the very least there are implications for the legitimacy of Parliament as a truly representative body for the community.

Society is changing – and has changed dramatically since the first Parliaments were established in Australia.

Do we really want our Parliaments to display a bias towards any one religion by saying a Christian prayer at the commencement of each sitting day?

Granted, one minute of each sitting day does not really seem like much. But like much of our parliamentary system, the actual action isn't what is of importance – it is about the symbolism.

So – are prayers in parliament relevant any longer in an institution that is the keystone of our modern diverse secular democracy? Do prayers in one particular Christian form undermine the secular basis of democracy?

First and foremost, Australia is a secular society. Our parliaments are secular parliaments. While some individual members are guided by their Christian faith, and may seek the spiritual support that praying offers them, Christianity (or any other faith, for that matter) has no place in the proceedings of any Australian parliament. To understand how parliamentary prayers have become part of daily procedures, then, we must look back at the history of Australian parliaments – and the Westminster system, on which our system is based.

Since European civilisation of Australia, our country has been run as a secular society. We have no state religion; and the founders of the country planned it that way. Section 116 of the Australian Constitution states

The Commonwealth shall not make law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

They who wrote our Constitution could not have been clearer – they saw a very definite separation of the church and state, and they supported a multi-sect society if not at that time a multi-faith one.

And whilst the census of 1901 – the year of our federation – may have shown that 96 per cent of Australians were Christian, the times have changed and society has moved on. The census in 1901 did not even count the Aboriginal people of Australia – unthinkable now.

As for the percentage of Australians who identify as Christian – that figure is continually declining, and religion plays a much less central role in Australian society than it has in the past. It is not even clear what the category ‘Christian’ means in regard to the

census – and of course, one has to treat census data with caution here – but it probably includes those with no real Christian commitment other than a vague personal notion of inherited belief.

The reality is – most Australians *do* identify as Christian. But identifying as Christian and actively following Christian practices (like praying) are two very different things. The 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes found that less than 15 per cent of Australians attend religious service once a week or more often. But 65 per cent of the population attend not more than once a year (almost 36 per cent say they ‘never’ attend religious service).

So, while many people may fill in ‘Anglican’ or ‘Catholic’ or one of the other Christian denominations on the census form, that cross on the statistics form doesn’t translate into religious adherence in their own lives. It is hard to imagine, then, that most Australians feel the need for their elected representatives to say a prayer before they get down to the business of running the country.

Parliaments are steeped in tradition, from the colours of the chamber to the way that we address each other to the attire donned by the staff.

And following from that traditionalism, prayers in parliament continue with very little real debate about their relevance to Australian society, and very little reflection of contemporary Australian views.

The first Australian parliament was opened on 9 May 1901 by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York, in the Exhibition Building, Melbourne. At the opening, Lord Hopetoun, the Governor-General, read a number of prayers, including the Lord’s Prayer and a prayer of petition similar to those still recited in

Australia's parliaments.

In this, the Australian Commonwealth parliament was mirroring the Westminster tradition. The tradition of daily prayer in the English parliament is thought to have begun in about 1558, becoming common practice by about 1567.

Until the 1580s, the prayers took no fixed form. It is generally believed that the present form of prayers recited in the Houses of Westminster date from the reign of Charles II (1660-85). It was also under Charles II that the Clarendon Code was developed, a series of laws designed to reinforce the prominence of the Church of England.

And so, as firmly based on Westminster as the Australian parliament was, it was almost inevitable that this aspect of the daily routine would be incorporated into the fledgling Australian parliamentary system.

As part of developing standing orders for the Houses, the issue of daily prayer was referred to each House's Standing Orders Committee for consideration. As standing orders are resolutions for the Houses, and not laws, the issue of prayers in parliament in no way contravened the aforementioned section 116 of the Australian Constitution.

In recent times, some debate has occurred –in Australia, but also a little in England – about the relevance of prayers in modern parliaments.

In early 2009, Conservative MP for South-West Bedfordshire Andrew Selous introduced a debate on Christianity in public life into the English parliament. Whilst the bulk of the speeches focussed on the importance and good works of Christianity in English society, John Mason, MP for Glasgow East, did speak to

the ongoing relevance of prayers in parliament. He said, 'Since arriving at Westminster, I have been interested in the vestiges of Christianity around the place. For example, there is Prayers at the start of each sitting. Is that a good thing? I have mixed feeling about it.'

He went on: 'Some attend only to book their seat for whatever business comes next, and I fear that the prayers themselves give a dry and dusty view of Christianity.'

Despite voicing such concerns, Mason went on to tell the House that on the opening of his new office, he decided 'on the spur of the moment to have a prayer.'

And so it seems destined that, for the foreseeable future at least, the tradition of Westminster's parliamentary prayers shall continue. In a debate such as the one that was held, to have only one person raise the quietest voice of dissent shows the level of acceptance for the practice in the Mother Parliament.

In Australia, a more serious and sustained debate about the relevance of prayers in parliament has surfaced in recent years.

The first salvo in this debate in recent times was fired by the then-Leader of the Australian Democrats, Senator Lyn Allison, who moved for the abolition of parliamentary prayers in 2006. The motion was defeated without debate, with the Australian Labor Party and Coalition opposing it.

The issue once again arose in 2008, when Harry Jenkins, the Speaker of the House of Assembly, called for public debate on the relevance of prayers in parliament (whilst maintaining his own neutrality on the issue). Mirroring Independent MP Roby Oakeshott's sentiments from Oakeshott's maiden speech, the Speaker questioned whether daily acknowledgement to the

traditional owners of the land might be more appropriate.

However, both major parties completely rejected the notion of removing parliamentary prayers from the daily routine, with the respective leaders' of the parties pointing to Australian heritage as the reason for doing so.

Debate of the issue followed, with church groups (naturally) coming out to support the continuation of the practice, whilst others vigorously opposed it. The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils' President Ikebal Patel voiced his support of the continuation of the practice, but expressed the opinion that the prayer should be non-denominational and should acknowledge the spiritual connection of Australia's Aboriginal people with the land.

The Australian press were, to a large degree, opposed to such a change in parliamentary practice, and used their pages to advocate the continuation of the status quo. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial stated, 'We think the prayers strike the right balance of recognition of higher purpose to the political struggles without forcing any particular version of belief down anyone's throat. Those of atheist or agnostic persuasion can stay silent, or at least give humanistic support to its message if they like.'¹

But plenty of other commentators came out in support of the abolition of prayers in parliament (or, at least, serious and constructive debate as compared to the off-handed dismissal that some offered).

Leslie Cannold, a columnist for the *Sun-Herald*, asked, 'If parliament began each day with an ode to the political supremacy of white men, would anyone cite "tradition" as a good reason to

¹ 'Deliver us from diversions,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 2008, 10.

preserve it?’²

In the *Sunday Canberra Times*, Graham Downie took issue with the tokenistic spirit of the prayer as it is received in parliamentary prayers, and noted – as I have, many times – that the prayer seems to have no bearing on the behaviour of parliamentarians, particularly during question time.³

The issue soon faded from the public consciousness, and prayers seem to be firmly entrenched in the Australian federal parliament for the time being.

Similar debates have occasionally arisen in most state parliaments around Australia.

The most substantial debate about the practice has existed in New South Wales. In 1996, Liberal MLC, the Hon Dr Brian Pezzutti, then in opposition, asked the Hon Michael Egan (Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council) whether the Australian Labor Party would consider removing the prayer from the start of the days’ business. Egan informed the Chamber that whilst he personally had some issue with the prayer, no consideration would be given to removing it.

In October 2001, Greens MLC Lee Rhiannon moved to remove parliamentary prayer from the daily routine of the NSW Upper House, replacing it with a time of quiet, personal reflection for members. The ALP, Liberals and Nationals all indicated that they would not support such a motion, and following debate, the Rhiannon motion was defeated, five votes to 31.

² Leslie Cannold, ‘Church and state should be separate,’ *Sun-Herald*, 2 November 2008, 9.

³ Graham Downie, ‘The use of prayers in parliament alienates and excludes,’ *Sunday Canberra Times*, 2 November 2008, 24

Prayers currently continue in both chambers of the New South Wales parliament.

Victorian parliamentary prayers have been subject to very little debate. In 1994, when debating a bill, Labor MLC Brian Mier commented that the reference to Christianity in the Chamber was outdated. It appears, though, that his comments did not prompt any further debate on the subject, and it does not appear to have been raised since.

As of the commencement of the 53rd Queensland parliament on 21 April 2009, there is no requirement for a daily parliamentary prayer in Queensland's Standing Orders. A prayer is read at the official opening of parliament by the governor, but not every day thereafter. This reverses a tradition of the Queensland parliament that had been in place since 1860.

In 2007, it was reported in the *Advertiser*, the South Australian weekday newspaper, that I had been reading during parliamentary prayers. I am an atheist, and it is my common practice to use the time given to prayers to catch up on some reading, or to prepare upcoming speeches or questions, but on this occasion – for some reason – it was deemed newsworthy and reported by Nick Henderson.

There followed a heated debate on the pages of South Australia's newspapers, with many writing very passionate letters (either in support of me, or expressing their dismay in me) that were published in, primarily, the *Advertiser*.

This was not the first time that prayers in parliament had been a matter of contention in recent history in South Australia. In the 1980s, the Honourable Anne Levy, in her role as President of the Legislative Council expressed concern that, as a non-believer, she

was required to read the prayer and wished to delegate the responsibility to the Clerk of the Legislative Council. However, such a move – which would have required a suspension of standing orders – was not passed by an absolute majority of the Council.

In May 2003, Liberal member for Unley David Pisoni was criticised by Labor member for West Torrens, Tom Koutsantonis, for refusing to remove his hands from his pockets during parliamentary prayers. Pisoni has regularly voiced his opposition to the ongoing practice of prayers in parliament, stating, ‘we are a multicultural society ... Government and Parliament should be separate from religion because Parliament should reflect society.’⁴

However, no real move has ever been made in South Australia to remove the practice of parliamentary prayers. But this does not mean that there has always been support for the practice: on the contrary, the introduction of prayers into the South Australian parliamentary sitting day took more than fifty years, and much vigorous debate.

The first bicameral parliament was held in South Australia in 1857: parliamentary prayers were introduced into the House of Assembly in 1918; and the Legislative Council in 1919. In the intervening years, members of the parliament debated the pros and cons of parliamentary prayer.

In 1886, Robert Caldwell (Member for the Yorke Peninsula) moved a motion calling for parliamentary prayers to be included in the standing orders. The motion, which was ultimately unsuccessful, was opposed for a number of reasons: Rowland Rees (Member for Onkaparinga) contested the notion, believing that to ‘introduce the

⁴ Hendrik Gout, ‘Archaic Parliament’, *Independent Weekly*, 31 October 2008

element of worship as suggested, and you will see history repeat itself by such worship becoming a mere matter of form and indifference, and finally being availed by the very few.’⁵

The issue arose once again in the aftermath of the First World War. In August 1918, Robert Nichols (Member for Stanley) moved a motion once again calling for the introduction of parliamentary prayers in the House of Assembly. Amongst those who opposed their introduction was John Gunn (Member for Adelaide), who reflected on the Federal parliament, where prayer ‘is read glibly by somebody. Nobody takes particular notice of it.’⁶ Member for Burra Burra Henry Buxton argued that the inclusion of parliamentary prayers would lead to hypocrisy by members who would pray and then be at each other’s throats shortly thereafter in the cut-and-thrust of parliamentary debate.

However, such opposition was overridden on this occasion, and parliamentary prayers were introduced in the House of Assembly on 5 November 1918.

The following day (6 November 1918), a motion was introduced into the Legislative Council calling for the proceedings of the Upper House to be opened with a daily prayer. Other members generally agreed, and parliamentary prayers were introduced into the Legislative Council on 10 July 1919.

Some attention has been given to the practice in the Tasmanian parliament, where parliamentary prayers became a daily occurrence from 1930. A proposal to change the prayer was made in 1989 by Green MHA, the Reverend Lance Armstrong. The motion, which Armstrong proposed because he felt that the

⁵ South Australian Parliamentary Debates, Rees, 28 July 1886, p. 535

⁶ *South Australian Parliamentary Debates*, Gunn, 28 August 1918, p. 122

behaviour of Members in the chamber was generally the antithesis of Christian behaviour, and thus devalued the sentiment, was never moved to debate.

In 2003, further attention was given to the use of parliamentary prayer in Tasmania, with suggestions that the Christian content should be removed and replaced with something more befitting the times (an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal connection with the land was the preferred option). There was much public outcry on the issue, and Premier Jim Bacon reaffirmed Tasmania's commitment to parliamentary prayer.

Prayers have been said to open both chambers of the West Australian parliament since their inception. To date, no debate has occurred about the ongoing relevance of the practice as far as I am aware.

Similarly, the Northern Territory parliament, which only has one chamber, begins each day with a prayer, copied directly from the House of Representative's practice. No effort has been made to remove parliamentary prayers in the Northern Territory.

In 1995, the Australian Capital Territory took the unusual move of voting to remove parliamentary prayers from their daily routine. Time is now given where members, in silence, can either pray or reflect on their duties as elected representatives of the people of ACT.

The debate about the relevance of parliamentary prayers is not about getting rid of religion by stealth – it is about reflecting the reality of contemporary Australian society. The reality is that those who identify as Christian in our society – while are still in a majority – is steadily declining, as is the participation rates with organised religion. I would assume that there are many people in

our community who identify as Christian, too, but who would be bemused by the idea of starting their professional day with a group prayer with their fellow workers.

Australian society has moved on since parliamentary prayers were introduced into the various chambers around our nation. It's time that the practices of our parliaments did, too.

We do not sit in parliament representing only our own personal beliefs – we are the elected representatives of the people. And as we sit in the various Houses of Parliament, we are representing a diverse community; a community made up of Christians, of course, but also of believers of other faiths and non-believers. And as with all duties we perform in our roles as parliamentarians, we do not represent only our personal views but also the views of the constituency that has granted us the right to sit here. So - why enshrine a practice in a parliament a practice that in fact divides the community, not unites it?

I would argue that – if a moment for reflection was deemed necessary – it might be more beneficial for members to take the opportunity to consider our own inner dialogue, whether we believe that to be motivated by some form of higher being or by our own reasoned morality – for a minute before we enter the chamber.

Or, in the alternative, perhaps the Speaker could offer some form of meditation on our role as legislators that is not couched in the archaic form of religious belief, but which instead reflects on our duties as representatives of the people.

But really, I think that we have enough time to give thought to our actions and our roles as parliamentarians in our day to day life - there is no need to waste parliament's valuable time on it.