

Subject: Parliamentary prayers [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

submission to the Senate inquiry into the appropriateness of a prayer time at the opening of a Senate Sitting day.

I am not a theologian and my submission is based on my experience as Speaker of the House of Representatives for two Parliamentary terms from 1998 to 2004. As an aside, this may mean that I have opened Parliament with prayer more frequently than any other Presiding Officer since 1983.

Significantly, at no time in my 6 years did I feel that the prayerful preamble spoken by me as provided by the Standing Orders, was in any way proselytizing. Nor did I have any sense of discomfort when those words were stated by my predecessors in the Chair over 21 years. Simply put, I found them comforting and reassuring.

The words of the designated prayers used in both the Senate and the House of Representatives are similar. It is apparent that our Constitutional Fathers showed great wisdom in selecting a text which would reflect the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of Australians. While the words rise out of a Christian tradition, there is only reference to God and they can be comfortably uttered by people of, for example, the Jewish faith or any mono-theistic belief. It is also reasonable to contend that the Lord's Prayer which follows the initial petition, originated in a Jewish, not Christian, society.

I respect those who hold other beliefs or no religious conviction at all. No one is compelled to attend the public prayer. My contention however is that a great deal of value is to be found in the quiet discipline of considering the responsibility that every Parliamentarian holds. Those reflective and well chosen words that are part of the traditional opening of Parliament, are a gentle reminder that, "no man is an

island". That we are accountable to others and not abandoned to make decisions in our own strength. This stated reordering of our individual priorities and this recognition of our obligations, in a public place, is imperative if we are to make wise decisions.

We are rightly proud to be (or to have been) Parliamentarians. Egotism is almost a prerequisite in our profession. Parliamentary prayer time provides us with an essential tool to ponder our place in the universe and comes with a script that deliberately helps us to be unselfish in that reflection.

I am grateful for this opportunity to make a written presentation to the Senate Committee. I wish them well in their deliberations and I hope they choose to continue a practice which has served our Chambers well.

Regards,

Neil.

(J. N .Andrew. AO.)