

**PROPOSAL TO REPLACE THE PARLIAMENTARY PRAYER
WITH AN INVITATION TO PRAYER OR REFLECTION**

3 August 2018

**SENATE COMMITTEE SECRETARIAT
CLERK OF THE SENATE, MR. RICHARD PYE
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600**

**SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF
REV. HON. FRED NILE M.L.C.**

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Introduction

This is a submission to the Commonwealth Senate Committee on Procedure (herein: Committee) in opposition to the proposed alteration or amendment to the custom of opening parliamentary proceedings with prayer.

In the interests of brevity and convenience, and in light of the fact that the Christian Democratic Party and I have on past occasions had the opportunity to debate this issue in the NSW Upper House, I enclose by way of our submission to this Commonwealth inquiry my contributions to those debates.

The enclosed debates are as relevant today as they were when this issue was discussed among my colleagues in 2001 and 2003. I encourage the Committee to consider these in its present and forthcoming deliberations.

Speech delivered to the NSW Legislative Council, 17 Oct. 2001

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE [4.00 p.m.]: The Christian Democratic Party opposes the motion moved by the Greens. As other speakers have said, there are conventions and procedures for this type of proposal. It should not have been the subject of an ambush. That applies not only to the issue of prayers but also to any other aspect of the standing and/or sessional orders. There are ways in which such matters are dealt with. A motion of this sort, which I would refer to as an ambush, is not the way. The motion should be rejected because of the process that has been adopted as well as for its content. The motion proposes an alternative to prayers in the following terms:

I ask all members to stand in silence and pray or reflect on your responsibilities to the people of New South Wales.

The implication is that somehow our prayers do not do that. Our prayer contains the following words, "advance the true welfare of the people of New South Wales". To my mind that is just another way of saying that our responsibility is to the people of New South Wales. We actually pray that we will advance the true welfare of the people of New South Wales. I would also suggest that the Lord's Prayer contains the same concept. We pray that, "Thy will be done on

earth as it is in Heaven." We know we cannot make heaven on earth because we live in an imperfect society, but I believe it is God's intention that, as far as is humanly possible, we should do all we can to try to develop a caring, compassionate society here on earth.

In introducing the motion, the honourable member said that we should include the word "we"—that is, inclusive of the whole community, which the elected members of this House represent. I contend that the words of the prayer we now offer and the Lord's Prayer are inclusive of the whole community. That is the point I make. Some individuals may not be included, but I believe the words we use are inclusive of almost 100 per cent of people in the community. It may not include the Greens or Senator Brown, who moved a similar motion in the Senate to abolish prayers in that Chamber. In relation to that motion, it is my understanding that there was only one affirmative vote, Senator Brown's, and that the motion was overwhelmingly rejected by all other members of the Senate. Honourable members should focus their minds on the prayer we offer each day. It is a very general prayer and it states simply:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of our State and Australia. Amen.

As a Christian I am happy to support that prayer, but it could be supported equally by a Jew or a Muslim. In fact, Muslims support it. It is an inclusive prayer, not exclusive. It is not even a Christian prayer but, as a Christian, obviously I support it. I think the Hon. Lee Rhiannon misunderstands the words of the prayer. It is possible that in her imagination she reads more into it than it actually says. With regard to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus Christ taught us what you might call a model prayer. We repeat it because we regard the words that he used as important. He said, "When you pray, pray like this". With the Lord's Prayer he was virtually giving us headings, if you like; showing us how we should pray in our personal prayers.

However, and rightly so, the community and churches of all denominations have come to accept the Lord's Prayer as a model prayer. I have been very impressed with Muslims with whom I have come in contact and the high regard in which they hold Jesus Christ. It is wrong for the honourable member to suggest that there is a move by the Muslim community to have the Lord's Prayer abolished. In their eyes Jesus Christ is merely a prophet, as was Mohammed. All through the *Koran*, of which I have a copy, the Prophet Mohammed insists on respect for Jesus Christ, and frequently refers to the importance of Jesus Christ. Section 80 of the *Koran* states:

And We gave to Moses the Book, and after him sent succeeding Messengers—

"Messenger" is another word for Prophet—

and We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear signs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit;

They believed that the people should listen to him and respect what he was saying. I have been studying the *Koran* because, obviously, what Muslims believe has become an important issue in society. The following words appear in section 40 of the *Koran*:

When the angels said, 'Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from Him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honoured shall he be in this world and the next, near stationed to God. He shall speak to men in the cradle, and of age, and righteous he shall be.'

The honourable member should not try to pretend that Muslims are campaigning against Jesus Christ and thereby suggest that if we want to make them feel inclusive we should downgrade what Jesus Christ said. I am surprised at just how many references there are to Jesus Christ in the *Koran*. Some may think that there is something unique about this House of Parliament: that

this Parliament and no other has prayers. Reference has been made to the Australian Capital Territory. People who want to change the law and other conventions focus on the Australian Capital Territory because it is easier to manipulate that Territory's Assembly than it is many of the long-established Parliaments of the States.

The prayers that we offer in the New South Wales Parliament are the same as those offered in South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia, Victoria and the Northern Territory. All State parliaments except Queensland have the Lord's Prayer. The reason Queensland Parliament does not have the Lord's Prayer is that it has gone further than any other State in that it offers a very detailed prayer at the opening of its proceedings. Because the prayer offered in the Queensland Parliament is so all embracing, it could be argued that the Lord's Prayer need not be offered; that some of its words are included in that prayer, which reads:

MOST GRACIOUS GOD: We humbly beseech thee, as for this State in general, so especially for the Parliament of Queensland under our most religious and gracious Queen at this time assembled: That Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper all our consultations, to the advancement of Thy Glory, the good of Thy church, the safety, honour, and welfare of our Sovereign and this portion of her Commonwealth; that all things may be so ordered and settled by our endeavours upon the best and surest foundations; that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety may be established among us for all generations. These and all other necessities, for us, and Thy whole Church, we humbly beg in the name and mediation of Jesus Christ, our Most Blessed Lord and Saviour. AMEN.

That is a very detailed and very Christian prayer, but it is different from the prayers we offer in this State. Its length is probably the reason that the Queensland Parliament does not offer the Lord's Prayer. Reference is often made in this House to the need for uniform legislation—that is, legislation consistent with that passed by the Federal Parliament. It has also been suggested that Federal legislation overrules that of the State. I am not suggesting that that notion should necessarily apply to the offering of prayers, but I make the point that it is relevant that the prayers offered in this Parliament each sitting day are the same as those offered each sitting day in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The first prayer offered by the Speaker of the House of Representatives is:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia.

The Speaker then goes on to say the Lord's Prayer. There was debate in the House of Representatives about members joining in the Lord's Prayer, as we do in this House. The Speaker, after considering the matter, saw no objection to members joining in the prayer if they wished and saying it aloud as we do. In fact, he encouraged them to do that. That was the end of that; there was no more debate in the Federal Parliament about the prayers and about members joining in the saying of prayers. This House is in the mainstream of Australian parliamentary practice. I see no reason why things should be changed. I believe that the present prayers are inclusive. People of all religions can support them. Atheists may have objections, but I do not believe that there are many atheists. I know that there are people who put on the census form "no religion". By that they mean that they do not attend church. But if you had the time to interview those people you would find—

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods: How do you know what they mean? They may mean a lot more than that.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: I am going by other surveys that have been taken.

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods: Many people put "no religion" because they have no religion and it is wrong of you to suggest that they mean that they do not go to church.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: It does not mean that they are all atheists. Other surveys have shown that over 80 per cent of people believe in God, and a great percentage of them believe in Jesus Christ. Those words in the census form are open to different interpretations. Some people are frightened that they may be harassed in some way if they reveal their religious background. That applies particularly to Jewish people, who certainly do believe in God and have no objection to the prayers that we offer in this House.

It is ironic that we are debating removing prayers when at no point in history has there been so much focus on prayer, particularly because of what happened on 11 September. There have been prayer vigils, prayer services and memorial services. Even in this House we all joined in the prayer of St Francis only a few weeks ago. My wife and I were privileged to attend a very moving memorial service in the Main Hall of our Federal Parliament in which there were prayers and readings from the *Bible*. Also present were religious leaders from all the Christian denominations as well as Jewish, Muslim and other representatives. The timing could not be worse for moving this motion. There has never been a more pressing need for prayer and divine support and unity within our society. The world is facing a crisis. I hope and even pray that before the debate is finished today, Ms Lee Rhiannon will say, "Yes, I think my timing is wrong and I will withdraw the motion." That would be a unifying factor in this House and in our State.

I could spend a lot of time going into the history of prayers and so on. I dealt with this in a speech in Parliament some time ago. The original prayers started in 1650 in the British House of Commons. Australia has inherited the House of Commons tradition, as have New Zealand, Canada and the United States. The United States went even further. I suppose it wanted to be different from Great Britain after the War of Independence. It decided not to have the same prayers but to go a step further. Full-time Christian ministers are appointed to the Senate and the House of Representatives. Just as ministers are called to a church to be the pastor, when the current chaplain resigns from the Senate or the House of Representatives the members meet to discuss possible replacements. Then an invitation is sent to the chosen person, who is usually a prominent clergyman in the United States—of any denomination, not a particular denomination. I think that there have been Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists and so on. That person is then invited to become the chaplain to the House Of Representatives or the Senate. The appointee has a chapel and an office. It is a full-time appointment within the Capitol building.

Every day before the Senate and the House of Representatives meet the ministers lead in an extempore prayer. They may read a prayer or make up their prayer for the day. I have been with them and discussed this with them and have seen them do it. It is a very moving moment when the prayers are said at the beginning of the sitting day in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The tradition of having prayers has been inherited from the start of the House of Commons. The original prayer is very similar to the Queensland State prayer. It is longer than the prayer we use but it has the same content. The prayer offered on that first occasion in 1650 was:

Almighty God, by whom alone Kings reign and Princes decree justice, and from whom alone cometh all counsel, wisdom and understanding; we Thine unworthy servants here gathered together in Thy name—

and this is where it is similar to our prayer—

do most humbly beseech Thee to send down Thy heavenly wisdom from above, to direct and guide us in all our consultations.

That is similar to the prayer we offer today in all the State and Federal Parliaments. The prayer of 1650 continues:

And grant that, we having Thy fear ever before our eyes and laying aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affections, the result of all our counsels may be—

our prayer picks up the words here—

to the glory of Thy name and the maintenance of True Religion and justice, the safety, honour and happiness of the Queen, the publick wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm are, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same, in true Christian Love and Charity one towards another.

Honourable members can see that the very words of the prayer that we have today are embodied in the original prayer from 1650. That gives the historical background to the prayers that we offer in this Parliament. Some people are very interested in history and may believe that even for that reason the present prayers should be retained. Obviously I feel that the prayers are more meaningful than that; they literally have some value. As we pray we are admitting that we are human beings and that we need wisdom beyond ourselves. That is what we ask for. We ask God to guide and to direct us in our deliberations, in our discussions, so that the final outcome will be for the true welfare of the people of New South Wales. I would even suggest that atheists would like to see those things achieved—that what we do in this place is really for the true welfare of the people of this State. Even the Australian Democrats might have sympathy with that concept. I do not think it is outrageous to have those words offered in a prayer every day. It might help us to have a spirit of humility that there are mysteries in life. There is more to life than any of us fully understands. By that simple prayer we are acknowledging that we need wisdom from above.

Members of this Parliament will interpret and apply it differently. But it means that we are reaching out and saying, "We do not know all the answers ourselves. Please help us in what we are seeking to do." The great majority of people would have that sentiment. I could spend a lot of time debating with the Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans his attack on the Christian Democratic Party and imputations he made that we changed the name in an attempt to get more votes. Our minutes and the records of our discussions show that it was never a consideration. In fact, our fear was that someone might have thought that we were the Australian Democrats. The last thing we wanted was to be associated with the Australian Democrats. The Christian Democratic Party is a well-known name that is used in many countries—Scandinavia, Germany, Italy and so on—to define a Christian party.

We are an independent party not affiliated with any other Christian Democratic Party in other parts of the world. Certainly there was never any thought of trying to take a vote from an Australian Democratic voter. However, we believe that our party should be clearly Christian. The Call to Australia party was calling people back to God, back to the *Bible* and back to family life, but it was not labelled specifically Christian. I wish to make that clear. In discussing many names, the words "Christian Democratic Party" fulfilled our needs. We oppose the motion, although I respect the enthusiasm and zeal of Ms Lee Rhiannon on many issues. However, on this issue she has picked the wrong time, and it would be best if her motion were withdrawn.

Speech delivered to the NSW Legislative Council, 16 Sep. 2003

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE [5.32 p.m.]: Obviously, I oppose the motion. On 17 October 2001, when a similar motion by the Greens was overwhelmingly defeated by 31 votes to 5 votes, I delivered a detailed speech. The membership of the House has not changed greatly since then, which is why some of us wonder whether this motion is a publicity stunt. The majority of members

of this House have not indicated a change of view. A minor point has been raised as to whether the Lord's Prayer is a Protestant or a Catholic prayer. As honourable members are well aware, we have two prayers: the President reads the first prayer, then we join in the Lord's Prayer. The most important sermon Jesus gave is in Matthew's gospel, chapter 6:

After this manner therefore pray:
Our Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen

The Hon. Peter Breen: The Catholics got it wrong, but they fixed it at Vatican II.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Jesus fixed it. He gave us the model. The Catholics do not need to feel embarrassed because they are only following the teachings of Christ in the gospels, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. The previous speaker and others have referred to our multicultural society. I acknowledge that some suburbs, such as Marrickville or Lakemba, may have a smaller percentage of Christians than others, but the percentage of Christians jumps from 67 or 70 per cent to 84 per cent in other communities such as Tamworth, Lismore and many of our other regional centres. That is why we consider the average figure. I am pleased to note that the overwhelming majority of people coming into our country from other countries are Christians. It is not as though a lot of people are coming to Australia to change Australia. They are coming to Australia because they believe it is a Christian nation. The Coptic Christians from Egypt come to Australia because they believe it is a Christian nation, they do not come to Australia to change it or to water down our Christian traditions.

The Hon. Henry Tsang: Also Koreans.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: The Hon. Henry Tsang mentioned Koreans. As honourable members know, 50,000 Koreans live in Sydney, the majority of whom are Christian. I have been invited to at least 12 Korean churches to speak. I have been impressed by the Christian faith and zeal of people from other cultures, not other religions. They have their Korean culture, their Egyptian culture and their Arabic culture, but we must remember that they follow the Christian faith. They would certainly uphold the House opening each day with a prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer. Last night, during the Governor-General's reception, a number of prominent Muslim representatives made their way towards me. We had some interesting discussions, particularly with the Chairman of the Islamic Council of New South Wales. I thought I would raise the subject of this motion with them. I told them that today we would debate abolishing the prayer. They were quite angry to think that prayers would be removed from this House. As other speakers have said, they would rather retain the prayers we have than have no prayers at all.

I told them that we pray two monotheistic prayers—prayers to Almighty God. They were very happy to have prayers in the New South Wales Legislative Council offered in that way. We should not blame the Muslims and suggest that they are a force working with the Greens to remove the prayer. There is no movement in that direction whatsoever from the Muslim community. As honourable members are aware, the opening prayer is based on the original prayer offered in the House of Commons from the 1650s. The Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans always confuses the separation of church and State. He ignores completely the fact that the United States Congress and Senate have full-time chaplains, and the buildings have incorporated in them a chaplain's office and a chapel. Engraved across the hall of the United States Senate are the words "In God

We Trust". I know that the United States Supreme Court is debating the separation of church and State, but there is absolutely no separation of faith and State in the United States.

The same applies in Australia: there is no separation of church and State. Christian schools, Muslim schools and other religious schools receive funding from both the State and the Federal governments. It is an artificial argument to suggest that a wall separates the two. They work in partnership and in co-operation. I remind honourable members that our Federal Parliament offers exactly the same prayers every day, as do other State parliaments throughout the country. With regard to the wording of the motion moved by Ms Lee Rhiannon, I would have no objection to the inclusion of a reference to a one-minute pause following the prayers. Perhaps we should not rush straight into the business of the House. If we insist on having a moment of prayer, let us then pause after the traditional prayers to allow atheists, agnostics and others—new-age people who want to meditate—to look at the roof or gaze around. If I were in the chair I would have no objection to allowing such a pause after the traditional prayers. The prayers are absolutely voluntary. No-one is forcing the Greens to join in the prayers.

As honourable members know, members of the Greens stay outside the door until the prayers are finished, then they come into the Chamber. They could come into the House and have their own thoughts while others are praying; it is not compulsory for them to pray. No-one walks up to them and says, "I don't think you were joining in that prayer." It is voluntary. The Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans referred to members having to "cop" the prayers, as though some imposition binds a person's conscience. I do not believe that his terminology is correct in the context of this debate. It is wrong for a Greens minority, which some people describe as a green, pagan, watermelon minority, to impose its will on a majority—a very intolerant trait. Very simply, opening prayers remind us that we have to answer to a power that is greater than ourselves. The members of this House are not the be-all and end-all. We have to answer to a greater power that is usually described as Almighty God, and we seek to be the servants and ministers of Almighty God as we serve the people of this State.

Concluding Comment

The two extracted transcripts above outline the general position of the Christian Democratic Party and myself in our opposition to any proposed removal of prayer from parliament.

I add and emphasis that parliamentary prayer is a reminder to those present that their work is governed by a higher moral law. It is also a reminder of the ethical and moral principles upon which this country was founded. All Australians, whatever their faith backgrounds, have benefited from living in a society governed by these principles, and it is legitimate and reasonable for those who shape our law and social policy to be reminded of this fact as they discharge their duties to their constituents.

I appeal to the Committee to take these and the above arguments into consideration, and reaffirm my opposition to the proposal to remove parliamentary prayer.

END