

Written evidence submitted by All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group

ABOUT THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY HUMANIST GROUP

The All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group is a cross-party group of Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords of all the main parties. The Group had its first beginnings in the 1960s; it currently has over 120 members. Humanists UK provides the secretariat. Its focus is wide-ranging and includes the promotion of a rational approach to bioethical, medical, and scientific issues; the defence of free speech, civil liberties, and education; constitutional issues and freedom of religion or belief; and other issues of relevance to humanists.

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

1. What topics do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum?

Parliamentary prayers

In the House of Commons each day starts with Anglican prayers. However most MPs and the public are not Anglican. Using oath and affirmation data from 2015, 17, 19, 22, and 24, and our own knowledge of MPs' beliefs, we estimate that 44% of MPs are Protestants – not all of whom will be Anglican – 7% are Catholics, 40% are non-religious, 4% are Muslim, 2% Sikh, 2% Jewish, and 1% Hindu. Further, the public are even less likely to be Anglican than members of Parliament. The 2019 British Social Attitudes Survey showed that the majority (53%) of the UK population have no religion, 37% are Christian, while only 12% identified themselves as specifically Anglican. This trend only looks set to continue as 68% of 18-24-year-olds say they belong to no religion and only 0.7% claim to be Anglican. Therefore starting every day with Anglican prayers is not reflective of MPs' own beliefs or the public at large.

Not only is the principle of giving one religion or belief preferential treatment in the chamber by having Anglican prayers discriminatory, the prayer card system means that MPs who do not want to attend Anglican prayers due to their own religion or belief are also put at a democratic disadvantage. This is because the current chamber only has 427 seats for 650 MPs. Therefore on busy parliamentary days, such as PMQs, MPs who have used a prayer card to reserve their seat for the rest of the day are guaranteed a seat while those, who may not have wanted to attend Anglican prayers due to their own religion or belief, are having to compete with other MPs and may not be able to get one. This crucially means that they are less likely to be picked by the chair in any debate. Therefore not only the MP but also their constituents are less likely to be heard due to the MP's own religion or belief. It cannot be the case in a modern parliament that an MP's own religion or belief allows them to be discriminated against.

We recommend that the Commons should revise its standing orders to see the practice of saying prayers before the start of business replaced by an inclusive ;time for reflection;. (We elaborate what we mean by that in response to question 3.) Daily Anglican prayers could be

regularly scheduled at another location in Parliament for those MPs who wish to attend them.

If prayers are not changed in the way we suggest, the House of Commons should nevertheless revise its standing order as soon as possible to remove the practice of prayer cards reserving seats for the day. For example, it could be made possible for members to reserve seats where they conscientiously object to attending prayers. This would ensure that an MP's own religion or belief does not put them or their constituents at a democratic disadvantage.

This clearly links to two of the strategic aims of the committee. First, it would improve the culture and working practices of Parliament as the current system is discriminatory against those who are not Anglican. MPs of all religions and beliefs would feel equally welcome. Replacing it with an inclusive time for reflection would send an important message to MPs that Parliament is open and inclusive to all regardless of religion or belief. It is time that Parliament modernises in this area and realises that the UK is a multicultural and multi-faith and belief democracy. Meanwhile it would ensure the value of having a reflective time before a parliamentary day is not monopolised by one religion.

Second, it would also make the procedures of the House of Commons more effective due to the system of prayer cards being used to reserve seats being scrapped. Although this problem is in part down to the lack of seats within Parliament, the prayer card system significantly exacerbates the negative effects this has. Replacing this system, if Parliament were to keep a system of reserving seats, with one that is not preferential to a particular MP based on their religion or belief would make the procedures of the Commons more effective. It would also ensure that all members receive spiritual nourishment instead of just Anglicans.

Chaplaincy and non-religious pastoral care

Non-religious pastoral care is a non-religious alternative to chaplaincy. Just as religious people, in times of crisis, may want to speak to a chaplain who shares their faith, so do non-religious people often want to speak to someone of like mind. To this end, the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network (NRPSN) was founded in 2016 to provide high-quality pastoral, spiritual, and specific non-religious care in the NHS, HMPPS, and the Armed Forces, and elsewhere. It has trained and accredited a network of over 300 pastoral carers who are operating both in a voluntary capacity across these three services, and in paid positions. There are pastoral carers operating or awaiting clearance in 20% of prisons across England and Wales and 40% of NHS trusts. There are around 15 paid posts in NHS trusts, including two people who head their chaplaincy and pastoral care teams. Similarly two prisons and one University employ humanists to head their chaplaincy and pastoral care teams. As we shall return to, the Senedd has a paid humanist pastoral carer. The Ministry of Defence has recently decided to introduce paid posts and is recruiting now.

Turning to the House of Commons, the Speaker by custom appoints a Church of England chaplain. The chaplain is considered in principle to minister to all MPs equally regardless of religion or belief. However in practice, as we have seen in other institutions, chaplains of

one religion or belief are not able to provide pastoral care equally to all. This is not to denigrate the work of religious chaplains but rather to point out that most people often want pastoral care from those who reflect their own religion or belief. 2016 polling of British adults found that only 4% of non-religious people have used a religious chaplain, while 45% have said they would specifically choose a non-religious pastoral carer should one be available. Christians are three and a half times more likely to have used a chaplain as the non-religious. This disproves the idea that one can provide a 'generic' chaplaincy where one ministers to all, regardless of religion or belief. Meanwhile the public as a whole are supportive of introducing non-religious pastoral care: 69% think non-religious pastoral carers should be made available in the relevant institutions and only 12% oppose this. This support is found among those of all religions and beliefs.

In 2010 it was reported that the Speaker supported there instead being a multi-faith team of chaplains rather than just the present arrangement, but for unknown reasons that never happened. It is imperative the Modernisation Committee takes the necessary action itself to ensure its progression. It should look into creating a pastoral care system for Parliament where chaplains and pastoral carers from a other religions and beliefs are appointed to ensure the needs of MPs and parliamentary staff are adequately met.

This would meet the strategic aim of improving the culture and working practices of Parliament. The current system of pastoral care means that a large number of MPs and parliamentary staff are not given equal and fair provision of pastoral care. As demonstrated above no one chaplain can minister to all regardless of their religion or belief. Replacing the current arrangement with pastoral carers from different religions and beliefs, including a non-religious pastoral carer, would ensure that the wellbeing needs of non-Anglican MPs and staff are much more adequately met. This will clearly improve the culture and working practice of Parliament.

It would also make the procedures of the House of Commons more effective by improving the wellbeing of MPs and staff and so help prevent them from having health-related issues.

2. Why would the topics benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?

Parliamentary prayers

The topic of parliamentary prayers would benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee for two reasons. Firstly it sits clearly within the Modernisation Committee's remit. As a Commons procedure that occurs at the start of every single day it is imperative that it is reformed correctly in a considered way by the Committee. However, it has not been given the due attention and time up until this point. However, a wider package of reforms, which presumably the Modernisation Committee will undertake, would allow it to be given the time and attention it deserves.

Given the very large number of non-Anglican MPs, this would have a widespread positive impact.

Chaplaincy and non-religious pastoral care

Similarly to parliamentary prayers the provision of non-religious pastoral care for MPs and parliamentary staff sits clearly within the remit of the Modernisation Committee. It also links very closely to the strategic aim to improve the culture and working practices of Parliament. MPs especially, come under immense stress and pressure and therefore it is crucial that adequate pastoral provision is made for all. As mentioned with parliamentary prayers, although this has been brought to the attention of the Speaker of the House, on its own it has not been given the amount of time and spotlight needed to enact change. Therefore as part of a suite of wider reforms the Modernisation Committee would seem to be ideally placed to introduce the necessary changes to ensure that pastoral care is available to all MPs and staff regardless of religion or belief.

Again given the very large number of non-Anglican MPs, this would have a widespread positive impact.

3. Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topics which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?

Parliamentary prayers

The Westminster Parliament is the only national legislature in the UK to have prayers in this manner. The Scottish Parliament holds a weekly 'time for reflection'. Individuals representing a wide range of religious, non-religious, and civic backgrounds share their thoughts in a reflective moment at the start of the day. This is the model we most support. However it is worth noting that these have been disproportionately Christian – 82 of the 125 times for reflection in the current parliamentary sessions were Christian, while just 3 were humanist – so it is important that any similar practice introduced into Parliament reflects local demographics and diversity rather than being unfairly dominated by one religion or belief. This would be a significantly more inclusive arrangement than the current one.

The Northern Ireland Assembly starts each day with two minutes of silent reflection. This is known as 'prayers', but name aside is fully inclusive. The Senedd and London Assembly have no equivalent procedure.

Chaplaincy and non-religious pastoral care

The Senedd has launched a chaplaincy and pastoral care team supporting staff and members of the Senedd. This is a multi-faith and belief team consisting of a Christian and a Muslim chaplain as well as a humanist pastoral carer, Mari Vaughan-Owen. The team provides support for all staff of a range of different religions and beliefs and complements the existing counselling services. The team was officially launched in October 2023. The Modernisation Committee could consider using this as a model on which to base its pastoral care services.

There is no equivalent chaplain or pastoral carer in the Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, or London Assembly.

4. Is there any existing work relevant to the topics which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?

Time for Reflection: A report of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group on Religion in Parliament is a report from the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group published in 2020. The report covers a range of issues regarding religion and belief in Parliament and specifically covers the two issues mentioned above. It also has recommendations on how to amend parliamentary practice.

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