

Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS)

www.humanist.org.au

Email: president@humanist.org.au

Submission to:

Senate Standing Committee on Procedure

Inquiry into Proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection

Submission by CAHS on (03/08/18)

Summary

The Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS) supports the proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer with an invitation to prayer or reflection. The existing situation, with only the option of a prayer, is unrepresentative of Australian society and inappropriately privileges the Christian religion.

Humanism

What is Humanism?

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. Humanism is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.” (the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) minimum statement on Humanism <https://iheu.org/humanism/what-is-humanism/>)

Humanism is an approach to life which supports the maximum possible fulfilment of all people through the cultivation of ethical and creative living, and supporting the freedom dignity and human rights of all. Humanism is a way of life.

Australia has several state based Humanist societies and an umbrella body; the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS). Humanists have played an active role in Australian society for many years.

Current prayer not representative:

The practice of Parliamentary prayers provides unnecessary privileges for religious expression and promulgation of beliefs in our society. The 2016 Australian Census reported that Australia is a religiously diverse nation, including 30% who stated they had no religious beliefs. In this context the current prayer is unrepresentative of the diversity of beliefs of the Australian community that MPs are elected to represent.

It is clearly not representative of the wider Australian community for government proceedings to be called to order in the name of a God that a very significant proportion of the population do not believe exists.

Current approach privileges one religious viewpoint:

By excluding other viewpoints the current approach in effect privileges the Christian religion. It sends the message that the thoughts that count are those endorsed by religion. The in conscience beliefs of all people should be respected and acknowledged, not just those of the religious.

Separation of Church and State:

We believe that the separation of Church and State is a crucial value. The current prayers refer to MPs as "servants of a Christian God". Parliament should not endorse or promote a particular religion. Indeed the current prayers may breach the Australian Constitution's requirements in regards to not "imposing any religious observance" (S. 116).

Conclusion – supporting the proposal:

It is clear that the current prayer is inappropriate for the reasons discussed above. It is unrepresentative and privileging of a particular point of view. Accordingly we strongly support the new proposal.

Lyndon Storey
President, Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS)
Web: www.humanist.org.au
Email: president@humanist.org.au