

# Atheist Ireland



## Request to all TDs to vote against starting each day's business with a public prayer

Tuesday 11 April 2017

Dear TD,

### **Six reasons to oppose the proposed change to the daily Dail prayer**

At 2.30 pm today (Tuesday 11 April) the Dail will vote to reinforce Christian privilege by amending the prayer at the start of each day. Atheist Ireland opposed this when it happened in the Seanad in 2012, and we continue to oppose it today.

The proposal to add a moment of reflection before the Christian prayer may seem to be a step forward, but actually it makes the situation worse. Here are six reasons:

1. It retains the particularly inappropriate wording of the current prayer, which asks 'Christ Our Lord' to direct every action, word and work of our elected parliamentarians.
2. It gives Christians the privilege of having their prayer said aloud and publicly, while everyone else must either pray or reflect silently and secretly.
3. It introduces a new requirement forcing TDs to stand, during a ritual that may be contrary to their right to freedom of conscience, religion and belief.
4. It infringes on the human rights of those who have to either participate or else reveal their religious or nonreligious beliefs, as ruled on by the ECHR.
5. Unelected staff members, who have to be in the chamber, must sit through these daily prayers, which may be contrary to their personal belief.
6. It undermines the ongoing task of having the prayer removed, to reflect a truly Republican Parliament that respects equally the rights to belief of all citizens.

### **What is wrong with the Dail prayer?**

The Dail starts its daily business with the prayer: "Direct, we beseech Thee, O Lord, our actions by Thy holy inspirations and carry them on by Thy gracious assistance; that every word and work of ours may always begin from Thee, and by Thee be happily ended; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

It is inappropriate that our parliamentarians should publicly ask a god, particularly a specific variation of a specific god, to direct their actions and every word and work of theirs. It suggests either (a) that they are being directed in their work by messages that they believe come from a supernatural being, or (b) that they are taking part in the prayer without believing it to be true.

That said, the very practice of public prayers in parliament is more of a problem than the content of the prayers. A democratic parliament should not institutionalise the public expression of the personal religious or nonreligious beliefs of any of its members, whether religious or atheistic.

These daily prayers also infringe upon the human right to freedom of conscience, in two ways. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that parliamentarians must not be forced to take a religious oath, and it follows that neither should they be forced to participate in a religious prayer. Also, if they choose to opt out of participating in the prayer, they are then being forced to indirectly reveal information about their religious or nonreligious beliefs. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that this contravenes the human right to freedom of conscience.

### **History of the daily prayer**

In the early days of the Irish State, the Speaker of the Dáil and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad recognised that such a public prayer was inappropriate in a democratic parliament. In 1923, the Earl of Wicklow first suggested to the Seanad that “some sort of reference should be made at the opening of our proceedings to the God whom we all worship.” The Seanad Cathaoirleach replied that it was “a delicate and difficult subject” and “perhaps the simplest and most dignified solution would be, if the Dáil and the Seanad were to arrange that at the beginning of business, all members standing up, there should be a moment's silence, and then each member could make what prayer he thought fit, according to his own belief. Otherwise, it might be difficult, and, as I say, delicate, to frame any sort of procedure that would receive universal acceptance.”

Sadly, this early respect for democratic equality and freedom of conscience was not to last long. In 1923 the Seanad adopted a daily prayer agreed with the Protestant and Roman Catholic Archbishops of Dublin. Then in 1932 the Dáil adopted the following daily prayer: “Direct, we beseech Thee, O Lord, our actions by Thy holy inspirations and carry them on by Thy gracious assistance; that every prayer and work of ours may always begin from Thee, and by Thee be happily ended; through Christ Our Lord. Amen.” At some stage, the current wording came about when the phrase “every prayer and work of ours” was changed to the broader concept of “every word and work of ours” beginning and ending with the Christian god.

In 1999 Deputy Prionsias de Rossa noted that the prayer does not acknowledge that other members of this society belong to different religions. In 2007 Senator David Norris said, as a believing Christian, that he feels offended when he hears the prayer everyday, as it is absurd of the House to invoke the name of Jesus Christ and state: “every word and work of ours may always begin from thee and by thee be happily ended through Christ”. In 2012, the Seanad voted to amend its prayer in a similar way to the current proposal. Atheist Ireland strongly opposed this change, highlighting the same concerns we have raised here. We also warned that this change in the Seanad would inevitably result in someone proposing a similar change in the Dail, and this is now happening. We are, however, five years further down the road of understanding how freedom of belief should work in a modern pluralist democratic Republic.

### **Summary**

Atheist Ireland is asking all TDs to vote that the Oireachtas cease the practice of starting each day's business with a public prayer of any sort. It is inappropriate in a modern pluralist Republic, and it infringes upon the human right to freedom of conscience by forcing people to reveal, directly or indirectly, information about their religious or nonreligious philosophical beliefs.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Nugent  
Chairperson  
Atheist Ireland