

Parliament of Victoria

Prayer in parliamentary proceedings

Angus Tonkin

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Research Note

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Executive Summary

Prayer was first read to introduce proceedings of the Victorian Legislative Council in 1857, while the Legislative Assembly took up the procedure in 1928. Since then, the Lord's Prayer has been a mainstay of each house. As Victorian society has become more multicultural and Victorians' religious affiliations have broadened beyond Christianity, recent decades have seen more people question the practice. There has been recurrent debate in the Legislative Council in particular, but the 60th Parliament has seen the issue gain traction in the Legislative Assembly as well.

This Research Note examines the origins of prayer in the Victorian Parliament, revisiting the debates that led to the Lord's Prayer's establishment in daily proceedings. It then looks at the current context of debate, given the changing state of Victoria's religious diversity and the rise of people who identify as having no religion, and considers the practice of prayer in parliaments around Australia and the world. The paper then summarises some of the key debates that have shaped the conversation about prayer in parliament in recent years.

Introduction

Prayer is a common staple of parliaments in Australia. The tradition of opening proceedings with some form of prayer has survived for decades across many iterations of standing orders and proposed changes. In Victoria, the Lord's Prayer has started proceedings in the Legislative Council since 1857—six years after the House's establishment—and in the Legislative Assembly since 1928. However, the consistency of the tradition has not always necessarily been reflective of unanimous support.

Prayer was contentious at the time it was introduced in the Council, due to sectarian differences and other concerns, and it remains a point of contention today, with the percentage of society following Christian faiths steadily waning over recent decades. This coincides with a growing number of people who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation and with the rise of other non-Christian faiths within the population of Victoria.

Even in a multifaith society, prayer before parliamentary debate is a common practice not just in Australia but in legislatures around the world. The United Kingdom, United States, Canadian and New Zealand parliaments all have prayers read at the beginning of proceedings in their jurisdictions, albeit through different approaches. Some Westminster-style systems, such as South Africa and Scotland, have moved away from prayer. Australia has been described as 'somewhere between tradition and innovation, and public debate on the subject continues to support the status quo'.¹ This paper compares practice across some of these jurisdictions as well as those within Australia.

Recent debates in Victoria have been prompted by motions looking to either abandon the practice of prayer, or else replace it with something like a moment of reflection—as has been implemented in the Australian Capital Territory—in a bid to be more inclusive. Interest in the prayer has recently risen again due to, among other developments, the government's commitment prior to the 2022 election to review the procedure and recent comments by Pope Francis against surrogacy. For those seeking a change from Christian prayer, there is the weight of tradition to overcome, with heritage and inclusion some of the most common themes for discussion.

This paper looks into the historical context for the adoption of the Lord's Prayer in the Victorian Parliament. It then explores current practices and provides a snapshot of religious affiliation in the Victorian community. Beyond that, the paper summarises some of the key recent debates around the practice of prayer from Victoria and other jurisdictions.

¹ M. Lanouette (2009) 'Prayer in the Legislature: Tradition Meets Secularization', *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Ottawa, Winter, p. 3.

1 | Adoption of prayer

The adoption of the Lord's Prayer in the Victorian Parliament in 1857 (Council) and 1928 (Assembly) reflected what was at the time an overwhelmingly Christian population (among those who were counted). This tradition in Victoria has the United Kingdom's Westminster parliamentary procedure as its antecedent.

In the United Kingdom, a prayer has been read at the start of a sitting day in both houses of the UK Parliament since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The House of Lords procedure began in 1558 and become common practice by 1567,² and the prayer is still read by a Church of England Bishop to this day.³ The present form of prayer in the House of Commons may date from around 1660 and is read by the Speaker's Chaplain, usually the incumbent chaplain of St Margaret's Westminster (the House of Commons church).⁴

The reading of prayer to open parliamentary proceedings thus became a consideration for lawmaking bodies of British colonies.⁵ While the Church of England constitutes the official religion for the Westminster Parliament, Anglicanism lost its privileged status reasonably quickly when the Australian colonies were established. In 1836, New South Wales (which at the time included the area of what would become Victoria) passed the *Church Act*, which saw the Church of England lose its legal privileges and placed Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and (later) Methodist churches on an equal footing.⁶

When the Victorian colony separated and established a Legislative Council in 1851, denominational disagreement initially posed difficulty for wording a prayer that would not offend anyone. Parliamentarians disagreed over whether prayer ought to be said in private or in public, whether they could be in the right mind to pray having come from their day jobs, and whether the prayer would be uplifting for Members' conduct or hypocritical in the context of the parliamentary behaviour to follow. These tensions would be renewed when the Legislative Assembly was established in 1856 and a unicameral parliament matured into a bicameral one.

In order to introduce the prayer, a majority of each house had to agree to a prayer being read.

Legislative Council

1851: First proceedings of the Victorian Legislative Council

Among the first topics to be debated in the new Legislative Council in 1851 was whether the Council should open daily proceedings with a prayer. A debate was initiated on 14 November when nominee Member Alexander Dunlop⁷ moved a two-pronged motion:

that the proceedings of the House be opened by prayer; and that a Committee be formed to draw up a form of prayer to be delivered by the Speaker.⁸

The House agreed to split the motion into two questions. Debate ensued on the first question, regarding whether the House would agree to a prayer. Dunlop was reported in the *Argus* (which reported on the parliamentary debates until Hansard was introduced in 1856) as saying:

... no Christian man would deny the obligation that laid on them of seeking the Divine guidance in all their actions, by prayer; more especially was it necessary at times when they

² Lanouette (2009) op. cit., p. 2; J. Ainsworth (2017) *Customs and Traditions of the House of Lords*, House of Lords Library Briefing, House of Lords Library, August, p. 18.

³ Ainsworth (2017) op. cit., p. 18.

⁴ M. Sandford (2013) *Traditions and customs of the House: House of Commons Background Paper*, House of Lords Library, p. 7.

⁵ L. Beck (2023) 'Local government prayers in Australia', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 36(1), p. 32.

⁶ National Museum Australia (2023) 'Bourke Church Act', NMA website, 4 May.

⁷ The Council was initially made up of a mixture of elected Members and nominated Members.

⁸ (1851) 'Legislative Council: Friday, November 14', *The Argus*, Trove, 15 November, p. 2.

were about to enter upon the consideration of matters of such vast importance as some of those that would be brought before them [Members of Parliament] ... There might, no doubt, be a difference of opinion as to whether prayers should be read by a clergyman of the Established Church, and also when the question was one likely to interfere with the religious prejudices or opinions of hon. members. He thought, however, that there would be no difficulty in the matter, but that a form of prayer might be drawn up, that would not hurt the conscience of any ...⁹

The motion was seconded by William Rutledge (Villiers and Heytesbury),¹⁰ who stated he thought it 'nothing more than a duty to which they ought all to conform' and 'nothing more than proper in a Christian community'.¹¹

John Fawkner (Talbot, Dalhousie and Angelsey) disagreed on several points, pointing out that few other people going about their professions are required to start their work with prayer. He added that a prayer was not read in the New South Wales Parliament (yet); that some may have qualms with attending prayers delivered by a member of a different church; that reciting prayers in private was 'more acceptable and more Christian'; and that he had fears of prayer being 'made a mere form'.¹²

John O'Shanassy (City of Melbourne) claimed that the religious public was divided into the Church of England, Dissenters and Roman Catholics, saying that implementing a prayer might unnecessarily 'disturb the harmony that ought to exist' in the chamber.¹³ James Johnston replied that he was none of these, but also questioned whether the House was a suitable place for prayer, given each church had existing places of worship. He echoed Fawkner's view on private prayer being preferable (citing 'the Pharisees who prayed in public') and expressed his 'regret at the want of unanimity'.¹⁴ Johnston also said that if the motion were agreed to and enough Members saw fit to remain outside for the prayer's duration, a quorum may not be present in order to begin proceedings.

Nominee William Haines said the solution lay in finding a prayer to which no-one could take offence, but conceded that people often took offence where none was intended.¹⁵ As if to prove Haines's point, William Westgarth (City of Melbourne) derided as impossible the idea of such a prayer, emphasising that places for prayer already existed and that 'the bulk of the people considered that religion ... should be confined to proper times and proper places'.¹⁶

The Attorney-General, William Stawell, countered that religious diversity was not an issue; the colony was founded in religious equality, he said, and he would just as soon see a Roman Catholic read an agreed-upon prayer than have none at all.¹⁷ He pointed to the influence of Benjamin Franklin on introducing the practice to the United States despite a 'greater variety of religious persuasions than any other part of the world'.¹⁸ At this point, Dr Francis Murphy (Murray) dismissed the subject as not worth the effort, saying that religion had always been a source of disagreement. He concluded that prolonging the discussion was unnecessary, 'as the clock reminded him that it was that time in the afternoon when hon. members were perhaps looking forward with anxiety to dinner'.¹⁹

The motion was negatived with 14 voting for an introductory prayer and 13 voting no (divisions required a majority of two or more in order for a motion to be agreed to).²⁰ Reporting on the decision, the *Argus* took a dim view of the disagreement among the new Members:

It says little indeed for the enlightenment and liberality of the age, that thirty gentlemen cannot once a day approach their common Creator, in a prayer in which they all could join; or

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Electorates will be indicated in brackets after the Member's name.

¹¹ (1851) *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2.

to which, at least, they all could listen without offence. But so it is. A deliberate decision has been arrived at, and the first Council of Victoria has decided that in its collective capacity it shall remain essentially Godless.²¹

1856–57: A new Legislative Council and agreement to prayer

In late 1856 and in the setting of a new Legislative Council—now the upper house of a bicameral parliament established under the Victorian Constitution, passed by the previous Council—another close-run vote decided a motion to establish a prayer in proceedings.²² On 28 November John Barter Bennett (South Province) moved:

That the proceedings of this Council be opened by prayer, and that a select committee be appointed for the purpose of preparing the form of prayer to be used in the Council on it's [sic] opening each day ...²³

Bennett said he did not foresee any difficulties for reaching consensus:

... among a body of men who all of them acknowledged the Divine authority, and even if Pagans were admitted into the House, he did not see the necessity of deferring on such an important matter to one or two proffering such opinions.²⁴

Nehemiah Guthridge (Central Province), in seconding the motion, said that ‘any religion was better than none at all’ and that he ‘would join in prayer with any man who believed in man’s immortality and the supremacy of the Divine Being’.²⁵ These voices were supported by Donald Kennedy (South Province), who tabled petitions on 26 and 27 November from constituents requesting a daily prayer in the Parliament.²⁶ Several more petitions arrived subsequently, Kennedy tabling two more on 4 December, together with William Roope (South-Western Province) tabling three, and Nehemiah Guthridge (Central Province) and John Hodgson (Central Province) one apiece.²⁷ Petitioners included constituents from Presbyterian and Wesleyan denominations, among others.

In opposition, Thomas Power (South Province) said that there was ‘mischief in the motion’ and that he ‘hoped the House would dismiss the question of interfering between a man’s conscience and his God’.²⁸ Matthew Hervey (Eastern Province) backed Power in expressing concern that the prayer, in being a compromise between various denominations, would ‘be mere lip-service, for hon. members could not so conveniently arrive at a fit frame of mind for prayer, on suddenly leaving their counting houses and places of business’.²⁹

Nonetheless, as the motion was put to the House, the numbers were tied, leaving the President to cast the deciding vote. He ultimately agreed to support the motion, sending the reference to what became the Prayer Committee, which comprised 15 Members.

The committee’s initial report proposed a form of prayer, but the report was rejected by the House in what the *Argus* reported as ‘showing a marked disrespect to the committee’, meaning the form decided on did not even reach the chamber.³⁰ Another committee was established to make an attempt. As chair, John Fawkner, now representing Central Province, said he would do his best to find a resolution lest he be ‘obliged to move for the reference to

²¹ (1851) ‘No prayers’, *The Argus*, 18 November.

²² Parliament of Victoria (unknown) ‘The Legislative Council: 1851–1856’, Parliament of Victoria website.

²³ J. B. Bennett (1856) ‘Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 28 November, p. 60.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁵ N. Guthridge (1856) ‘Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 28 November, p. 61.

²⁶ (1856) ‘Petition: Opening the Council with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 November, p. 18; (1856) ‘Petition: Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 27 November, p. 28.

²⁷ (1856) ‘Petitions: Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 December, p. 58.

²⁸ T. Power (1856) ‘Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 28 November, p. 61.

²⁹ M. Hervey (1856) ‘Opening the proceedings with prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 28 November, p. 62.

³⁰ (1851) ‘Friday, 12th December, 1856’, *The Argus*, 12 December, p. 4.

the committee of different forms of prayer ad infinitum'.³¹ From this second committee a form was agreed upon and put to the House.

While the committees' reports are not available, Hansard debates suggest that the form decided upon by the second committee and debated in the House involved both a version of the Lord's Prayer and an additional preamble. Thomas McCombie (South Province) moved that 'all the words before the Lord's Prayer be struck out' in order to make it 'as little objectionable as possible'.³² Dennis Keogh (North-Western Province) supported the amendment, saying that 'no Jew could join in the latter clause of the prayer'.³³

James Strachan (South-Western Province) maintained his general opposition to the prayer as a whole, noting that the form was 'objectionable' to him as a Presbyterian and questioned the genuine demand for prayers among politicians.³⁴ He said that 'The Bishop had afforded the Members of the Assembly an opportunity of joining in prayer before the commencement of the business of the day', but on one occasion only two Members had taken up the offer, one of whom had arrived late, which Strachan thought to be 'nothing less than a solemn mockery'.³⁵

With the House tied 14-14 on McCombie's amendment, the President cast a deciding vote in support of the amendment, shortening the form to just the Lord's Prayer. Hansard reports that 'A lengthy debate here took place; the propriety of opening the proceedings with prayer being again discussed', and the motion that each day would begin with 'the Lord's Prayer simply' was subsequently carried on a narrow majority of 15 to 13.³⁶ The division list was not published, and whether Protestant or Catholic in form was not specified.

Standing orders constitute the permanent set of rules which govern each chamber's procedure, which can be varied through the introduction of sessional orders, which expire at the end of a parliamentary term. The Lord's Prayer continued to be read from 1857 but did not enter standing orders until 1883.³⁷

Legislative Assembly

1856: First prayer motion negatived

When the Victorian Parliament re-opened with a newly minted bicameral legislature in 1856, petitioners urged the Legislative Assembly to start proceedings with prayer, just as they had for the Council.³⁸ On 28 November 1856, Colin Campbell (Polwarth, Ripon, Hampden and South Grenville) moved:

1. That it is desirable that this Assembly should commence its daily legislative proceedings by asking the blessing of God on its deliberations.
2. That a committee be appointed ... to consider the best mode of carrying the above resolution into effect and to report to the house.³⁹

In doing so, Campbell said, 'What he required the house to do he wished to see done in the least objectionable form, and altogether disconnected from any organization or churches'.⁴⁰ In encouraging 'the necessity of the House expressing a general reliance on the Supreme

³¹ J. Fawcner (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 11 December, p. 112.

³² T. McCombie (1857) 'The prayer question', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 February, p. 400.

³³ D. Keogh (1857) 'The prayer question', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 February, p. 400.

³⁴ J. Strachan (1857) 'The prayer question', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 February, p. 400.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 400.

³⁶ Hansard reporters (1857) 'The prayer question', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 February, p. 401.

³⁷ Legislative Council of Victoria (1883) '*Standing rules and orders of the Legislative Council*', Legislative Council of Victoria, standing order 43.

³⁸ (1856) 'Petitions', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 26 November, p. 27; (1856) 'Petitions: Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 27 November, p. 31.

³⁹ C. Campbell (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 33.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 33.

Being', Campbell acknowledged a view that prayer was a matter for an individual and not a public forum; however, he noted that the chamber could be described as 'a congregation of individuals', meaning that the private prayer and public forums may not necessarily be mutually exclusive.⁴¹

The seconder of his motion, David Moore (Melbourne), cited the prayer as an opportunity for the Parliament to demonstrate a desirable standard of 'virtue and morality'.⁴² He stated from previous experience in this topic that 'the greatest difficulty' would be to avoid 'all sectarian differences' in the prayer's wording.⁴³ Moore echoed Campbell's example of New Zealand, where its Legislative Assembly had been able to compromise on a form of prayer, as proof that sectarian differences could be overcome (see footnote).⁴⁴

There was, however, vocal opposition to both the motion's introduction and the substance of the motion. George Horne (Warrnambool) regretted that the debate had been brought up again, describing the issue of prayer as a 'constantly rolling apple of discord' prosecuted by Members who 'assumed that those who opposed the motion did so in fear of incurring reproach of their fellow-men' and stigmatising those who objected as 'irreligious'.⁴⁵

John O'Shanassy (Kilmore), having moved from the Legislative Council to the Assembly, argued a similar line to Horne. He said that Campbell wanted a 'theological discussion', having introduced the motion in such terms that 'all who did not agree with him were wrong'.⁴⁶ Further, O'Shanassy objected to making 'the Speaker the medium between that House and the Deity' and opposed prayer in parliament on grounds of religious diversity in the community.⁴⁷ He stated:

If all were of one religion or one faith, then it would be all very good, and they might be bound to do collectively what they did in an individual capacity, but such, as they were aware, was not the case. They were living in a country where various religious opinions were entertained, but if the motion was carried it would be laying down a fundamental principle that a majority had a right to dictate the religion of the people.⁴⁸

An assertion that prayer could help to lift the tenor of debate was also challenged. Campbell had argued that Victoria ought to introduce prayer in part because the practice was in place in the 'mother country' and British colonies, but O'Shanassy countered that in the UK Parliament the prayer 'had been productive of very little good effect'.⁴⁹

Renowned unionist Peter Lalor (North Grenville) conceded that he did not see inconsistency in Christians of different denominations joining in prayer, but ultimately opposed prayer in Parliament on the basis that he held a low opinion of the conduct of Members. In his view, he did not want to besmirch the words of prayer by association with the work of Parliament, because 'the manner in which prayer would be received in that House would but bring contempt on Almighty God'.⁵⁰ Frederick Sargood (St Kilda) was similarly blunt, saying the idea of 'a country comprising Protestants and Roman Catholics, Jews, Infidels, and Israelites

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴² D. Moore (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 34.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 34

⁴⁴ In 1854 there were concerns in the first session of the New Zealand Parliament about whether a prayer should be read, but the House ultimately found that the prayer was a common feature elsewhere. A factsheet states, 'Speaker Charles Clifford (himself a Catholic) declared that the first clergyman who could be found, whatever his denomination, should be invited into the House to say the prayer. He had quietly arranged for his Anglican reverend friend to wait outside the House ... Later a committee drew up a suitable form of prayer which was adopted by the House'. (NZ Parliamentary Library (2010) *The business of Parliament in history*, NZ Parliamentary Service, June, p. 3)

⁴⁵ G. Horne (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 34.

⁴⁶ J. O'Shanassy (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 34.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁰ P. Lalor (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 36.

uniting in one form of prayer' was 'so absurd ... that he was surprised the honourable member had not the good taste to refrain from introducing' the subject.⁵¹

Having observed the arguments to this point, Thomas Embling (Collingwood) agreed with Campbell's intention 'in the abstract' but thought the motion 'impracticable'.⁵² However, in a conciliatory mood, he saw that 'The best way of disposing of the question' was 'that they should agree to give the honourable member his committee', believing that the committee wouldn't agree to a form and 'the subject would in this way fall to the ground'.⁵³ In any case, the motion—to both introduce the prayer and establish the committee—was negatived, 26 noes to 21 ayes.

1928: Agreement to prayer in the Legislative Assembly

While the Legislative Council continued with the tradition of Lord's Prayer from its introduction in 1857, the Legislative Assembly continued without one for over 70 years. The issue was raised multiple times, with attempts to discuss prayer in the lower house being shut down in 1866 and 1871.⁵⁴ In objecting to the 1866 motion (moved by John Rout Hopkins, Member for South Grant) Peter Snodgrass (South Gippsland) referenced the 'hurried manner' and 'the absence of solemnity' in the Legislative Council's prayer reading,⁵⁵ a procedure Francis Longmore (Ripon and Hampden) thought to be more formality than prayer.⁵⁶

By 1928, however, the terms of engagement over prayer in Parliament had changed. Members had acquired party affiliations, and Victoria was now part of a federated Australia. On 4 October, Lieutenant-Colonel George Knox, the newly elected Nationalist Member for Upper Yarra,⁵⁷ moved:

That in the opinion of this House the Speaker on taking the chair each day should read the Lord's Prayer.⁵⁸

Knox noted the UK practice of a chaplain reading the prayer in advance of the House of Commons sitting, and likewise prayers preceding business in the Australian Parliament since 1901 and the Victorian Legislative Council since 1857, together with procedures in other states. Knox was confident in his motion and had the Christian majority to back it. He referred to two Members who had objected on the grounds that a Speaker might one day be nominated who did not believe in the Lord's Prayer's teachings, rendering 'repetition by such a man ... contrary to the spirit of the prayer'.⁵⁹ In response he asserted, 'That day will never come in the history of this Parliament'.⁶⁰

Knox was also not alone in his family in believing it an important mission, with his father, William Knox, having been the one to introduce the practice to the Australian Parliament.⁶¹ According to Knox junior, the prayer had thereafter continued 'for 28 years without any adverse criticism'.⁶² He also had the support of the Premier at the time, Edmond Hogan (Labor, Warrenheip and Grenville).

⁵¹ F. Sargood (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 36.

⁵² T. Embling (1856) 'Opening the proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 28 November, p. 36.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ J.R. Hopkins (1866) 'Opening proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 14 February, p. 38; J.R. Hopkins (1871) 'Prayer', Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 May, p. 71.

⁵⁵ P. Snodgrass (1866) 'Opening proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 February, p. 38.

⁵⁶ F. Longmore (1866) 'Opening proceedings with prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 February, p. 38.

⁵⁷ From now on in the paper, a Member's party and electorate will be contained in brackets after first mention of their name.

⁵⁸ G. Knox (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2047.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 2047.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2047.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 2047; D. Wheeler (1983) 'William Knox', Australian Dictionary of Biography.

⁶² Knox (1928) *op. cit.*, p. 2047.

In a change from earlier debates, interdenominational concerns had now apparently been supplanted by a truce, with Knox saying:

My motion has the approval of all the churches in Victoria and in the Commonwealth of Australia. My father said to the late Archbishop Carr, 'Have I your authority, as the spiritual head of the great Roman Catholic Church, to propose that the Lord's Prayer should be said daily in Parliament.' That eminent prelate unequivocally and openly gave his approval to the proposal. The head of every religious denomination agrees with that sentiment.⁶³

However, the motion did attract criticism over the lack of detail about the wording to be used in the prayer. George Michael Prendergast (Labor, Footscray) indicated Knox's father had simply moved in 1901 that 'a prayer' be read in the House of Representatives, while here the younger Knox had asked for the 'Lord's Prayer' without stipulating which version, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. He stated:

One version begins :— "Our Father who art in heaven," and another, "Our Father which art in heaven." These two versions, I submit, present different view-points of religion. At the end of each version there is also a substantial difference in the wording.⁶⁴

Members in favour of the motion came from across the political spectrum. William McPherson (Nationalist, Hawthorn) seconded the motion, spruiking the Lord's Prayer's broad appeal by saying, 'No other prayer has been translated into so many languages as the Lord's Prayer has been'.⁶⁵ William Brownbill (Labor, Geelong) noted that it had been done elsewhere and that the Victorian Assembly should do likewise, provided it was invoked in suitable 'reverence'.⁶⁶ William McKenzie (Labor, Wonthaggi) also echoed debates from decades past when he said the 'inspiring words' of the prayer being repeated each sitting commencement 'would not do any harm'.⁶⁷

Opposition was couched in arguments recycled from previous debates. One was the perception that public displays of prayer were a form of sacrilege. Many of these objections came from Melbourne's inner suburbs. Maurice Blackburn (Labor, Clifton Hill) recited Christian scripture to assert this rationale for opposing a public show of prayer:

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.⁶⁸

James Jewell (Labor, Brunswick) estimated that about 95 per cent of Victoria recited the prayer twice daily, but he did not agree with the Lord's Prayer—"the most sacred thing that we can say between ourselves and our God"—being recited daily in Parliament.⁶⁹ He said a daily prayer in the chamber would be putting 'the Lord's Prayer on a butcher's block' to be 'chopped up' through its presence 'just as a formality'.⁷⁰ Jewell thought the Lord's Prayer 'should be said in a place of worship or in a man's home'.⁷¹

John Cain (Labor, Northcote) was more adamantly against prayer in parliament. As a Christian himself, he had no problem with Christian worship itself but had 'no respect for the man who simply mouths Christian principles and never acts up to them. There is too much

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 2048.

⁶⁴ G.M. Prendergast (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2055.

⁶⁵ W. McPherson (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2048.

⁶⁶ W. Brownbill (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2049.

⁶⁷ W. McKenzie (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2050.

⁶⁸ M. Blackburn (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2049.

⁶⁹ J. Jewell (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2048.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2048.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 2048.

of that in society to-day'.⁷² Cain cited a present 'industrial upheaval'⁷³ and the lack of 'Christian spirit' in the Australian Government's handling of it as proof enough not only that displays of prayer in any parliament were ineffective in improving conduct in accordance with Christian principles but that politics and religion should not mix.⁷⁴

Knox interjected that the prayer would have a 'Christianizing effect upon the House', but Cain retorted that he did not agree.⁷⁵ Further, Cain noted the scarcity of attendance at religious places of worship and felt that the preferred manner of worship was being hijacked by a pious few. 'Those people who desire to avail themselves of religious consolation,' he stated, 'have ample opportunities at their command'.⁷⁶

Wilfrid Kent-Hughes (Nationalist, Kew) would not concede that the dealings of the House were un-Christian-like, but felt that a prayer would demonstrate the common ground held between opposing sides. He also argued that while parliamentary behaviour may seem combative, Parliament remained a place of Christian values:

I have seen members fighting each other politically, like Kilkenny cats, on the floor of this House, and five minutes later talking outside of the Chamber as affably as any other group of men might do elsewhere. We have differences of opinion; we have different views on principles and fundamentals in politics; and although we may disagree very strongly on those principles, there is no reason why we should disagree personally as we come into contact with each other outside of this Chamber. Political warfare is a special type of warfare. The game of politics is governed by peculiar rules and traditions, and we play it out according to those rules, without any unchristian feelings towards one another.⁷⁷

Kent-Hughes even went so far as to say, 'This is not the time nor the place to discuss matters of ethics and religious belief'.⁷⁸

Reg Pollard (Labor, Bulla and Dalhousie) was opposed to Kent-Hughes downplaying the motion's religious significance. On the contrary, he insisted that the motion would intrude on the rights of the individual and accused the Government of putting itself on a pedestal and masking bad deeds with hypocrisy.⁷⁹ Further, he posed the question:

Why inflict upon those who do not believe that it is necessary here, and who would resent it, something which other members can recite in the privacy of their rooms in this building or in their own residences?⁸⁰

Those opposed and in favour of the prayer were equally represented among the debate participants (six speakers apiece), with Frank Keane (Labor, Coburg) rounding out the debate by decrying the use of prayer to justify political ends and condemning what he called 'too much "churchianity" and too little Christianity in the world'.⁸¹

Despite this, however, the motion was eventually passed, 18 ayes to 11 noes, and the Lord's Prayer was instated. The version to be used was not specified.

⁷² J. Cain (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2050.

⁷³ Days earlier on 1 October the Nationalist Federal Government's *Transport Workers Act 1928* had come into force, requiring all waterfront workers to hold a federal licence (also known as a 'dog collar' at the time), a measure bitterly opposed by unions such as the Wharf Labourers' Union. The *Argus* reported that the Australian Council of Trade Unions had directed union members not to apply for a licence. As a result of union strikes volunteer labourers were sourced locally and from overseas to fill demand, leading to violence between union members and volunteer labourers and extended dispute. ((1928) 'Strike Violence', *The Argus*, 29 September, p. 19.; J. Dawson (2014) 'The Dog Collar Act', Port Melbourne Historical and Preservation Society website, 30 October)

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2050.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2051.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2051.

⁷⁷ W. Kent-Hughes (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2053.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2053.

⁷⁹ R. Pollard (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2054.

⁸¹ F. Keane (1928) 'Reading of Lord's Prayer', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 4 October, p. 2056.

2 | Current context

Victorian practice

Procedures in both houses of Victorian Parliament begin with the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer was originally, according to Christian gospel, delivered by Jesus Christ to his disciples as an example of how to pray and has been described as ‘the model prayer’ for Christians communicating with God.⁸² Being based in Christian scripture, it is recognised across denominations.

However, as constitutional expert Luke Beck writes, the Lord’s Prayer is not a generically Christian utterance but has two versions in common usage, one Protestant and one Catholic. The line ‘For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever’—and variations of it—appearing in the King James Bible, is used only in the Protestant version.⁸³ In the current Victorian parliamentary standing orders, neither house prescribes the exact words or denominational version of the prayer, but the version traditionally used is Protestant, but with slight variations in wording and grammar in each chamber (Table 1).⁸⁴

In the Legislative Assembly, the Lord’s Prayer is required under an ongoing resolution agreed to in 1928.⁸⁵ In the Legislative Council, under standing order 4.02, the Lord’s Prayer must be read by the President when a quorum is present; it may also be read prior to the opening of a new parliament and at a regional sitting.⁸⁶

In neither house are provisions made for other forms of prayer, as has been implemented in the ACT. Attendance is optional. Changes to these procedures can be proposed by any Member and can be made official through the agreement of the house to amend standing orders or through temporary sessional orders.

Table 1: Current prayers in the Victorian Parliament⁸⁷

Legislative Assembly	Legislative Council
Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.	Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, As it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, The power, and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen.
Source: Procedure Office (LA)	Source: Chamber Support Office (LC)

⁸² D. Freeman & D. Corbett (2019) *Amen: a history of prayers in Parliament*, Sydney, PM Glynn Institute, pp. 11–12.

⁸³ L. Beck (2012) ‘[Prayers in Parliament and the Constitution](#)’, Constitutional Critique blog post, University of Sydney website.

⁸⁴ S. Pennicuik (2016) ‘Procedure Committee: Reference’, [Debates](#), Legislative Council, Victoria, p. 1378.

⁸⁵ Legislative Assembly of Victoria (2024) [Standing orders](#), Legislative Assembly of Victoria, ongoing resolutions (p. 134).

⁸⁶ Legislative Council of Victoria (2022) [Standing orders](#), Legislative Council of Victoria, standing orders 1.01(10), 4.02 & 4.05(1) (pp. 1, 11–12).

⁸⁷ L. Moran, Manager of Procedure Office (2024) email, 1 March; A. Burt, Manager of Chamber Support Office (2024) email, 1 March.

In both houses the prayer precedes the Acknowledgement of Country. The Acknowledgement was introduced to Legislative Assembly opening proceedings on Tuesdays via an ongoing resolution in December 2015 and became a daily practice from August 2019.⁸⁸ In the Legislative Council, the Acknowledgement was read by discretion of President Bruce Atkinson from 9 February 2016 and repeated weekly in the 58th Parliament; from the opening of the 59th Parliament, President Shaun Leane repeated the Acknowledgment daily.⁸⁹ For the 60th Parliament it was agreed to as a daily procedure in standing orders by resolution of the House in September 2022.⁹⁰

Religious diversity

The landscape of religious belief in Australia now is decidedly different to what it was in 1857 and 1928, when denominations of Christianity made up the majority of the population. The Victorian Parliament's adoption of the Lord's Prayer, while divisive at the time of inclusion in each house, was thus reflective of the religious climate.

At the time of the 1928 Assembly debates, contemporary statistics taken from the national 1921 Census indicated that 97 per cent of Victorians (excluding 'full-blooded' Aboriginal Australians, who were recorded separately) were Christian in some form. About 39 per cent of the population came under the Church of England, while 21 per cent were Catholic or Roman Catholic.⁹¹ Only 196 Aboriginal Victorians were surveyed and the majority of these respondents (175) were reportedly Christian, 109 with the Church of England and 40 Presbyterian.⁹²

The trend away from Christian worship is a relatively recent phenomenon, driven largely by generation alpha, generation Z and millennials.⁹³ Even as recently as 1971, 86.2 per cent of the country was of Christian faith, down to 43.9 per cent in 2021 (Graph 1).⁹⁴ In Victoria the percentage of the population following a Christian denomination has halved from 85.1 per cent in 1971 to 40.9 per cent in 2021.⁹⁵

In 2021, 20.5 per cent of Victorians described themselves as Catholic, while only 6.5 per cent of Victorians describe their faith as Anglican.⁹⁶ The highest concentrations of Catholicism were in Niddrie (43.8 per cent) and Sydenham (36.3 per cent).⁹⁷ The highest concentration of Anglicans was in Mornington (13.6 per cent).⁹⁸

State, territory and national populations have been altered by numerous waves of migration across the past two centuries but particularly since the 1950s, in turn altering the cultural make-up of Australian society.⁹⁹ Non-Christian religions, including many polytheistic religions, make up a significant and increasing proportion of the Victorian population, comprising 13.1 per cent in 2021. Concentrations of certain faiths in certain electorates mean minority faiths nationally may be majority faiths locally. Victoria's religious diversity has grown to include faiths such as:

⁸⁸ N. Hutchins, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (2015) 'Acknowledgement of Country', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 9 December, p. 5422; Legislative Assembly of Victoria (2022) op. cit., ongoing resolutions (p. 134).

⁸⁹ A. Burt, Manager of Chamber Support Office (2024) email, 7 March.

⁹⁰ J. Symes, Leader of the Government (2022) 'Business of the House, Standing orders', [Debates](#), Victoria, Legislative Council, 20 September, pp. 3447–48.

⁹¹ C. Wickens, Commonwealth Statistician (1921) 'Part VI.—Religions', *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne, Government Printer, pp. 353–54.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 864.

⁹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) 'Religious affiliation in Australia', ABS website.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) 'Snapshot of Victoria', ABS website, 28 June.

⁹⁶ C. Triscari & M. Aroozoo (2024) 'Census Rankings', Parliamentary Library & Information Service Sharepoint site..

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ The Australian Government Treasury & Department of Home Affairs (2018) *Shaping a nation: population growth and immigration over time*, Canberra, Australian Government Treasury & Department of Home Affairs, p. 17.

- Islam: 4.2 per cent across Victoria, with the highest concentrations in Broadmeadows (28.2 per cent) and Greenvale (28.0 per cent)
- Hinduism: 3.3 per cent, with the highest concentration in Tarneit (15.1 per cent)
- Buddhism: 3.1 per cent, with the highest concentration in St Albans (15.2 per cent)
- Sikhism: 1.4 per cent, with the highest concentration in Kalkallo (11.0 per cent)
- Judaism: 0.7 per cent, with the highest concentration in Caulfield (28.6 per cent).¹⁰⁰

Comparatively, there is a growing cohort of people describing themselves as following ‘no religion’, a portion of society which has almost reached parity with Christianity. The 2021 Census data for religious affiliation in Victoria indicate that the percentage of people with ‘no religion’ has risen in inverse relation to the amount of people subscribing to a form of Christianity (Graph 1). As of 2021, 38.8 per cent of Victorians answered ‘No religion’ in the Census, with electorates varying widely—as high as 60.9 per cent (Brunswick) and as low as 13.3 per cent (Greenvale).¹⁰¹

For electorate statistics with regard to religious affiliation, please consult the Parliamentary Library’s [Census Rankings](#).

Graph 1: Religious affiliation in Victoria (% of population), 1971 to 2021—Christian, non-Christian and no religion

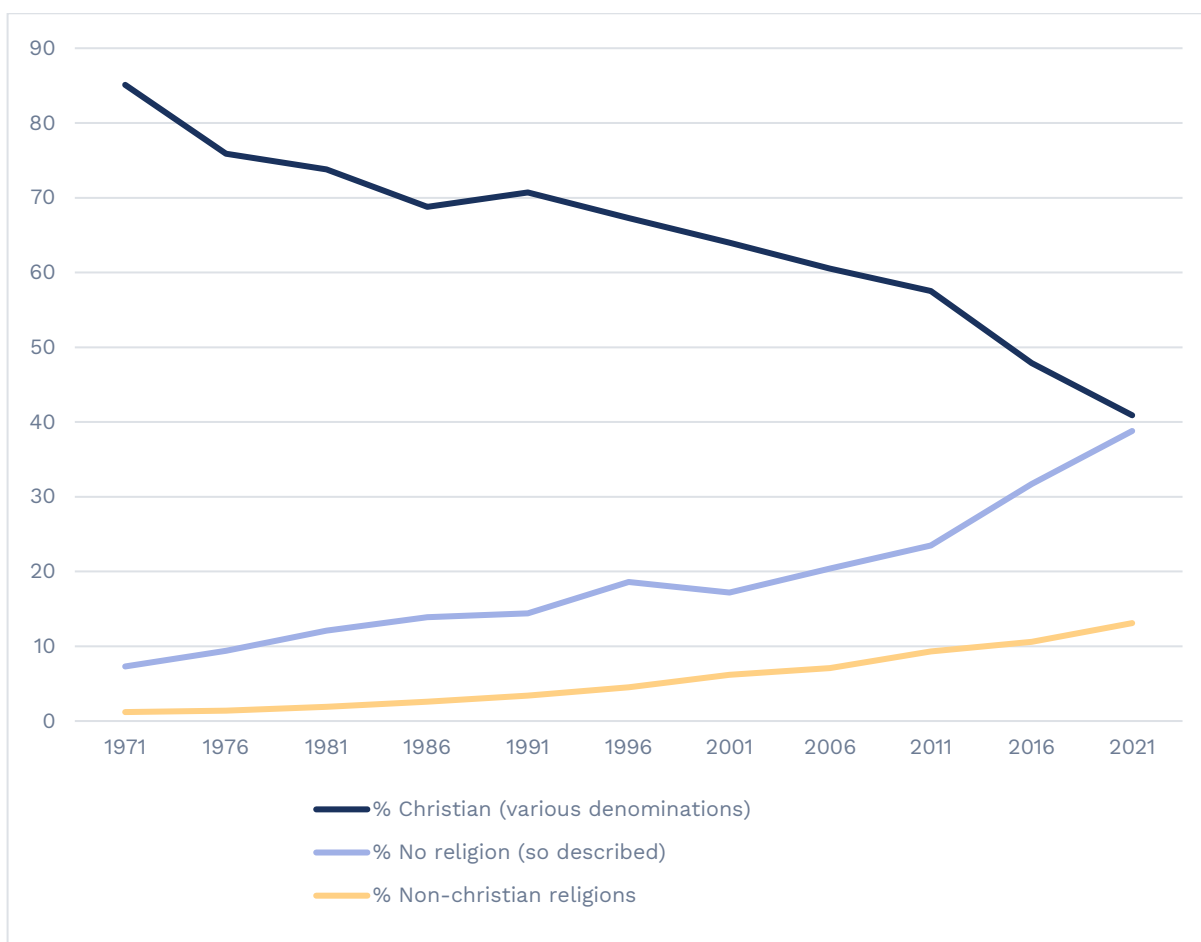


Table data sources: ABS Census of Population and Housing 1971–2021; ABS Tablebuilder.

¹⁰⁰ Triscari & Aroozoo (2024) op. cit.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

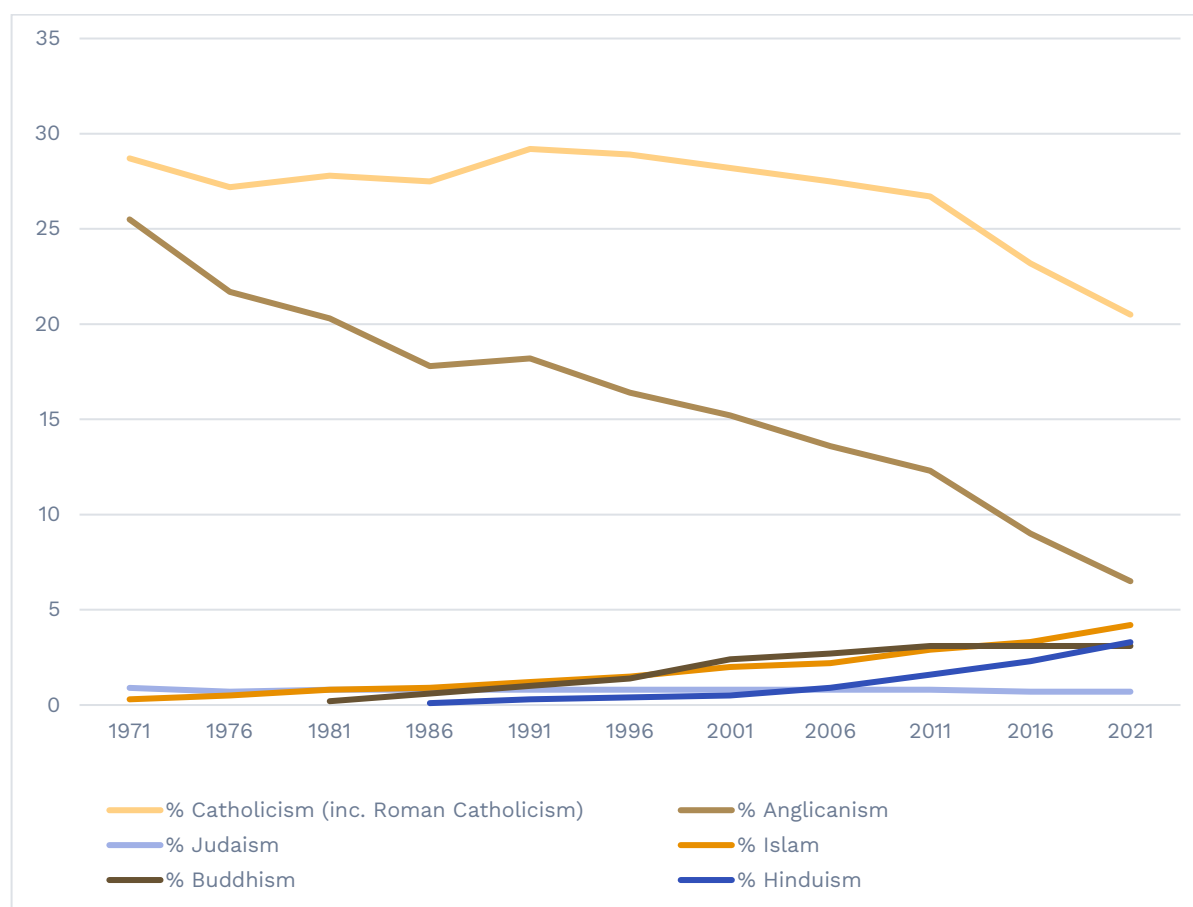
Graph 2: Religious affiliation in Victoria (% of population), 1971 to 2021—individual faiths

Table data sources: ABS Census of Population and Housing 1971–2021; ABS Tablebuilder.

Other jurisdictions

Within Australia, prayer is a common feature of parliamentary procedures. Australian jurisdictions differ in the ways in which they conduct prayers in parliament, with some more prescriptive about the words uttered than others. Most parliaments also now include an Acknowledgement of Country in their daily proceedings, creating some variation in whether prayers are said before or after the Acknowledgement.

All parliaments bar the ACT Legislative Assembly incorporate a Christian prayer into the start of a sitting day. While Victoria only includes the Lord's Prayer, many legislatures opt to also read a parliamentary prayer, specific to that jurisdiction, such as the one New South Wales uses in its Legislative Assembly:

Almighty God, we ask for your blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the true welfare of Australia and the people of New South Wales. Amen.¹⁰²

ACT procedure, following a 1995 amendment to standing orders, says that Members may 'stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory'.¹⁰³ This practice still recognises the right to prayer, with the mover of the 1995 change to standing orders, Wayne Berry, indicating 'that some sort of prayer could be

¹⁰² Legislative Assembly of New South Wales (2023) *Consolidated standing and sessional orders and resolutions of the house*, Parliament of NSW website, February, SO 39 (p. 12).

¹⁰³ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2023) *Standing orders and continuing resolutions of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory as at 9 October 2023*, ACT Legislative Assembly website, October, SO 30 (pp. 15–16).

conducted by members'.¹⁰⁴ Another notable recent change occurred in October 2022, when the Federal Senate agreed to add an invitation from the President to Members to 'pray or reflect in your own way' while the prayers are being read.¹⁰⁵

Prayer is also a widespread phenomenon in local government council meetings, having come into prominence in the mid-20th century after a push by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to help Australia 'become more Christian'.¹⁰⁶ A 2021 study found that over half of Victoria's local councils—42 out of 79—still incorporated prayer into their proceedings, the majority (39) specifying a Christian prayer.¹⁰⁷ Of the three that didn't specify a Christian prayer, Greater Dandenong City Council's prayer custom incorporated Christian, Sikh and Jewish faiths, while Northern Grampians and Wyndham's were not specific to any faith.¹⁰⁸ As of 2024, a ABC report indicates that the number of councils starting their proceedings with prayers has dropped to 29.¹⁰⁹ President of the MAV, Cr David Clark, praised the educational role of multiple faiths being represented in prayer practices and said that the role of faith in society was 'quite different in 2024 than it was in 1996'.¹¹⁰ However, he said it was up to each council to decide on their own practice.¹¹¹

Further variety is apparent in overseas parliaments. A study from the Irish Parliament's Oireachtas Library and Research Service finds that 'there is a clear division between practices in continental European parliaments, which do not have any prayers, and parliaments in the Westminster tradition ... which do'.¹¹² In the UK, tradition has remained much as it did in previous centuries, though absence does not warrant a fine (as it did in 1606).¹¹³ In both houses, Members still face the wall behind them for the prayer's duration due to the historical difficulty of kneeling while wearing a sword, an item once common but now no longer permitted in the chamber.¹¹⁴

The United States Senate and House of Representatives have retained prayers read by the house chaplains, with the occasional invitation of guest chaplains of various faiths.¹¹⁵ Prayers have been read since the first Continental Congress in 1774,¹¹⁶ but these practices have faced constitutional challenges. In 1983 a Supreme Court judge's ruling found that legislative chaplains were 'deeply embedded in the history and tradition of this country', had 'become part of the fabric of our society' and coexisted with 'the principles of disestablishment and religious freedom'.¹¹⁷ This has since been used to dismiss challenges to the use of prayer in American legislative settings.¹¹⁸

The Scottish and Northern Irish parliaments, both devolved parliaments under the umbrella of the UK, have opted in different ways to sidestep the English precedent of a house chaplain reading a prayer to begin proceedings. Since its inception in 1998, Northern Ireland Assembly has prescribed in standing orders two minutes of silence to allow for prayer or

¹⁰⁴ W. Berry (1995) 'Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments', *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 695.

¹⁰⁵ L. Richards (2023) *Prayers in Parliament: a chronology*, Research Paper Series 2022–23, Australian Parliamentary Library, p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Beck (2023) op. cit., pp. 32–33.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁹ O. Sanders & M. Neal (2024) 'Pressure grows on Victorian councils to ditch opening prayer amid claims of human rights violation', *ABC News*, 5 March.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Oireachtas Library & Research Service (2016) *Prayers in plenary and other religious services in Parliaments*, L&RS Note, Dublin, Houses of the Oireachtas, p. 1.

¹¹³ Ainsworth (2017) op. cit., p. 18.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 18; House of Commons Information Office (2010) *Some Traditions of the House*, House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, Westminster, UK Parliament, August.

¹¹⁵ Congressional Research Service (2011) *House and Senate Chaplains: An Overview*, United States Senate website, 26 May.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 1

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 5.

reflection.¹¹⁹ The Scottish Parliament has opted for a ‘Time for Reflection’ (TFR) at the start of the week since its inception in 1999,¹²⁰ intending for the new parliament to be ‘socially and politically inclusive’.¹²¹ The TFR is a ‘short narrative’ delivered by a different community member or member of a religious order that relates ‘to personal experience or current affairs’ or consists of ‘prayers/readings from appropriate texts’.¹²²

Table 2 provides a summary of the procedures undertaken in parliaments around Australia, including: whether prayers are read; the order in which they are read in relation to acknowledgements of country; whether specific words are prescribed; and whether other forms of prayer or reflection are invited.

Table 3 provides a summary of prayer provisions in selected international jurisdictions.

¹¹⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly (2022) *Northern Ireland Assembly Standing Orders as amended 22 March 2022*, Belfast, Northern Ireland Assembly, updated 22 March, standing order 8; John Alderdice, Initial Presiding Officer (1998) ‘Opening proceedings’, *Official Report*, Belfast, Northern Ireland Assembly, 14 September.

¹²⁰ N. Bonney (2013) ‘Proportional Prayers: Time for Reflection in the Scottish Parliament’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66, doi:10.1093/pa/gss006 (pp. 816–833), p. 1.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 818.

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 822.

Table 2: Prayer provisions in Australian state and federal jurisdictions

	Chamber	Prayers read by presiding officer	Before or after Acknowledgement of Country	Words prescribed	Invitation for other forms of prayer or reflection
Victoria	Legislative Assembly	Yes	Before	Lord's Prayer (Ongoing resolution) ¹²³	No
	Legislative Council	Yes	Before	Lord's Prayer (SO 4.02) ¹²⁴	No
Australia	House of Representatives	Yes (but not in the Federation Chamber, the second meeting room of the House) ¹²⁵	After	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 38) ¹²⁶	No
	Senate	Yes	After	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 50) ¹²⁷	Yes ¹²⁸
New South Wales	Legislative Assembly	Yes	Before	Parliamentary prayer (SO 39) ¹²⁹	No
	Legislative Council	Yes	Before	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 30) ¹³⁰	No
Queensland	Legislative Assembly	Yes	Before	None prescribed in orders ¹³¹	No
South Australia	House of Assembly	Yes	Before	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 39) ¹³²	No
	Legislative Council	Yes	Before	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 51) ¹³³	No

¹²³ Legislative Assembly of Victoria (2024) op. cit., ongoing resolutions (p. 134).

¹²⁴ Legislative Council of Victoria (2022) op. cit., standing order 4.02 (See also SOs 1.01(10) & 4.05(1)).

¹²⁵ Parliamentary Education Office (date unknown) [‘Why is the Lord's Prayer read at the beginning of each day in the House of Representatives and Senate if Australia is a secular nation?’](#), Parliamentary Education Office website.

¹²⁶ Australian House of Representatives (2022) [Standing orders](#), Canberra, Parliament of Australia, August, SO 38 (p. 30).

¹²⁷ Australian Senate (2022) [Standing orders and other orders of the Senate](#), Canberra, Parliament of Australia, October, SO 50 (p. 42).

¹²⁸ The President is instructed to introduce the prayer with the following words: ‘Senators, I invite you, as I read the prayer, to pray or reflect in your own way on your responsibilities to the people of Australia and to future generations’. (Senate Table Office (2022) op. cit., p. 42)

¹²⁹ Legislative Assembly of New South Wales (2023) op. cit., SO 39 (p. 12).

¹³⁰ Legislative Council of New South Wales (2023) [Standing rules and orders](#), Parliament of NSW, August, SO 30 (p. 9).

¹³¹ Legislative Assembly of Queensland (2024) [Standing rules and orders of the Legislative Assembly](#), Queensland Parliament, 13 February; Legislative Assembly of Queensland (2024) [Sessional orders of the Legislative Assembly 57th Parliament \(First Session\)](#), Brisbane, Queensland Parliament, March.

¹³² House of Assembly of South Australia (2018) [Standing orders for regulating the public business of the House of Assembly, together with the joint standing orders of the houses](#), Parliament of South Australia, SO 39 (p. 11).

¹³³ Legislative Council of South Australia (2022) [Standing orders of the Legislative Council relating to public business together with the joint standing orders agreed to by both houses](#), Parliament of South Australia, SO 51 (p. 11).

	Chamber	Prayers read by presiding officer	Before or after Acknowledgement of Country	Words prescribed	Invitation for other forms of prayer or reflection
Western Australia	Legislative Assembly	Yes	After	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer ¹³⁴	No
	Legislative Council	Yes	After	Legislative Council prayer and Lord's Prayer (resolution of the House) ¹³⁵	No
Tasmania	House of Assembly	Yes	After	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 22) ¹³⁶	Yes ¹³⁷
	Legislative Council	Yes	After	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (resolution of the House) ¹³⁸	No
Australian Capital Territory	Legislative Assembly	No	Not applicable	Not applicable	Yes ¹³⁹
Northern Territory	Legislative Assembly	Yes	Before	Parliamentary prayer and Lord's Prayer (SO 7) ¹⁴⁰	No

¹³⁴ Richards (2023) op. cit., p. 28.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³⁶ House of Assembly of Tasmania (2017) *House of Assembly standing & sessional orders and rules*, Parliament of Tasmania, SO 22 (p. 31).

¹³⁷ The Speaker introduces prayers with the following words: 'I now invite Members to join me in reciting the Lord's Prayer or to stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of Tasmania'. (House of Assembly of Tasmania (2017) op. cit., p. 31)

¹³⁸ Richards (2023) op. cit., p. 27; Legislative Council of Tasmania (2010) *Standing orders*, Parliament of Tasmania, SO 28 (p. 9); L. Hiscutt (2021) 'Motion: Prayers', *Debates*, Legislative Council of Tasmania, 22 June, p. 16.

¹³⁹ Following the Acknowledgement of Country, the Speaker will say: 'Members, at the beginning of this sitting of the Assembly, I would ask you to stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory'. (Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2023) op. cit., p. 16)

¹⁴⁰ Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory (2021) *Sessional orders and orders of continuing effect*, NT Legislative Assembly, sessional order 5 (p. 5).

Table 3: Prayer provisions in international jurisdictions

	Chamber	Prayers (read by)	Words prescribed	Invitation for other forms of prayer or reflection ¹⁴¹
United Kingdom (Westminster)	House of Commons	Yes (Speaker's Chaplain)	Yes ¹⁴²	No
	House of Lords	Yes (Senior Bishop or Lord Spiritual)	Yes ¹⁴³	
Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland Assembly	No	No	A period of two minutes' silent prayer or contemplation ¹⁴⁴
Scotland	Scottish Parliament	No	No	A 'Time for Reflection' delivered by speakers which reflect the balance of beliefs in Scotland according to Census data, with speaker nominations made to the Presiding Officer by Members or by faith representatives directly ¹⁴⁵
United States	House of Representatives	Yes (Chaplain of the House)	No ¹⁴⁶	Guest chaplains may be invited to address the House and have come from many faiths ¹⁴⁷
	Senate	Yes (Senate Chaplain)	No ¹⁴⁸	Guest chaplains may be invited to address the Senate and have come from many faiths ¹⁴⁹
European Parliament	Plenary	No	Not applicable	No
South Africa	National Assembly	No	No	An opportunity for silent prayer or meditation ¹⁵⁰
	National Council of Provinces	No	No	An opportunity for silent prayer or meditation ¹⁵¹
Canada	House of Commons	Yes (Speaker)	Yes ¹⁵²	A moment of silence for private reflection or meditation ¹⁵³
	Senate	Yes (Speaker)	Yes ¹⁵⁴	No
New Zealand	House of Representatives	Yes (Speaker)	No ¹⁵⁵	No

¹⁴¹ Not including mechanisms outside the chamber, including prayer rooms.

¹⁴² UK Parliament (date unknown) '[Prayers](#)', UK Parliament website (accessed 20 February 2024).

¹⁴³ UK Parliament (2023) 'Appendix I: Prayers for the Parliament', [Companion to the standing orders and guide to the proceedings of the House of Lords](#), UK Parliament website.

¹⁴⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly (2022) op. cit., SO 8.

¹⁴⁵ Bonney (2013) op. cit.; SPICe (2023) [Contributors to Time for Reflection: Session 6](#), Fact Sheet, Scottish Parliament website, 15 March.

¹⁴⁶ United States House of Representatives (2021) [Rules of the House of Representatives: one hundred seventeenth congress](#), Washington D.C., US Congress, February, Rule II, Clause 5 'Chaplain' (p. 3).

¹⁴⁷ Congressional Research Service (2011) op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ United States Senate (2013) '[Standing rules of the Senate](#)', Washington D.C., US Congress, November, Rule IV, Clause 1(a) 'Commencement of daily sessions' (p. 3).

¹⁴⁹ Congressional Research Service (2011) op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ National Assembly of the Republic of South Africa (2016) [Rules of the National Assembly](#), ninth edition, Cape Town, Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, May, Rule 46 (p. 52).

¹⁵¹ National Council of Provinces (Republic of South Africa) (2008) [Rules of the National Council of Provinces](#), ninth edition, Cape Town, Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, March, Rule 24 (p. 21).

¹⁵² Bosc, M. & A. Gagnon (eds) (2017) '[Chapter 10: The Daily Program](#)', [House of Commons Procedure and Practice](#), 3rd edition, House of Commons Canada website.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Senate of Canada (2013) 'Chapter Four: Order of business', [Companion to the rules of the Senate of Canada](#), second edition, Ottawa, Parliament of Canada, November, rule 4-1 (p. 55).

¹⁵⁵ New Zealand Parliament (2023) 'Chapter 2: Sittings of the House', [Speakers' Rulings 2023](#), New Zealand Parliament website, ruling 16/4.

3 | Recent debates

Today, the place of the Lord's Prayer in the Victorian Parliament is couched in a broader debate about the merits of prayer in parliamentary procedure in parliaments around Australia and the world. This chapter looks at some of the recent debates that have shaped the conversation.

Common arguments for and against change

In 2018 a federal Senate Committee inquiry into a proposal to replace prayers with an invitation to prayer or reflection highlighted the key points of current debate.¹⁵⁶ The inquiry received over 800 submissions, illustrating the diversity of views and arguments involved in current debate, spanning those in favour and those in opposition to changing the tradition of prayer in parliamentary settings.

Those in favour of change—which include such stakeholders as the Council of Humanist Societies, the Rationalist Society of Australia, the National Secular Society and constitutional law expert Luke Beck, among others—raised a number of arguments. The following arguments mentioned in the inquiry's report are often cited as reasons for opposing prayer in parliaments:

- Australia is a secular nation and should have a clear separation of church and state;
- modern society is both multicultural and religiously diverse, and an invitation to prayer and reflection is more inclusive than the status quo;
- there is a significant and growing cohort of Australians with no religious affiliation;
- a Christian prayer's presence in parliament in the absence of other religions infringes on human rights, including freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination;
- a tradition should not be retained at the expense of excluding people;
- a prayer, when said by those who do not believe it, may be hypocritical.¹⁵⁷

Those in favour of retaining the prayer are similarly diverse in their arguments, with the following among those outlined in the report:

- the Lord's Prayer's is a part of a parliament's heritage and tradition, and is a reflection of Christianity's contribution to Australia's systems of government;
- Christianity is the dominant religious affiliation in the community;
- the removal of prayer may cause division;
- the prayer encourages Members, through being answerable to a higher power, to be altruistic and care for others' welfare;
- an invitation to reflection is, by comparison, 'insipid' and 'weak'.¹⁵⁸

The report did not recommend change, but provided a suggestion that a preamble to the prayer might invite Members to 'pray or reflect in your own way'.¹⁵⁹

Further debate in the Australian Parliament

There have been calls for the prayer to be removed since the 1990s. In 1997 Bob Brown (Australian Greens, Tasmania) unsuccessfully attempted to have the prayer (both the parliamentary prayer and the Lord's Prayer) replaced in the Federal Senate by a moment of silence. At the time the matter was sent to a committee, and the committee reported back:

It is clear that many senators who join in the prayer regard its retention as important, but among those who do not join in the prayer there does not appear to be a strong view that its proposed abolition is a significant question which should occupy the time of the Senate.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Senate Standing Committee on Procedure (2018) *Proposal to replace the parliamentary prayer*, final report, Canberra, The Committee, September, p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 4.

In 2008, in the wake of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, then Speaker of the federal House of Representatives Harry Jenkins stated that a public debate was warranted over whether the prayer should be rewritten or replaced. He met resistance from both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (Labor, Griffith) and Leader of the Opposition Malcolm Turnbull (Liberal, Wentworth), together with several others, and the matter did not progress.¹⁶¹ Periodic calls for change have subsequently come from the Greens.¹⁶² In 2022 Senate President Sue Lines, an atheist and chair of the Procedure Committee at the time of the 2018 prayer inquiry, also indicated she did not want to continue reading the prayer in that House.¹⁶³

1995: Agreement to introduce a moment of reflection in Legislative Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory

A commonly cited model by those advocating for a change to prayer in parliaments is the ACT's procedure. The ACT is the only Australian jurisdiction to implement a notable change away from the Christian prayer. In 1995, the Legislative Assembly amended its standing orders to replace the original Christian prayer read by the Speaker with a silent moment of reflection or prayer through the following motion, moved by Wayne Berry (Labor, Ginninderra), then the Deputy Leader of the Opposition:

That the following amendments be made to the standing orders:

- (1) standing order 30, omit all words after "shall be read:", substitute the following words: "Members, at the beginning of this sitting of the Assembly, I would ask you to stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory."; and
- (2) standing order 74, after "Prayer", insert "or reflection".¹⁶⁴

The motion was moved following a parliamentary committee report, which found that 'the existing prayer ... did not reflect the spirituality of the community generally'.¹⁶⁵ Berry cited the different make-up of Australian society in comparison to 'the one that existed when there was a state religion' and noted that the revision reflected 'the change in the structure of our society'.¹⁶⁶

Much of the support for the motion referenced the right to freedom of religion. Kerrie Tucker (Greens, Molonglo) cited the irrelevance of traditions to those who do not believe in them, saying she thought those Members in support of prayer were 'intent on disallowing others who may not share their beliefs the right to reflect on what is important to them'.¹⁶⁷ Andrew Whitecross (Labor, Brindabella) agreed, saying that people should not be discouraged from standing for Parliament due to an impression that a person of one faith may 'somehow have greater rights to participate or greater status in the community than people with other personal beliefs'.¹⁶⁸

A number of Members objected to the motion. Illustrative of several community and church views was the speech by Gregory Cornwell (Liberal, Molonglo), then the Speaker of the House but speaking from the floor. He quoted from a joint statement by the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Uniting Church in the ACT, which suggested the prayer be retained with the addition of a 'period of silent reflection'.¹⁶⁹ The Salvation Army submitted that the 'land is steeped in Judaic Christian tradition' and that the prayer was 'not offensive' for

¹⁶¹ AAP staff (2008) 'Govt, Opposition united in prayer stance', *ABC News*, 26 October.

¹⁶² J. Ireland (2014) 'Time to scrap Lord's Prayer in Parliament: Greens', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January.

¹⁶³ Richards (2023) op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Berry (1995) op. cit., p. 695.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 695.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 696.

¹⁶⁷ K. Tucker (1995) 'Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments', *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 699.

¹⁶⁸ A. Whitecross (1995) 'Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments', *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 710.

¹⁶⁹ G. Cornwell (1995) 'Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments', *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 697.

Islamic or Jewish people.¹⁷⁰ The Church of St Andrew found that to address ‘Almighty God’ is ‘acceptable to all major religions’.¹⁷¹ Whether the prayer was exclusively Christian was a point of contention, with some Members echoing the view that it accounted for other monotheistic religions, and others disagreeing and indicating it was ‘distinctly Christian’.¹⁷²

The president of the ACT’s Ethnic Communities Council advocated for keeping the prayer, saying that ‘the minority should not dictate what the majority within a multicultural [society] espouse. As it is for those who oppose or deny religious expression there is opportunity to remain silent’.¹⁷³ However, the pastor of the Holy Cross Lutheran Church in ACT was of a different opinion, submitting that a presumption of Christian faith among parliamentarians was no longer a reasonable expectation and that they saw no reason ‘why this proposal should not meet with approval’.¹⁷⁴

The motion was narrowly passed after extensive debate, 8 ayes to 7 noes, with Labor and the Greens voting aye and Liberals voting no.

Constitutionality

Constitutional law academics have scrutinised the issue of prayer in the Federal Parliament with regard to Australia’s constitutional separation of church and state, which Michael Hogan describes as:

... a unique mixture of elements derived from a British Constitution and tradition of law, from a superimposed American principle of separation, and from the evolving pattern of Australian federalism and judicial interpretation.¹⁷⁵

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.¹⁷⁶

This may provide some avenues for challenge to the prayer in the Australian Parliament, though whether a standing order could be considered a law is unclear;¹⁷⁷ it is difficult to say with surety due to the fact that the High Court has never ruled on this issue.¹⁷⁸ Professor Gonzalo Villalta Puig suggests that, among other reasons for a court challenge being difficult, ‘the right to freedom of religion under s 116 does not apply to the standing orders that require the Speaker and President to read prayers on taking the chair’.¹⁷⁹

Regarding Victoria, Puig says that the High Court has interpreted section 116 ‘as a regulator of Commonwealth legislative power rather than as a guarantee of an individual civil right’.¹⁸⁰ Puig further justifies a narrow interpretation of the Constitution’s applicability to state legislatures due to the fact that it ‘does not apply to the States even though it is in Ch V (The States) of the Constitution’.¹⁸¹

Unlike the Australian Constitution, Victoria’s Constitution does not include freedom of religion provisions preventing the creation of laws that advocate for a particular religion. There are, however, provisions in the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* relating to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief (section 14) as well

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 697.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 697.

¹⁷² *ibid.*, p. 699.

¹⁷³ T. De Domenico (1995) ‘Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments’, *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 707.

¹⁷⁴ M. Moore (1995) ‘Standing orders 30 and 74 – Prayer and routine of business: Amendments’, *Debates*, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, 1 June, p. 703.

¹⁷⁵ G.V. Puig (2009) ‘[Parliamentary Prayers and Section 116 of the Australian Constitution](#)’, Parliament of Australia website, June.

¹⁷⁶ [Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act](#) (Cth), s 116.

¹⁷⁷ L. Beck (2017) ‘[Official prayers in federal parliament are divisive and unconstitutional, and should be scrapped](#)’, *The Conversation*, 22 August.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Puig (2009) *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*

as recognition and equality before the law (section 8).¹⁸² Charter compatibility on the grounds of section 8 has been raised in the context of local government prayer procedures¹⁸³ and in the Parliament (see ‘2016: Greens reference to Procedure Committee’) but has not been formally tested.

Recurrent debate in the Victorian Parliament

There have been several debates in the Victorian Parliament on its tradition of reciting the Lord’s Prayer, along with further calls for this tradition to be altered. In the same year the ACT enacted its revised procedure, Carole Marple (Labor, Altona), stated in the House that the Lord’s Prayer must be ‘reconsidered’ given the multicultural nature of society. She suggested ‘a statement which expresses human spirituality for all of us in various ways and which may be accepted by members of our society across the board’, saying that she would prefer ‘time for quiet meditation’ for Members to reflect on their parliamentary duties.¹⁸⁴

On 26 May 2000, in advance of an invitation to Aboriginal Elders from the Council for Aboriginal Recognition to attend the floor of the House for Reconciliation Week, then Premier Steve Bracks (Labor, Williamstown) successfully moved that, on the day the Elders attended, the Legislative Assembly would allow ‘elders to give a traditional Aboriginal welcome in lieu of the Speaker reading the Lord’s Prayer’.¹⁸⁵ There were some opposed to this, with Lorraine Elliott (Liberal, Mooroolbark) saying: ‘If we do not honour and observe our own traditions, we are less likely to honour and observe those of others’.¹⁸⁶ On the day in question, the Lord’s Prayer was not read prior to the ceremony—which included Elders’ speeches for Reconciliation Week—but it was read following a suspension of the House and prior to the resumption of business.¹⁸⁷

Since that time, the issue has been raised mostly in the Legislative Council. In 2008 Sue Pennicuik (Greens, Southern Metropolitan) broached the topic of abandoning the prayer in a Members statement following Harry Jenkins’s suggestion that the prayer in the federal House of Representatives be replaced by an Acknowledgement of Country.¹⁸⁸ The issue was again raised in 2014 when the Legislative Council considered an amendment to standing orders to allow a local religious leader to deliver the prayer at a regional sitting of Parliament. While David Davis (Liberal, Southern Metropolitan) said the gesture would recognise ‘the heritage of the chamber and the heritage of our community’,¹⁸⁹ Pennicuik signalled that, in addition to the Greens’ existing concerns over parliamentary prayer, having a religious leader deliver a prayer to the Council would be ‘not appropriate’ in the context of preserving a separation between church and state.¹⁹⁰

2016: Greens reference to Procedure Committee

Ms Pennicuik again raised the issue in 2016, proposing a reference to the Procedure Committee to find a ‘suitable alternative to the daily prayer’.¹⁹¹ In doing so, she asked that the committee ‘look at alternatives that already occur in other parliaments in Australia and

¹⁸² *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), ss 8 and 14.

¹⁸³ Sanders & Neal (2024) op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ C. Marple (1995) ‘Appropriation (Parliament 1995–96, no. 1) Bill: Second reading debate’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 12 October, p. 638.

¹⁸⁵ S. Bracks, Premier of Victoria (2000) ‘Aboriginal reconciliation’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 26 May, p. 1859.

¹⁸⁶ L. Elliott (2000) ‘Members statements: Lord’s Prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 30 May, p. 1937.

¹⁸⁷ A. Andrianopoulos, Speaker (2000) *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 31 May, p. 2018.

¹⁸⁸ S. Pennicuik (2008) ‘Members statements: Parliament: Lord’s Prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 28 October, pp. 4524–25.

¹⁸⁹ D. Davis, Minister for Health (2014) ‘Business of the House: Standing orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 16 October, p. 3405.

¹⁹⁰ S. Pennicuik (2014) ‘Business of the House: Standing orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 16 October, p. 3403.

¹⁹¹ S. Pennicuik (2016) ‘*Procedure Committee: Reference*’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 23 March, p. 1378.

across the world which would better reflect our multicultural community in Victoria'.¹⁹² Pennicuik suggested a number of examples of alternative procedures around the world, including:

- a rotation of prayers from multiple faiths
- a moment of silence for prayer or reflection
- voluntary attendance of prayers only on special occasions
- no provision for prayer at all.

In echoing Pennicuik's view of prayer as exclusionary, Fiona Patten (Australian Sex Party/Reason, Northern Metropolitan) highlighted that Victoria contained followers of 135 religious faiths and that the reading of the Lord's Prayer in Parliament was discriminatory under section 8(2) of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, 'Recognition and equality before the law'. She said it discriminated 'against anyone who is non-religious' and 'people who do not have the same religion', and that this demonstrated 'some are more equal than others in this place, and they seem to be of the Christian club'.¹⁹³

There was some dispute over the level of public demand for change. Mary Wooldridge (Liberal, Eastern Metropolitan), then Leader of the Opposition in the Council, cited Malcolm Turnbull's 2008 comments about the prayer being 'a non-partisan reaffirmation of our commitment to the common good' and said she had fielded no 'representations from Victorians' for an end to the Lord's Prayer in Parliament.¹⁹⁴ On the contrary, Patten indicated that people were supportive of a change to a procedure they are 'generally surprised' to learn still exists.¹⁹⁵ Pennicuik ultimately said, 'People are not clamouring for it or making demands, but ... most people that I have spoken to agree not necessarily on what should happen but that there should be a discussion about an alternative which could be more inclusive'.¹⁹⁶

Gavin Jennings (Labor, South-Eastern Metropolitan), then the Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, advised caution in advancing change in such a way that would be 'confronting' to some parts of the community, particularly those of the Christian faith.¹⁹⁷ While not a practising Christian himself, he said that the prayer has 'a value system that underpins it that I have a regard for'.¹⁹⁸ Dr Rachel Carling-Jenkins (Democratic Labour Party/Australian Conservatives Party/Independent, Western Metropolitan) picked up on this to acknowledge prayer's appeal in representing a values system that is 'deep, meaningful and respectful irrespective of faith'.¹⁹⁹

Tradition was a common theme of discussion. Carling-Jenkins also raised the prayer's representation of the Judaeo-Christian values underpinning the parliament's creation,²⁰⁰ while Wooldridge cited 'Victorians' connection to the Westminster system'.²⁰¹ Pennicuik posited that while the prayer 'may be traditional it is no longer representative or reflective of the general community in Victoria'.²⁰² Patten raised examples of traditions that have been

¹⁹² *ibid.*, p. 1378.

¹⁹³ F. Patten (2016) '[Procedure Committee: Reference](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 23 March, p. 1381.

¹⁹⁴ M. Wooldridge (2016) '[Procedure Committee: Reference](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 22 June, p. 3085.

¹⁹⁵ F. Patten (2016) *op. cit.*, p. 1381.

¹⁹⁶ S. Pennicuik (2016) '[Procedure Committee: Reference](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 22 June, p. 3088.

¹⁹⁷ G. Jennings, then Special Minister of State (2016) '[Procedure Committee: Reference](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 23 March, p. 1384.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 1384.

¹⁹⁹ Dr. R. Carling-Jenkins (2016) '[Procedure Committee: Reference](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 22 June, p. 3086.

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 3086.

²⁰¹ M. Wooldridge (2016) *op. cit.*, p. 3085.

²⁰² S. Pennicuik (2016) 23 March, *op. cit.*, p. 1378.

changed or abandoned for the better, saying that heritage that is exclusive to one religion was not ‘a heritage that we want to take forward’.²⁰³

The motion was negatived without division and the reference lost.

2019: Legislative Council Procedure Committee report into commencement of sitting day proceedings

Prayer was again debated in the 59th Parliament when President Shaun Leane referred the matter of sitting day commencement proceedings to the Legislative Council Procedure Committee.²⁰⁴ A public inquiry was not undertaken, in part due to the large volume of responses to the 2018 Senate inquiry and the limited resources available to deal with a comparable workload.²⁰⁵ Wendy Lovell (Liberal, Northern Victoria), the Deputy President, tabled a report on 26 November 2019, along with a minority report from Liberal committee members.

Lovell reiterated the Liberal Party’s view that the prayer was an important reflection of ‘Victoria’s Judaeo-Christian heritage but also the principles and traditions of our Westminster parliamentary democracy’.²⁰⁶ Then Leader of the Opposition, David Davis called the debate around changing procedure on prayer ‘an ongoing attack on our history’.²⁰⁷

On the other hand, Fiona Patten advocated for ‘a secular, silent reflection at the beginning of the day’,²⁰⁸ while Minister for Roads Jaala Pulford noted that ‘this question of how 40 people start their day three times a week, 16 weeks a year’ was ‘an enduring question’.²⁰⁹ She raised procedures operating in other jurisdictions as options to consider—the ACT, Scotland and Northern Ireland—and found it ‘unusual and indeed exclusive that one faith be preferred over others’.²¹⁰

2021: Fiona Patten’s motion to amend sessional orders

On 4 August 2021, Fiona Patten moved to amend Legislative Council sessional orders to replace the Lord’s Prayer until the end of the parliamentary session. Orders would be amended to invite Members to ‘stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of Victoria’²¹¹—echoing a similar invitation in the ACT Parliament. Patten reiterated many of the points she made in debates in 2016 and 2019, saying that while tradition was important and that her proposal was ‘pro-religion and thus pro-Christianity’, the inclusion of ‘one religion’s prayer has become divisive and disrespectful but also discordant to our society’.²¹² In her advocacy, Patten cited the support of a coalition of community leaders who had cosigned a letter to support her push. Signatories included representatives from the Victorian Council of Churches, the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, UNESCO and Catholic priest and community activist Father Bob Maguire.²¹³

There were also differing views on public sentiment. Patten and Greens leader Dr Samantha Ratnam (Northern Metropolitan) found community support for change. Conversely, Craig Ondarchie (Liberal, Northern Metropolitan) and Melina Bath (Nationals, Eastern Victoria)

²⁰³ F. Patten (2016) op. cit., p. 1382.

²⁰⁴ W. Lovell (2019) ‘Committees: Procedure Committee: Commencement of Sitting Day Proceedings’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 November, p. 4198.

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4198.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4199.

²⁰⁷ D. Davis (2019) ‘Committees: Procedure Committee: Commencement of Sitting Day Proceedings’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 November, p. 4200.

²⁰⁸ F. Patten (2019) ‘Committees: Procedure Committee: Commencement of Sitting Day Proceedings’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 November, p. 4199.

²⁰⁹ J. Pulford, Minister for Roads (2019) ‘Committees: Procedure Committee: Commencement of Sitting Day Proceedings’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 November, p. 4199.

²¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 4200.

²¹¹ F. Patten (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, pp. 2751–52.

²¹² *ibid.*, p. 2752.

²¹³ *ibid.*, p. 2754.

found support for retaining the prayer. The Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, Jaclyn Symes (Labor, Northern Victoria), said, ‘Frankly I actually think the vast majority of Victorians probably could not care less about this issue, but some people feel strongly one way or the other’.²¹⁴ Many contributions questioned the topic’s urgency, given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the time.

Ondarchie, Bernie Finn (Liberal, Western Metropolitan) and Jeff Bourman (Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, Eastern Victoria) all indicated that the sentiment of the prayer was something to be valued. Finn questioned ‘why we would want to remove a prayer or any form of words that promotes love, peace and forgiveness’ before labelling the proposed change as ‘anti-family’, ‘anti-faith’ and ‘anti-freedom’.²¹⁵ Ondarchie questioned why Patten was ‘trying to change the parliamentary procedure for an element of the parliamentary day that she is not even here for’, noting the voluntary aspect of prayer attendance.²¹⁶ Bourman summed up his interpretation of the prayer as not strictly for Christians but about being ‘a good person’.²¹⁷

Patten ultimately found support from the Greens, Rod Barton (Transport Matters Party, Eastern Metropolitan) and Andy Meddick (Animal Justice Party, Western Victoria)—who moved an amendment to the motion seeking to have the Acknowledgement of Country read first²¹⁸—and drew some favourable comments from Liberal Democrats Tim Quilty (Northern Victoria) and David Limbrick (South-Eastern Metropolitan). Limbrick posed the ‘inverse’ scenario: ‘If there was no prayer and we were voting to insert the Lord’s Prayer into our day, would that be appropriate? Ultimately I came to the conclusion that it would not be’.²¹⁹ He did not support a secular prayer but would support a moment of silence. Patten’s motion was opposed by Liberals and Nationals, as well as Bourman and Dr Catherine Cumming (Independent, Western Metropolitan).

Further debate on the motion was deferred and the question never resolved. The Government made a qualified commitment for the next parliament, with Symes saying a Labor government would ‘commit to workshopping a replacement model that is purpose-fit for Victoria’, but also ‘that the model should be consistent across both houses of Parliament and not just the Legislative Council’.²²⁰ The commitment was confirmed later by then Premier Daniel Andrews, but he added at the time, ‘Far from being at the top of my list, this is not even on my list’.²²¹

There have been no official developments on this commitment at the time of publication.

Ongoing debate and the trend of abstention

It is a growing practice for Members across both houses to wait until the prayer has been finished before entering the chamber. Dr Ratnam in 2021 described the Greens’ abstention in both chambers as a ‘longstanding practice’.²²² Pennicuik indicated in 2016 that she and former Greens leader Greg Barber (Northern Metropolitan) had been doing so for five years to that point,²²³ and had recently been joined by another Greens MP, Colleen Hartland (Western

²¹⁴ J. Symes, Leader of the Government (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2756.

²¹⁵ B. Finn (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2758.

²¹⁶ C. Ondarchie (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2760.

²¹⁷ J. Bourman (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2763.

²¹⁸ A. Meddick (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2759.

²¹⁹ D. Limbrick (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 4 August, p. 2762.

²²⁰ Symes (2021) op. cit., p. 2756.

²²¹ Smethurst (2021) op. cit.

²²² Dr S. Ratnam (2021) ‘Motions: Sessional orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, p. 2756.

²²³ Pennicuik (2016) op. cit., p. 1380.

Metropolitan), who said at the time that the Parliament needed ‘a prayer that takes in all faiths, a reflection or a welcome to country’.²²⁴

Members of other parties have also done so, particularly in the Legislative Council, with other Members including Fiona Patten and Candy Broad (Labor, Northern Victoria).²²⁵ Pennicuik indicated in 2016 that, at that time, ‘at least seven’ Members of the Council were in the habit of abstaining from prayer participation.²²⁶ President Shaun Leane indicated in 2019 that he accommodated this in the following manner without being compelled by standing orders to do so:

I have decided to sit down after the Lord’s Prayer and obviously let some people find their way into the chamber, and then I choose to stand to do the acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land. If any members feel that they would like to join me in that, they should feel free.²²⁷

The issue of prayer has persisted into the 60th Parliament. Its place as the Legislative Council’s first procedure of the day (that is, prior to the Acknowledgement of Country) was made official in the standing orders agreed to in September 2022, a status quo David Davis indicated the coalition would be keen to preserve.²²⁸

The government’s stated commitment to reviewing the Lord’s Prayer’s place in Parliament has also been raised by the Greens and Legalise Cannabis Victoria. In February 2023, Premier Andrews indicated that a parliamentary committee may be an option for finding a replacement for the prayer and ensuring it is ‘more reflective of the fact there are many different faiths across our Victorian community’.²²⁹ David Ettershank (Legalise Cannabis Victoria, Western Metropolitan) raised a question without notice on prayer in March 2023, prompting Jaclyn Symes to respond that it was not a matter for government but for both chambers to reach a resolution on. However, she did indicate that she would ‘stand by that commitment’.²³⁰

Recent comments from Pope Francis describing surrogate motherhood as ‘deplorable’ have elevated the issue among some Labor Members in the Legislative Assembly.²³¹ In protest, two Labor MPs—Dylan Wight (Tarneit) and Paul Edbrooke (Frankston)—stated that they would no longer participate in the daily prayer.²³² In the first week of the 2024 parliamentary year, four additional Labor Members abstained from entering the LA chamber until the prayer had been read: Jordan Crugnale (Bass), Mathew Hilakari (Point Cook), Paul Mercurio (Hastings) and Michaela Settle (Eureka).²³³ In the context of calls for change, Premier Jacinta Allan (Labor, Bendigo East) acknowledged that Victoria’s cultural diversity ought to be reflected in parliamentary practices but said in January 2024, ‘These are matters that are decided by the parliament itself and we need to be having those broader cross-party discussions’.²³⁴

²²⁴ C. Hartland (2015) ‘Members statements: Attendance for prayer’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 24 June, p. 1939.

²²⁵ Pennicuik (2016) op. cit., p. 1380; Patten (2016) op. cit., p. 1381.

²²⁶ Pennicuik (2016) op. cit., p. 1380.

²²⁷ S. Leane, President of the Legislative Council of Victoria (2019) ‘Questions without notice: Acknowledgement of country’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 7 March, p. 653.

²²⁸ D. Davis (2022) ‘Business of the House, Standing orders’, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 20 September, p. 3448.

²²⁹ AAP & SBS (2023) ‘[The Lord’s Prayer could be dumped from Victoria’s parliament. Here’s why](#)’, SBS News, 6 February.

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²³¹ Francis (2024) ‘[To members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See](#)’, The Holy See website, 8 January.

²³² R. Eddie (2024) ‘[Labor MPs quit parliament prayers after Pope denounces surrogacy](#)’, *The Age*, 10 January.

²³³ B. Kolovos (2024) ‘[More Victorian MPs sitting out of Lord’s Prayer as state parliament resumes](#)’, in ‘Australian politics live with Amy Remeikis’ live blog, *The Guardian Australia*, 6 February.

²³⁴ B. Kolovos (2024) ‘[Should Australian parliaments axe the Lord’s Prayer? In Victoria it’s up for debate](#)’, *The Guardian Australia*, 17 January.

4 | Conclusion

The use of prayer in parliamentary settings remains a contentious issue. It has been the subject of recurring debate across Victorian parliaments since the 1990s, with arguments ranging from its heritage value to claims of exclusivity. However, it has been a particularly common debate since 2016—first in the Legislative Council and now in the Legislative Assembly. Support for the tradition has become well established over the years. However, there have been indications that the Victorian Government is willing to look at alternatives to the Lord's Prayer in the current Parliament with the cooperation of both houses. Prayer procedures vary widely in parliaments around the world, providing options for how procedure could be amended in Victoria. Further, Pope Francis's comments on surrogacy have only fuelled debate on prayer's suitability in a modern legislative body. As a result, the Lord's Prayer's place in the Victorian Parliament promises to be a topic of ongoing discussion.

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Enquiries

Victorian Parliamentary Library & Information Service
Parliament House, Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002
Telephone: (03) 9651 8640
<https://new.parliament.vic.gov.au/>

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