

## PRAYERS

### *Motion*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [3.32 pm]: I move —

That a revised form of prayer, as contained in the schedule to this motion, be adopted by the Council.

### **Schedule**

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

As many honourable members in this chamber will recall, I have canvassed this issue in this house before. Indeed, this is the second time that I have put this motion on the notice paper. It is, however, the first time that it has been debated. The reason that it lapsed on the notice paper was that the previous Parliament came to an end. I feel very strongly about this issue. It is a small but symbolic thing that the Parliament could do. I have never attempted to make a partisan issue of this matter. Because I have 45 minutes to speak on this motion, I will share with honourable members a bit of my understanding of the history of how we got to the stage of saying the prayer that we say at the beginning of each day's sitting of our chamber. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate that I am not trying to score political points here. There is a serious issue about the standing and legitimacy of this chamber in the eyes of the Western Australian community, and that is what I will attempt to point out.

I have moved this motion again in this Parliament, which is identical to the motion that was on the notice paper in the previous Parliament, to give us a chance to debate the issue. I will start with some of my personal history on the idea that the prayer could be changed and the form of the change that I am proposing. I sat in the chamber for several years absorbing the rituals, practices and procedures of this place, growing increasingly uncomfortable at the language that is used in the opening prayer. As honourable members know, because they sit and listen to it every day, the opening prayer refers to "men" and "man"; it is all couched in the male gender. If it was couched in the male gender when talking about God, I would not have a particular problem because I know that is a big theological argument. I had quite an amusing discussion with one of my colleagues today. Hon Ken Travers said that his assumption was always that God was a woman so why would we be worried about the accusation that we were trying to change it? That is not the point that I am endeavouring to make with this motion. I will go into some of those details in a moment.

In April 2011 I got to the point of putting my thoughts in writing and sending a letter to the President, pointing out that I thought it was wrong to be using gender-exclusive language in 2011 and that we should look at various ways to remove that language from the prayer. Before I did that, I talked to people who had been in Parliament much longer than I had at that stage about how we might go about changing the prayer. My initial feeling before I consulted more widely was that the way to do it in a bipartisan sense might be to set up some kind of working group, perhaps including people from outside Parliament and religious and church groups, to sit around a table and talk about what form of prayer or meditation or whatever they chose would be an appropriate way of formalising the opening of the parliamentary day in this chamber. It was pointed out to me that the existing prayer was devised by a committee. It was called the Liturgy Committee. I think that this prayer is pretty unsatisfactory. On the basis that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, it does have the feeling that it is not a well-crafted poetic piece of work.

**Hon Simon O'Brien:** Are you serious? It's a beautiful prayer.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** It was designed by a committee. I think it has a slightly clunky feel about it.

**Hon Donna Faragher:** So this one is designed by you, though.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** No, it is not designed by me.

**Hon Peter Katsambanis:** It's designed by your committee.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** No, absolutely not. I ask members to listen to what I am saying. I am not trying to score points here. I say to Hon Simon O'Brien that I am only talking about the first part of the prayer; I am not talking about the Lord's Prayer. That was designed by a committee. I am just explaining my reasoning.

I abandoned the idea of the committee and I wrote to the President, not just out of the blue but because at that stage he was engaged in chairing a review of the standing orders of this place and I knew that that was a kind of root and branch survey of our existing standing orders. While I know that the words used in the prayer are not designated by the standing orders, there is a reference to the prayer in the standing orders. I thought that might be a way of engaging members of the chamber in some discussion about whether we wanted to change it, and if we did want to change it, what form of words we would like to use. The President put my letter to the committee and I understand there was some discussion. I do not know what was discussed in that committee but the

message that I got back from the committee was that it was not prepared to consider it at that stage because it did not technically fit within its terms of reference, and, what is more, the prayer could be changed only by motion of the house. In a sense, that goes without saying because standing orders can be changed only by motion of the house. Nevertheless, it took me back to considering the course of action that I have now taken, which is to put to the house a motion to change the prayer. We go from 2011 through the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges' review of the standing orders to May 2012, which is when I put the first substantive motion to the house. Only seven or eight months after that, this Parliament was prorogued and we did not get the chance to debate that motion. Hence, it is now back on the notice paper, and today it surfaced for debate.

Yesterday I was in the chamber for prayers and I noticed that the public gallery was full of school students. I went to the Parliamentary Education Office today to see if I could find out which school they were from. Unfortunately, I think it was one of the schools that came in the public entrance, so I am not sure where those students were from. I am pretty sure they were secondary students and were wearing a school uniform. I am only sorry I cannot identify them. They sat there for about half an hour, listening intently to our formal business and then departed. I thought: I'm not sure we have inspired many of them with what they have heard thus far today. The point is that the young men and women from whichever school they go to sat through the prayer. They heard a prayer that does not use inclusive language. In a sense, I suppose that might have been a bit of a curiosity to them because I do not think there are many places in the lives of young people today where they hear that kind of gendered language, because it is simply not used anymore; it is so old fashioned that it is just not used. They may, indeed, have been a bit bemused when they heard it. I will remind people of it because I know what it is like to sit through something every day and not really listen to it. A couple of times I have had to go back to the written form of the prayer to remind myself exactly what the words say. This, Mr President, is what you say at the introduction of every day's sitting —

Almighty God, we humbly beseech you.

That is not the right one, I am sorry. I will come back to it when I have found the right piece of paper.

Thank you, very much, Mr President, you are very kind to hand me your copy. It reads —

Almighty God, creator of the universe, giver of life, who has ordained that man should live as a social being, seeking the fulfilment of his own true purpose within the society and sanctions of his fellow man  
...

The prayer goes on, but that is the end of that gendered language. Our prayer clearly says that God has ordained that man should live as a social being. A couple of years ago, when I first put this notice of motion on the notice paper, a member of the government said to me, "Everyone knows God is a man; let's not have this debate in the chamber; it's not appropriate." Part of that prayer could be interpreted as talking about God. When it says "ordained that man should live as a social being, seeking the fulfilment of his own true purpose", maybe there is an argument that "his" refers to God. Then it says "within the society and sanctions of his fellow man", so clearly those two uses of "his" refer to "man" who "should live as a social being". I rest my case there.

**Hon Liz Behjat** interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order!

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** If anyone wants to argue that there is a syntactic point there, that might be an interesting discussion to have. It is fairly clear, if only by strong implication, that we are talking about man living as a social being. My point is that, day after day, students come into this place and listen to a form of language that is effectively archaic because it contains political implications, using the male gender, presumably to refer to men and women. That is simply not done anywhere else in our education system, in our churches, in any of our courts or in any of our public institutions. My straightforward proposition is that we should be looking at moving to a different prayer, maintaining the use of the Lord's Prayer, but removing those introductory sentences and replacing them with some form of what is known throughout Australia as the parliamentary prayer. Each Parliament in Australia, other than the Legislative Council of Western Australia, has adopted a form of the parliamentary prayer.

Notice that I am not suggesting we stop praying. I am not trying to abolish the prayer. The Senate Standing Committee on Procedure's second report of 1997 was on an inquiry into the prayer that was used in the Senate. The result of that inquiry is that the Senate now uses a form of the parliamentary prayer. The part of the inquiry that interested me was the consideration of the question about whether, indeed, in the late twentieth century it was appropriate to open parliamentary days with a prayer at all. The conclusion of that Senate committee was that for people who think the prayer is important and the people who pray with it, it is a significant thing to be able to pray at the beginning of each parliamentary day. For the people who do not pray for one reason or another—they may be atheists, so they simply do not join in the prayer, or they pray to a different sort of God or in a different format—it was not offensive; it was simply a period of quiet reflection. Even the non-prayers

considered it to be a significant moment in the parliamentary day. The Senate committee therefore recommended that the prayer be retained. It recommended that the prayer to be adopted be a form of the parliamentary prayer. That is exactly what I am doing. I do not join the prayer, but I do not find it offensive that the President says a prayer. I do not take any exception to members who use the prayer moment to communicate with the God they believe in. As a person who does not believe in God, it does not offend me at all. I think it is a fitting way to start the day.

Since I started talking about this some years ago I have had—not hundreds—probably a couple of dozen communications from people with all sorts of different points of view. One or two have called me the devil incarnate. That is fine because they say that about me for lots of reasons.

**Hon Ken Travers:** I was going to ask: is that about the prayer or something else?

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** That is an exceptionally good point, Hon Ken Travers. I am used to them. I have a couple of letters I will share with honourable members a little later. One or two communications came from people who said it was not appropriate to pray to a Christian God in a multi-faith society and that we should be sitting down with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians and coming up with some form of multi-faith prayer to start the day. I will be honest with honourable members: I thought that might be a little too far to go in one jump. I made the decision to not pursue that course of action, but I put it to honourable members from all parties in this house that one day that is what we might like to look at. I would be happy to support a move to that kind of multi-faith approach to the prayer. But let us just take it one step at a time. That is why I propose this form of prayer, which includes gender-neutral language.

The original argument I put to the President was that the prayer with the words that Mr President uses today contains words such as “man” and “his”. Clearly the acceptability of the use of the male pronoun is long past. This is not something I have invented. Members do not have to go further than the introductory manuals in the Department of Education or in any university in this country to find style guides and procedural manuals that tell us to avoid gendered language. There is plenty of literature about the use of inclusive language, and much of that literature gives practical examples of how to avoid this use of language in case people feel there is not an elegant way to express themselves while dispensing with gendered language. There are plenty of elegant ways of doing it. With my tongue firmly in my cheek, I came up for you, Mr President, with a number of inelegant ways of rectifying the situation. I did it to make a rhetorical point about the fact that many of these examples of possible changes that I am about to go through not only are inelegant but also show up the ridiculous tangle we get ourselves into when we try to manipulate the language to mean what we say because we are wound up in some kind of political correctness or old-fashioned language.

I started from the proposition that the use of “man” promotes the impression, if not the reality, that reference is being made to male people. That is not to say that there may once have been acceptable generic uses for “man”, but modern usage clearly indicates that when the reference is specifically to males and females, it is better to use “humans” and “people” rather than “man” and “his”. I assume—I think all honourable members will agree with me—that when the prayer states “man should live as a social being”, we mean that all humans have been ordained to live as social beings. All humans seek fulfilment of their own true purpose within the society and sanctions of their fellow humans. Members might think that I am being funny and pedantic, but I make that assumption. If that is not true and we mean “man” and not “women”, make that argument and we will have that debate, but that is a totally different argument from the one that I am putting to honourable members now.

We do not have to overcomplicate this. There are lots and lots of sayings on the public record that correctly refer to men and democratic participation and all that sort of thing. I gave you, Mr President, an example. Thomas Jefferson said —

... Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed ...

It would be not only churlish but also factually inaccurate to go back and try to reframe that example in non-gendered language, as Jefferson meant men because women did not have the right to vote. When he referred to society being governed by men, that is exactly what he meant. Women played no role in either instituting governments or consenting to the power structures pertaining to them, which is what Jefferson was referring to. The words of the prayer are not directly comparable to Jefferson’s statement. However, the fact that women are now, obviously, full participants in the economic, social and political structures of our community makes it clear that my assumption that the prayer refers to humans rather than adult men is correct. This is when we come to my tongue-in-cheek suggestions about how we might rectify the language in the prayer. The first example I gave you, Mr President, retains “men”, “man” and “his”, but tests the legitimacy of the claim that they refer to people of both sexes by changing it to —

Almighty God, creator of the universe, giver of life, who has ordained that man (of both sexes) should live as a social being, seeking the fulfilment of his (or her) own true purpose within the society and sanctions of his (or her) fellow man (of both sexes); bless this Legislative Council now assembled ...

That is clearly ridiculous, but that is what members are suggesting if they seriously want to argue that “man” includes men and women. It does not. It refers to male people. We can see how ludicrous that suggestion is when we unpack how that would read in reality. I made a couple more suggestions based on the rejection of the generic use of “man” that are a bit more elegant than that first example. I am reading only the first half of the first sentence. We could include specific references to women, in which case the prayer would read —

Almighty God, creator of the universe, giver of life, who has ordained that man (and woman) should live as a social being, seeking the fulfilment of his (and her) own true purpose within the society and sanctions of his (and her) fellow man (and woman); bless this Legislative Council now assembled ...

That is the first option that simply takes out the gender-specific terms. Another version could be —

Almighty God, creator of the universe, giver of life, who has ordained that humans should live as social beings, seeking the fulfilment of their own true purpose within the society and sanctions of their fellows; bless this Legislative Council now assembled ...

I think that would be acceptable. If anybody wants to propose an amendment to simply neutralise the language, I would be prepared to look at that. I go back to the students sitting in the galleries who will not be taken by surprise if they hear language such as that because at least it refers to “humans” and “people” living within the society and sanctions of their “fellows”, instead of the exclusive language of “men” and “males”. However, having looked at that point, if we agree that we want to get rid of the gendered language, why do we not look at the form of the parliamentary prayer? I put it to members that, frankly, I prefer this version because I think it is more fitting to our time. It still refers to God; it is still a Christian prayer, but it also brings us into line with every other parliamentary house in this country. The version used in the Senate is —

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

The New South Wales prayer is clearly a version of the same prayer but it makes specific reference to New South Wales —

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.

Honourable members will see quite clearly that what I have suggested in the schedule attached to this motion is simply a Western Australian version of that New South Wales prayer —

Almighty God, we ask for your blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the true welfare of Western Australia and its people.

I have said that I am not trying to score political points and I can see the look of disbelief on government members’ faces because I do not usually stand here and do that; I am usually quite interested in scoring political points. I thought that it would give a flavour to the way these debates have been conducted in the past if I go over a bit of the history of how we reached this point in the first place. The prayer with which the President starts the day’s proceedings—the one which I am trying to change and which starts “Almighty God, creator of the universe”—was introduced into this place in 1975, which to those of us who were born in the middle of last century seems rather recent. It was done by motion of the house. Thanks to the miracles that are worked by Hansard and the Parliamentary Library, the debates are now all online. If members ever have a spare couple of hours on a cold winter’s night when somebody is standing in the chamber and talking about things that are not directly engaging their attention, they should look at the archived *Hansard* on POWAnet. It is all there and it is captivating reading to go right back over the decades and dip into some of the debates. That is what I did a bit of to prepare for today’s debate. This is all a bit murky because apparently nobody has been able to find an original version of the prayer that was said from about 1840. We think that prayer was written by the first colonial chaplain, Reverend Wittenoom, whose name has gone down in history for reasons that he may not be entirely happy with these days, but I am sure it was not the poor fellow’s fault. He was the first chaplain of the Swan colony and the consensus is that he was the one who penned the first prayer. It certainly started “Prevent us O Lord” because there is reference to that in the 1975 debate. People such as Harry Phillips and David Black may want to correct me on this, but I think the original form of the prayer went something like —

PREVENT us, O Lord, in all our doings with Thy most gracious favour, and further us with Thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued and ended in Thee, we may glorify Thy holy Name and finally by Thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

That is not the end. The prayer continues —

MOST GRACIOUS GOD, we humbly beseech Thee, as for this State in general, so especially for the Legislative Council at this time assembled: That Thou wouldest be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations to the advancement of Thy glory, the good of Thy Church, and the honour and welfare of Her Majesty and this portion of Her Dominions; That all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavours, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations. These and all other necessities, for them, for us, and Thy whole Church, we humbly beg, in the Name and Mediation of Jesus Christ our most blessed Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

That is not the end. Then it goes to the Lord's Prayer —

OUR FATHER which art in heaven ...

That is basically the prayer Mr President says today. Even that is not the end of the prayer. It finishes —

THE grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore.

Mr President, as you would well know, it is up to the President to exercise his or her discretion in these things, and your predecessors did indeed exercise their discretion. Apparently, before 1975, on a Tuesday the President would say the whole lot. By Wednesday, members were getting tired, so he would shorten it and leave out a couple of sections. On Thursday, he would only do the first bit, always followed by the Lord's Prayer. But it was a movable feast and the President would exercise his discretion about how much of the prayer he would read out.

In 1975, or presumably sometime in 1974, it was thought this needed to be formalised. I do not know why because I have not been able to find any reference to it, but some of the references to "dominions" were dropped. Perhaps honourable members began to feel a little odd when looking up at the children in the gallery and wondering whether they still needed to talk about dominions. I am only hypothesising here. Whatever the reason, the whole issue of how the Legislative Council should open its day was referred to a committee called the Standing Orders Committee, which in turn referred the whole question to the Liturgy Committee.

I make one further point about the very lengthy prayer I have read out, which in fact is four prayers: there is no use of gender language in it. Did any member notice that? It does not refer to "man" or "his" this or that. We will not lay the blame on our 1975 predecessors because they were clearly doing their best, which is well illustrated by the debate in this house. It started on 18 March with Hon Jack Heitman. Only one Labor member ever contributed to this debate, and the rest of the debate, I assume, is between members of the Liberal Party.

**Hon Ken Travers:** Is it in the Legislative Council?

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** It was in the Legislative Council, and there were Labor members here, but not many of them. One member of course was Hon Lyla Elliott, who is still very active in the Labor Party.

On 18 March 1975, Hon Jack Heitman, a member for Upper West Province, moved a motion to revise the form of the prayer in the Legislative Council. That motion came back on the notice paper on 25 March, a week later, and a debate took place in the context of a suspension of standing orders.

To introduce a bit of reference to party politics, the then Minister for Justice, Hon Neil McNeill, whom some members may know of, moved to suspend standing orders to debate the motion to change the prayer. Hon Ron Thompson, the then Leader of the Opposition, said that the house should not suspend standing orders to do that. He was a Labor member, and he lost the argument because, as Hon Ken Travers has pointed out, there were few Labor members in the Legislative Council at that time. Standing orders were then suspended so that the first part of the debate could take place.

Interestingly, the President of the Legislative Council at the time was Hon Arthur Griffith, not of course to be confused with Hon Clive Griffiths. The President at the time, Hon Arthur Griffith, was elected to this place in 1953 and Hon Clive Griffiths was elected a decade later. I thought it interesting to note that Hon Clive Griffiths participated in this debate in 1975, given that he paid us a visit yesterday.

**Hon Ken Travers:** It would have been just before he took office as President.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** That is right; he was elected in 1965.

At that time standing orders were suspended and the prayer, almost as we know it today, was read into *Hansard*, then there was the debate. He spoke about the history in which the President had asked the then Standing Orders Committee to give consideration to a new form of prayer. Two suggested forms of a prayer were received from the Liturgy Committee and they were combined. Hon Jack Heitman says that they were combined into the prayer that appears on the notice paper.

We now get to an interesting matter. Hon Jack Heitman says that he had asked the clerks to do some work for him, which, in these days of Google and so on, we spare the clerks from doing. The historical *Hansard* of 25 March 1975 states —

The Clerks have had a look at the history, or lack of history, in regard to prayers in the House, and it appears that a form of prayer for the Legislative Council was prepared by the Reverend J. B. Wittenoom, MA, who was the Colonial Chaplain in 1840.

Members may be interested to know a bit of Western Australian history. Reverend Wittenoom was the grandfather of Edith Cowan. One of his daughters by his second marriage was the mother of Edith Cowan.

In their research the clerks were able to find that when the standing orders were adopted in 1890 from the South Australian legislature, no reference to prayers appeared. A reference to prayers does not appear until 1907, when the then Standing Orders Committee undertook a complete revision of the standing orders. Even then there was no printed version of the prayer. The honourable member advised the house —

... it is assumed that the Standing Order relating to the reading of prayers was inserted at that time, as this particular provision was included in the 1914 Standing Orders reprint.

He continues —

There is no printed record of the form of prayer being altered, and therefore, because the present version is different from the original, it is assumed that at some stage a Presiding Officer exercised his prerogative and altered the prayer to suit his particular fancy.

Knowing that this place works on precedent, Mr President, you might like to look closely at that if you have views about this matter. Your predecessor does not correct the record at that stage, but clearly there had been other Presidents who felt they had a degree of latitude in this matter.

**The PRESIDENT:** That would be brave, as Sir Humphrey would say.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** Courageous, as Sir Humphrey might have said.

The debate continued that day. Other members traced the history of the prayer in Parliament over 300 years. House of Commons and House of Lords records show that the original form of the prayer was—I hesitate to mention this in front of Mr President—in fact a sermon given at the beginning of each day’s sitting. There are blessings to be counted. The debate finished that day, and within a couple of days a question without notice was asked about the prayer.

Again, it was members of the Liberal Party debating with each other. An objection was raised to leaving references to Jesus Christ and Almighty God in the prayer. This was all coming from the conservative side of politics. When the question was raised in Parliament, Hon Neil McNeill indicated that he was not going to proceed with the motion on that day’s notice paper because they had to go back to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges—there is a history to this and the more things change the more they stay the same. We eventually get to the substantive motion that went to the house on 22 April 1975, when the version of the prayer that Mr President reads every day this chamber sits was finally adopted by the Legislative Council.

There is one part of this debate that I will share with honourable members—partly for their amusement. There is a reference to the fact that the President has some degree of latitude, because Hon N.E. Baxter, who was the Minister for Health, pointed out that —

Standing Order 53 states —

The President shall take the Chair and read prayers at the time appointed on every day fixed for the meeting of the council.

The Standing Order does not say what form of prayer the President may use. I suggest, Mr President, that as presiding officer in this Chamber, when opening the proceedings of the House, you could at any time use any form of prayer you like. Even if the House does not agree to the motion you, Sir, could come here tomorrow and use this form or prayer or another form of prayer if you so desired.

The President was outraged by this suggestion and he actually interjected and said —

I hope the Minister is not suggesting I should use a form of prayer that has not been agreed to by the House.

That is how that debate proceeded. Of course, the Minister for Health said, “No, I respect the President’s authority.” The final contribution to the debate was made by Hon W.R. Withers, the member for North Province—that is Bill Withers of course, somebody who may be known to some honourable members, but no relation to Reg Withers, who, of course, was at that time in the federal Senate. This is something that we might

like to reflect on, given that this debate has only five minutes more to run today, and then we will revisit it when we come back in a few weeks' time.

**The PRESIDENT:** Actually, that is it for today, and you have five minutes left at the next session of motions on notice. The time for motions on notice has elapsed and, looking at the time, I will leave the chair until the ringing of the bells.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

*Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm*