

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL — OPENING PRAYER

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [5.43 pm]: I want to tell honourable members that when we return for the next session of parliamentary sittings I will put it to honourable members that we should support a motion to replace the opening prayer of the Legislative Council with a Western Australian version, akin to those used in most Australian Parliaments. It would read as follows —

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 Western Australia.

Mr President, I know you are familiar with the argument I am about to outline because I put it to you in the context of the review of the standing orders, which has just been carried out by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges. I understand that the result of some discussion within that committee on this matter was that the prayer could be changed only by motion and that perhaps it should be referred back to me for consideration in that context. That is why I want to outline my argument to honourable members so that we have two weeks to think about it. I will be happy to then chat to anybody who wants to support what I am about to propose.

I have been a member of this place for just on seven years; in fact, seven years this week. I came into the Legislative Council with a deep respect for the practices and procedures of the Parliament in general and the Legislative Council in particular. I have never been a person who thinks it is appropriate to contemplate the reform of any of those practices and procedures until one has spent some time observing them personally. After seven years, my feeling is that it is time to contemplate some reforms. I want to outline to honourable members my reasons for proposing to reform the opening prayer.

As honourable members know, the first part of the opening prayer, as it is currently used, 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; bless this Legislative Council now assembled ...

It seems to me that the time when such references to “man” and the use of the male pronoun were acceptable is long past. Honourable members are likely to be familiar with the literature—now very extensive—on the use of inclusive language, in which case they will know that it has been well established that the use of terms like “man” promote the impression that reference is being made to male people. While there may once have been an acceptable generic use of the term “man,” I put it to honourable members that modern usage clearly dictates that where the reference is specifically to males and females, terms like “humans” or “people” are to be preferred. Honourable members will note that in making this observation, I am making an assumption; that is, that the prayer we use every day intends to convey the idea that all humans have been ordained to live as social beings and that all humans seek the fulfilment of their own true purpose within the society and sanctions of their fellow humans.

Of course, that is an assumption, and I may be mistaken in that assumption; it is not hard to find examples of past references couched in the male gender that are clearly meant to refer only to adult male humans. For example, when Thomas Jefferson said that governments are “instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”, he clearly intended people to understand that in using the term “men”, he was referring to adult male humans since women, who did not have the vote, played no role in either instituting governments or consenting to the power structures pertaining to them.

While the words of the prayer do not bear the same close relationship to the question of enfranchisement, the fact that women are now regarded as full participants in the economic, social and political structures of our community provides a sound basis for my assumption that the wording of the prayer is supposed to apply to all humans, rather than just to adult males. That being the case, I put forward a couple of suggestions for change. There is more than one way to resolve this problem.

The first suggestion retains the use of the terms “men”, “man” and “his”, but tests the legitimacy of the claim that the use of the word “man” is a generic term by specifically noting that where the terms are used, they refer to people of both sexes. Adjusted that way, the prayer would read as follows —

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 ...

The second and third suggestions are based on a rejection of the generic use of the term “man” and are both, I am sure honourable members will agree, more elegant than the first. We could consider an amendment that includes specific references to women and reads as follows —

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 ...

Alternatively, we could look at substituting language that is not gender specific, such as the following example —

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 ...

When I discussed this matter with my 25-year-old son, his immediate reaction was that the best way to redress the imbalance created by having had so many years of using male gendered language was simply to swap genders so that the prayer reads —

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

While I am very proud of having a son who is completely fearless about discussing gender politics, I did suggest to him that we might consider an option that would have rather fewer honourable members choking on their cucumber sandwiches.

I would be the first to agree with honourable members that, with the exception of this last version, none of these rather technical ways of resolving the problem to which I am drawing attention is particularly elegant or eloquent. There is, however, one additional way of resolving the issue. Most Parliaments in Australia open their proceedings with what has become known as the Parliamentary Prayer, which reads, in the version used in the Senate, as follows —

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 language used in the New South Wales Parliament is slightly different, but it is still clearly a version of the same prayer. It reads —

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.

In closing, I make one final point. I know that over the years there have been many calls to end the practice of starting the parliamentary day with a prayer. Some years ago the Senate conducted an inquiry into the proposition that, because Australia is becoming an increasingly secularised society, the practice should cease. That inquiry report, if honourable members want to look it up, is the Senate Procedure Committee’s second report of 1997. It observed that those parliamentarians who joined in the prayer considered its retention as important and those who did not join in the prayer did not have a strong view as to its abolition. Although we do not have any formal evidence before us in the Legislative Council, my impression is that, at least in the WA Labor Party, these observations are probably still sound today. That is why, although I do not join in the prayer, I am not suggesting that we abolish the prayer. I do, however, believe very strongly that the exclusive language used in the current form of the prayer in the Legislative Council reflects very poorly on Legislative Council members and the Parliament as a whole, and that is why I will be asking honourable members to support the motion I will be moving in the Parliament the next time we meet.

House adjourned at 5.53 pm
