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Church and State: 'The place of religion in the parliament of a multicultural, secular, democracy'

The letter reproduced below was sent by Mary Gallnor, in a personal capacity, to all state and federal parliamentarians. It is particularly relevant to the issue of voluntary euthanasia, as politicians will be afforded a "conscience vote" or a "free vote" on the Dignity in Dying Bill.

I am not a Christian, but having been brought up in strict Irish Catholicism in Protestant England, I do acknowledge that some people get comfort from a belief in a supernatural being. That is incomprehensible to me but, as a humanist and a liberal, I respect the rights of everyone to follow a chosen path.

However, when they impinge on the rights of others then I believe I have the right to speak out. I refer to an edict from the Pope sent to members of parliament by Archbishop Wilson in January. In this document all Catholics, worldwide, are instructed to follow Catholic teaching and I agree they are free to obey the Pope in their personal lives. What I take objection to is that there is a special message to all Catholic politicians instructing them to take the Catholic dogma on to the floor of parliament; in other words into our lives. In effect the Vatican has laid down its own legislative agenda to be followed by the whole world and I find this frightening, dangerous and very offensive.

We live in a multicultural secular country which is not Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Catholic. Surely we expect anyone who chooses to enter parliament to leave religious dogma at the door and instead to apply critical, rational thinking to their chosen work as lawmakers. Bertrand Russell wrote " what we need is not the will to believe but the will to find out". Well the way to find out is to research both sides of the argument using clearly verifiable evidence and then to balance the harm and the good to society of passing any bill, irrespective of personal preference. Let us be clear, religious dogma cannot be proved and if a belief in the dogma of their church forbids it then they should abstain from voting on that particular bill.

During her excellent contribution to the embryo stem cell research, Senator Amanda Vanstone gave her opinion on the place of religion in a secular democracy when she stated:

Your religion is your business and no one else's. It follows that I attach very little importance or interest in arguments over religious dogma. My personal view is that when you make your religion an issue, you drag it into the political domain and you tarnish it.

Further she maintained

You are entitled to follow your religious beliefs but you are not entitled to demand by legislation that everybody else does the same.

Amanda also quoted Clarence Darrow in the infamous Scopes "Monkey Trial" who argued that

The realm of religion is where knowledge leaves off, and where faith begins, and it has never needed the arm of the state for support, and wherever it has received it, it has harmed both the public and the religion it would pretend to serve.

Our Founding Fathers were obviously concerned about this as is shown by article 116 of The Constitution, but up to now members of parliament have been getting away with doing it with impunity. Some even cite their religious dogma as reason for opposing social justice issues.

I suggest that it is high time that we stopped referring to a "conscience vote" which is a euphemism for "cop out" and call it instead a non aligned vote or, as in the UK, a free vote. I put it to you that it is also time for us to restate vigorously and often, that there is no place for religious dogma in the parliament of a secular, democratic country.