

Racial and Religious Hatred Bill

How to Meet Your MP

As an elector, you have regular opportunities to meet with your MP at one of their 'constituency surgeries'. It is vital that Christians – particularly church ministers – meet their MPs and put the case for religious liberty. A personal approach can have a great influence.

This leaflet contains tips for meeting your MP. (If you cannot be involved in a face-to-face meeting, you can write a letter instead. We have provided tips for that too.)

Who is my MP?

If you do not know who your MP is, make sure you have your postcode handy and go to: <http://www.locata.co.uk/commons/>

Alternatively, you can telephone the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272 (select option '3') or ask your local council.

'Constituency surgeries'

Most MPs hold 'constituency surgeries' at regular times. To find out the details ring the local constituency office (details in the phone book), consult your weekly press, or ring the House of Commons on 0207 219 3000 and ask to speak to the office of your MP.

You can also find out the surgery times from your public library or local press. If your MP has a website, you may find details there. A list of MPs' websites can be found at: www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/almms.cfm

It is important to arrange an appointment to see your MP, especially if you are taking a delegation. The constituency office may be willing to give you an appointment outside ordinary surgery times, especially between now and the beginning of October when the House of Commons is in recess.

How to approach the meeting

- It is important to emphasise at the meeting that, as a Christian, you oppose religious hatred but the legislation will damage religious freedom and community relations.
- Be prepared and be clear about what you want. Have three or four specific points that you want to put to the MP. (See the list overleaf. You may also wish to read our briefing paper at: <http://www.christian.org.uk/>)
- Find out how your MP voted on this issue at: <http://www.christian.org.uk/mpvotes.php>
- If you voted for your MP, tell him. He needs your vote, so he should be prepared to listen to you.
- Speak calmly, politely and rationally throughout, but also remain clear and firm.
- Don't try and convince the MP in one sitting. Rather, try and get their interest in the issue by presenting some simple points from the tips overleaf.
- **Urge your MP to vote against the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill.**
- You might want to take a small delegation of sensible, well-informed people from your church (ideally including the minister).
- Don't overwhelm your MP. Keep it simple. Try to get their interest in the point you are making, with a view to giving more detail later.
- It may be relevant to take some evidence to back up your case but, again, don't overwhelm them.
- Follow up your meeting with a letter, reiterating the points you made, and adding any additional information you promised.

What do I say?

You must use the kind of arguments that politicians can understand. Very few of them will be sympathetic to biblical or doctrinal arguments. Use *three or four of the following points* (please use your own words):

- Emphasise that, as a Christian, the legislation threatens your religious liberties. It threatens the freedom of anyone with clear views about religion.
- This law – whatever the Government's intention – would limit free speech.
- Vague assurances that the law will not affect evangelism or criticism are not enough. The offence is inherently ambiguous and dangerously open to subjective interpretation.
- The offence would create an incentive for religious (and secular) groups to pursue other religions through the courts. Far from ensuring religious harmony, this law would create disharmony.
- An 'incitement to religious hatred' offence is not necessary. It is already an offence to incite a crime against another person, whether or not religion is the cause. The 'religiously aggravated' offences (passed in 2001) can also be used.
- Say you do not accept the Government's new claim that the offence is needed to tackle Islamic preachers who justify terrorism. The Government itself clearly doesn't believe this - it is introducing new laws against 'indirectly inciting terrorism'.
- Say 'religious belief' is not like 'race'. People can change their minds about their religious beliefs and enter into vigorous debate. But no-one can change their race.
- Say that churches are not excluded from the reach of the law. A Sunday morning sermon that criticises a religion as 'false' could see the preacher prosecuted for inciting religious hatred.
- Say that even if the number of prosecutions is small, the threat of prosecution may cause many to keep quiet. There will be a profound 'chilling effect'.
- Say you do not accept the claim that this law is merely closing a 'loophole' whereby only Sikhs and Jews are currently protected by race laws (by virtue of their status as distinct ethnic groups). A small amendment to the race law could deal with this issue, but an incitement to religious hatred offence is a very different new law. Race laws deal with ethnicity whereas 'incitement to religious hatred' would focus on beliefs. For the first time *theological* criticism of Sikhism and Judaism could be prosecuted.

Writing to your MP

If you cannot visit your MP, write a letter. Send your letters to the MP at:

House of Commons
Westminster
London, SW1A 0AA

- Be brief, polite, and firm.
- **Urge your MP to vote against the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill.**
- Use two or, at the most, three of the points above.

Letters are *much* better than email. However, if you wish to use email you can find out whether your MP has an email address (and email him) via:

<http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alms.cfm>

Those on The Christian Institute mailing list will receive updates on this issue and information about writing to members of the House of Lords. *If you would like to join our mailing list, please use the contact details below.* Do also please contact us if your MP changes his or her mind as a result of your visit.

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August 2005

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