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PARLIAMENTARY REPORT

June to September 2024

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The new Labour Government

The Labour Party won 411 seats at the General Election on 4 July 2024, giving it a simple majority over all other parties of 172, and Sir Keir Starmer KC duly became Prime Minister on the following day.

After something of a hiatus as the new Government was formed and junior ministerial posts were allocated, it was announced that the new Minister for Faith would be Lord Khan of Burnley, a Muslim and former MEP who had spent 12 years teaching law and community leadership at the University of Central Lancashire. On 7 October, the Government announced that the new Second Church Estates Commissioner would be Marsha de Cordova, MP for Battersea.

One minor casualty of the Dissolution was the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill,[1] a private Member's bill sponsored by Fiona Bruce MP which had completed its Commons stages on 17 May and which would have put the role of Special Envoy on a formal footing and require every Prime Minister to appoint one, as recommended by the Bishop of Truro in his report on International Religious Freedom. On 30 July, however, the Government answered a written question from Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Con, Chingford and Woodford Green) on the appointment of a Special Envoy as follows:

> This Government will champion freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all abroad. No one should live in fear because of what they do or do not believe in. Envoy roles will be decided upon in due course. In the meantime, we will use the strength of our global diplomatic network, including dedicated staff within the FCDO, to promote and protect FoRB around the world.[2]

Which looks like at least a qualified 'No'.

[1] <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-04/0191/230191.pdf>, accessed 7 October 2024.

[2] <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-07-22/863>, accessed 6 September 2024.

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Unsurprisingly, the Government is still pondering its legislative priorities. In answer to a written question from Julia Buckley (Lab, Shrewsbury) to the Secretary of State for Justice about her Department's plans to respond to the Law Commission's report on reforming weddings law, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Alex Davies-Jones, said this:

> We are aware that the Law Commission made recommendations for wholesale change of weddings law in July 2022. We will take the time as a new Government to properly consider this issue. We will set out our next steps on our manifesto commitment to strengthen rights and protections for women in cohabitating couples in the near future.[3]

Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill

The previous Government's Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, which had been the subject of three rounds of consultation, and which would have imposed fairly light duties of compliance on most places of worship, fell at the Dissolution. The new Government introduced its own Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill on 12 September.[4]

It takes forward most of the proposals in the previous Government's bill of the same name, but with some significant tweaks. According to the accompanying ministerial statement:

> We have raised the standard tier threshold from 100 to 200, to create a more appropriate scope of the duty;
>
> The 'reasonably practicable' standard of requirements, now applicable in both tiers, is designed to allow procedures and measures to be tailored to the specific circumstances of a premises or event. This will enable duty holders to take into consideration what is within their control and the resources they have available to them, as well as what is suitable and appropriate for their premises or event; and
>
> We have removed the requirements for a specific, prescribed form of training and the completion of a mandatory standard terrorism evaluation form – in recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate and could be onerous.[5]

[3] <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-08-30/3492>, accessed 9 September 2024.

[4] <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0009/240009.pdf>, accessed 16 September 2024.

[5] HC Deb (2024-25) vol 753 column 51WS: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-09-12/debates/24091249000022/Terrorism(ProtectionOfPremises)Bill>, accessed 16 September 2024.

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So far as places of worship are concerned, Paragraph 11 of Schedule 1 provides that premises used for 'communal worship or other communal religious practice' will be regarded as 'standard duty' premises – which attract the less onerous level of compliance. Furthermore, under Clause 2(2)(a), a building will only be 'qualifying premises' at all if 'it is reasonable to expect that from time to time 200 or more individuals may be present at the same time in connection with one or more uses specified in Schedule 1'. That *proviso* would appear to exempt very small places of worship completely, but it remains to be seen what the 'standard tier' threshold will mean in practice: will it exempt large rural church buildings that could easily accommodate 200 or more but which have tiny congregations?

Under the terms of the Bill, rather than setting up a new regulator the scheme will be regulated by the Security Industry Authority.

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill

The Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015, which requires that, except for the dioceses of Canterbury, York, London, Durham and Winchester, where a vacancy arises among the Lords Spiritual it must be filled by a woman if there is one who is eligible, was originally intended to expire ten years after it came into force. The Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill,[6] which was introduced into the Lords on 30 July, seeks to extend the operation of the 2015 Act for a further five years until 18 May 2030.

Tynwald and the Bishop's vote

The Isle of Man Constitution Bill 2023,[7] which will remove the right of the Bishop of Sodor and Man to vote in the Legislative Council and Tynwald Court, was read the first time in the Legislative Council on 11 June and proceeded to the Clauses stage. On 25 June the Council referred the Bill to a committee of three members.[8]

[6] <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/56020/documents/4991>, accessed 6 September 2024.

[7] <https://www.tynwald.org.im/spfile?file=/business/bills/Bills/Isle-of-Man-Constitution-Bill-2023-Amended-in-Keys.pdf>, accessed 6 September 2024.

[8] <https://www.tynwald.org.im/spfile?file=/business/vp/VP/PP-2024-0086.pdf>, accessed 6 September 2024.

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