

# British government removes online petition protesting pope's visit

LONDON - The British government has removed from its website a petition protesting Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 16-19 visit to England and Scotland.

The petition had urged the British prime minister to dissociate the government from the pope's "intolerant views" and not to support the state visit financially. The secularist coalition Protest the Pope sponsored the petition, which had attracted more than 12,300 signatures.

Gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell, who drafted the petition, said July 16 that the government had removed the petition three months before it was due to close, and that it had not allowed signatures since April.

"This looks like an attempt to prevent the petition from embarrassing the government by gaining a large number of signatures in the run-up to Pope Benedict's visit," Tatchell said in a statement.

"The prime minister's office originally agreed that the petition would remain open until the pope arrived in the U.K.," he said.

Petitions have been part of the tradition of British democracy since at least the 19th century and until recently were usually delivered in person by the petitioners to either the prime minister's residence on Downing Street or to Parliament.

Under the country's last government, however, petitioners were encouraged to launch online petitions using the government's own website. These have the benefit of allowing signatories to add their names electronically with the guarantee that the government will issue a formal response within a set time frame.

The Protest the Pope petition had criticized Pope Benedict for his alleged "intolerant opposition to women's rights, gay equality, embryonic stem-cell research and condom use to prevent the spread of HIV."

It urged the prime minister to rebuke the pope for allegedly covering up the clerical sex abuse of children and, according to the petition, his “rehabilitation of the Holocaust-denying Bishop Richard Williamson, and his plan to make a saint of Hitler’s pope, Pius XII, who refused to publicly condemn the Holocaust.”

In its response, posted on the prime minister’s website, the government explained it would fund only the state aspects of the visit, with the Catholic Church meeting the costs of pastoral events.

“There are issues on which we disagree” with the Catholic Church, the statement said. “However, we believe that Pope Benedict’s visit will provide an opportunity to strengthen and build on our relationship with the Holy See in areas where we share interests and goals and to discuss those issues on which our positions differ.”

The Protest the Pope coalition is planning a march and rally in London to coincide with the pope’s Sept. 18 prayer vigil in London’s Hyde Park.