

GENERAL SYNOD

LONDON DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION ON HOUSE OF LAITY ELECTIONS

Background note from the Secretary General

A. THE PRESENT POSITION

1. The electorate in elections to both the House of Laity of the General Synod and the houses of laity of diocesan synods has remained substantially unchanged since the Synodical Government Measure 1969.
2. The Church Representation Rules ('the CRRs' - comprised in Schedule 3 of that Measure) provide that for General Synod elections the diocesan electors (save in the case of the diocese of Europe) are to be the members of the houses of laity of the deanery synods in the diocese, other than co-opted members and persons who are lay members of a religious community represented in the House of Laity. The elected lay members of a diocesan synod are chosen by members of the houses of laity of the deanery synods in the diocese whose names and addresses are recorded in the register of lay electors, other than those co-opted to the deanery synod.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BRIDGE COMMISSION

3. In 1997 a Commission chaired by Lord Bridge of Harwich (the 'Bridge Commission') published its report, *Synodical Government in the Church of England: A Review*¹. It recommended the abolition of the requirement for deanery synods to be part of the formal system of Synodical government.
4. As a result it had to propose a new electoral basis for laity elections to the General Synod and diocesan synods. It also commented that "...*even if deanery synods were to be retained as a continuing level of synodical government we would not consider it desirable that they should retain their electoral function.*"²
5. In framing alternative electoral arrangements, the Bridge Commission declared itself to have two main objectives, namely: (a) to enable parishes to have a direct involvement in the electoral process and so to feel confidence in its outcome and (b) to establish an electorate who would act responsibly to ensure, so far as possible, that the wishes of the parishes were accurately reflected.³
6. To that end the Bridge Commission recommended that:

¹ GS 1252

² GS 1252, Paragraph 10.5

³ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.6

“... each parish should elect at its annual parochial church meeting a number of lay people, to be known as synodical electors, who would form the electors for the lay members of the General Synod and the diocesan synod; each parish should elect one elector for each 50 members, or part thereof, on its electoral roll. ... [the CRRs] should be amended to provide in like terms for the election of synodical electors by cathedral worshippers.”⁴

7. The Bridge Commission argued that that approach would ensure that every parish had a direct interest in the electoral process and would provide a suitable weighting in proportion to the number of members on the electoral roll. Furthermore, it would create a total electorate similar in size to the then lay membership of deanery synods. An elector’s sole responsibility would be “*the exercise of the franchise on behalf of their parishes*”.⁵
8. The Bridge Commission believed the system it proposed offered a number of advantages, including the introduction of a measure of reporting back and communication during the lifetime of Synod, and was a means of bringing greater reality to the representation of the Church in the synodical system. Not least, the Commission felt its proposals would narrow the “*unacceptably wide gulf*” between the General Synod and the parishes.⁶

Other options considered and rejected by the Bridge Commission

9. The Bridge Commission carefully considered but rejected the possibility of introducing ‘universal suffrage’, that is giving every lay individual whose name is on an electoral roll a vote. This was not least because the Bridge Commission saw considerable practical difficulty and cost in organising elections on this basis if they were to be free from the risk of irregularity (and thus legal challenge). On the basis of costings provided for it, it thought the Church unlikely to wish to incur the sort of expenditure involved on a system as “*seriously flawed*” as it considered it, in the Synodical context, to be.⁷
10. A further option considered by the Bridge Commission was that the electorate should consist of the elected lay members of the diocesan synod. It concluded that this had the disadvantage of “*failing to satisfy [the] first objective that parishes should have direct involvement in the electoral process*”. Since many parishes were not represented directly on the diocesan synod, it also meant that the gap between the General Synod and the parish would only be widened.⁸

⁴ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.13

⁵ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.16

⁶ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.17

⁷ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.11

⁸ GS 1252, Paragraph 10.12

Subsequent consideration of the Bridge Commission's recommendations by the General Synod

11. The Synod took note of the Bridge Commission's report (by a small majority) in November 1997.⁹ Subsequently a Follow-Up Group was appointed to consider and take forward its recommendations. The Follow-Up Group did not support the recommendation that deanery synods be abolished and saw the proposal that the electorate of the House of Laity and of diocesan synods should be changed as one that fell consequentially¹⁰ - though its report did also refer to "*doubts that the system of synodical electors ... would result in an electorate sufficiently well informed to be able to exercise its vote in elections to diocesan synod and to the General Synod*".¹¹
12. The Synod took note of the Follow-Up Group's report in November 1999. In the course of the debate the Chair of the Group reported that the Bridge Commission's recommendations as regards deanery synods and the creation of 'synodical electors' had "*attracted much criticism*".¹² Whilst some members expressed regret that the Bridge Commission's recommendations as regards the lay electorate had not been accepted, no following motion proposing their adoption was moved and the Follow-Up Group did not pursue them subsequently.

C. SUBSEQUENT CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUES

13. Since 1999, there has been one Synodical review of the arrangements for elections to the Convocations and the House of Laity, by the Elections Review Group. As part of its work in 2007 it briefly considered a proposal from the Diocesan Secretaries Liaison Group that the electorate for the House of Laity of the General Synod should be the lay members of the diocesan synod.
14. The Group shared the Bridge Commission's view that that would only widen the gap between the General Synod and the parishes. It believed that taking direct involvement in elections away from parishes altogether would achieve no clearly identifiable benefit and that the current position represented a satisfactory middle way. The focus of effort should accordingly be on making the current arrangements work more effectively.

D. THE PROCESS FOR ALTERING THE ELECTORATE

15. Changes to the electorate for the House of Laity and the houses of laity of diocesan synods would not require legislation by way of Measure, since the 1969 Measure enables changes to the CRRs to be made by resolution of the General Synod, passed by a majority in each House of not less than two-thirds of those present and

⁹ Proceedings, Volume 28, no.2, pages 663-704

¹⁰ GS 1354, paragraph 4.6

¹¹ GS 1354, paragraph 4.3

¹² Proceedings, Volume 30, no.2, pages 214-234

voting.¹³ The resolution would then be laid before both Houses of Parliament as a Statutory Instrument subject to the ‘negative resolution’ procedure.¹⁴

E. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN ANY REVIEW

16. Any review of the current arrangements would need to revisit the options considered by the Bridge Commission as well as considering whether any new options might now be available.
17. The sort of issues that any review would need to consider include:
 - what impact the use of the electorate concerned would be likely to have, respectively, on the roles of deanery synods, diocesan synods and the General Synod in the life of the Church;
 - whether the electorates for the House of Laity of the General Synod and houses of laity of diocesan synods should in principle be the same;
 - whether the use of the electorate concerned would mean that the lay membership of the General Synod and of diocesan synods would better reflect the views and concerns of the laity of the Church of England;
 - what impact the use of the electorate concerned would have upon the ability of those elected to fulfil their responsibilities as, respectively, members of the General Synod or a diocesan synod;
 - the cost of operating any new system;
 - any other practical issues to which the use of the electorate concerned would give rise, including from the point of view of identifying its membership (a) in sufficient time to enable elections to proceed at the prescribed point and (b) with sufficient clarity to avoid legal challenge to their result; and
 - the extent to which the use of technology might alleviate difficulties of either kind.

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¹³ Section 7(1) Synodical Government Measure 1969; Standing Order 35(d)(i)(4)

¹⁴ Section 7(2) Synodical Government Measure 1969