

LONDON DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION ON HOUSE OF LAITY ELECTIONS

Background Paper by Mr Clive Scowen (London)

'That this Synod request the Business Committee to commission a thorough review of how the House of Laity of this Synod and the houses of laity of diocesan synods are elected, particular consideration being given to whether the electorate should be some body of persons other than the lay members of deanery synods.'

1. What is the current situation?

As members will know well

- the aggregate of the lay members of the deanery synods in a diocese elect lay members to represent that diocese on the General Synod
- the house of laity of a deanery synod elects lay members to represent that deanery on its diocesan synod.

That has been the case since the inauguration of synodical government in 1970. Yet this role of the house of laity is very different from the functions of the whole deanery synod, set out in section 5(3) of the Synodical Government Measure 1969:

“The functions of a deanery synod shall be—

- (a) to consider matters concerning the Church of England and to make provision for such matters in relation to their deanery, and to consider and express their opinion on any other matters of religious or public interest;
- (b) to bring together the views of the parishes of the deanery on common problems, to discuss and formulate common policies on those problems, to foster a sense of community and interdependence among those parishes, and generally to promote in the deanery the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical;
- (c) to make known and so far as appropriate put into effect any provision made by the diocesan synod;
- (d) to consider the business of the diocesan synod, and particularly any matters referred to that synod by the General Synod, and to sound parochial opinion whenever they are required or consider it appropriate to do so;
- (e) to raise such matters as the deanery synod consider appropriate with the diocesan synod”.

For the discharge of these “section 5(3) functions” a fairly “flat” scale of representation (under which the number of members elected by a large parish is not that much greater, if at all, than the number elected by a small parish) would be acceptable: each parish would be adequately represented but none would be unduly dominant. However such flat scales are not acceptable if the bodies which the house of laity elects are to be credible and democratically legitimate. The house’s role as electoral college therefore makes it important that each parish should have mathematically fair representation, which in turn requires that the scale should have equal intervals and that those intervals be fairly small.

2. How did the motion come about?

In 2007, in order to ensure fair representation of all parishes so far as reasonably possible, the London Diocesan Synod adopted a scale under which each parish had one deanery synod member per 55 electoral roll members or part thereof, subject to a cap of 10. That, ironically, led to complaints from larger parishes that they had too many deanery synod members ex officio on their PCCs, and from some deaneries that one or two large

parishes were dominating their synods. So last year the bishop's council established a working party to consider the matter in depth and make recommendations as to the scales of representation to apply to the 2011 deanery synod elections. The working party concluded that fairness in the election of members to General Synod and the diocesan synod required a continuation of the 2007 approach, albeit with an interval of 75 rather than 55. However it felt that relaxation of some of the constraints imposed by the Church Representation Rules would be helpful and recognised that if the electoral function of the house of laity were removed much flatter scales could be adopted and the problem of over-large PCCs and of large parishes dominating deanery synods could be eliminated.

3. What are the disadvantages of the current system?

- (1) It impossible to adopt a scale of representation which enables fair representation of larger parishes on General Synod and diocesan synods without at the same swamping the PCCs of those parishes with deanery synod members and risking the domination of deanery synods by a few large parishes.
- (2) It is highly questionable how representative deanery synod members are of their parishes or their electoral rolls. Often those who serve on deanery synods are
 - those with time on their hands
 - committee specialists
 - in parishes where deanery synod elections are seldom contested, folk who cannot get elected directly to their PCC and use deanery synod membership as a "back door".

In consequence, deanery synod members seldom include young people, or even anyone under 50, or minority ethnic Anglicans. In London we have been concerned that, despite have a reasonable number of minority ethnic candidates in recent General Synod elections, very few actually get elected. It seems likely that if the electorate were more diverse in age and ethnicity those they elected would be too.

4. Are there other advantages of removing the electoral function of the deanery house of laity?

Removing the electoral function and the necessity for a proportionate scale of representation would enable a more radical reconsideration of the membership of deanery synods. Changes to the Church Representation Rules could be considered to enable

- wholly flat representation (the same number of members per parish regardless of size)
- alternate membership, where the parish sent different people according to the subject under discussion. (For example, when the parish share or quota was being determined treasurers could come and vote on behalf of their parishes without having to be a member expected to attend all the other meetings; or when outreach to young people was on the agenda parishes could be represented by those involved in such ministry who are seldom synod members under the current system.)

Deanery synods could become more informal fora for planning mission in the deanery, or for mutual encouragement between neighbouring parishes, with a much more fluid membership than at present. Decoupling the electoral function would not necessarily result in such changes, but it would make them possible.

5. So what alternative is being proposed?

The motion deliberately does not propose a specific alternative way of electing laity to General Synod and diocesan synods but rather asks for a thorough review of all the

options. However there are two obvious possibilities which any review would have to consider:

- (1) A new electoral college for each deanery Annual Parochial Church Meetings would elect a number of Electors each year, in proportion to the size of their electoral rolls. The scale of representation would be agreed nationally by General Synod and could provide for one Elector per 25 electoral roll members or part thereof, or even one per 10. Such Electors would have no other function than to vote in General Synod and diocesan synod elections, but could have other electoral functions conferred on them by their diocese. If elections were conducted in the traditional manner the increased number of Electors would significantly increase the cost, but it may be that the introduction of electronic voting and distribution of manifestos, etc would eliminate any increase in cost. Electors would not be members ex officio of any other body but clearly could also be members of the PCC or deanery synod. The role is therefore likely to be much more attractive to younger people and anyone to whom “committee culture” is alien, and so to result in Electors who are far more representative of their parishes than deanery synod members.
- (2) One person, one vote. Under this much more radical option every electoral roll member would have a vote in General Synod and diocesan synod elections. Formidable practical objections were raised when this option was proposed previously, not least the cost and the risk of campaigners on particular issues signing up electoral roll members to “pack” the electorate. Electronic voting may well be a solution to the cost issue and rigorous measures would have to be put in place to prevent abuse. Even so it may still be considered impracticable, but it is surely worth considering. It would put the houses of laity of General Synod and diocesan synods on a par with the houses of clergy who are of course elected by all the licensed clergy in the diocese.

There may well be other options. The review sought by this motion would enable any proposal made in consultation to be thoroughly evaluated.

6. In summary:

- **there is currently a mismatch between the electoral and section 5(3) functions of deanery synods**
- **scales of representation which produce electoral fairness cause problems for PCCs and deaneries**
- **lay members of deanery synods are not fully representative of their parishes and electoral rolls, particularly young people, ethnic minorities and those who are repelled by “committee culture”**
- **decoupling the electoral function would enable, but not require, a more radical review of how deanery synods are constituted and operate**
- **potential alternative ways of electing laity to General Synod and diocesan synods include a new electoral college for each deanery and one person, one vote, but other options could be considered.**

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