

GENERAL SYNOD**HOUSE OF LAITY****Role of Chair and Vice-Chair**

1. The Standing Committee of the House met on 3 March following the meeting of the House on 18 January to discuss, amongst other matters, the role of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the House in meetings of the House and in meetings of the General Synod.
2. It seemed clear from the debate on 18 January that there was some confusion about two matters in particular: firstly, the role of the Chair and (by extension) the Vice-Chair in relation to chairing meetings of the House on the one hand, and their role during debates at General Synod on the other; and, secondly, the protocol for making either oral or written public statements in which reference is made to their office as Chair or Vice-Chair of the House.
3. It seemed to the Standing Committee that it would assist the House in coming to a common understanding on these matters if the following guidance were issued for the information of the House.

During debates

4. The Standing Orders of the House of Laity do not specifically address the question of whether the Chair of the House should be neutral in debate. However, SO 1 of the House specifies that the Standing Orders of the General Synod, where applicable, apply *mutatis mutandis* to the House. In the view of the Legal Office, this means that the provisions of SO 14(c) of the General Synod – that the Chair of any debate may not “take part in debate” – apply to the Chair or Vice-Chair of the House when chairing any debate of the House under SO 7(c) of its Standing Orders.
5. Also in the view of the Legal Office, a distinction needs to be made between the role of the Chair or Vice-Chair of the House when chairing a debate in the House, and their role when speaking in a debate in the Synod. No-one who chairs a debate, whether in the House of Laity or in the Synod, may take part in that debate (see above). However, if not actually chairing a debate, there is no bar on the Chair or Vice-Chair of the House taking part in it and giving their personal view. Nor are the Chair or Vice-Chair required to seek to establish – and represent – the majority view within the House of Laity on the question under debate in Synod: like any other member of the House or the Synod, they are free to articulate their own view on the matter under debate.
6. So far as precedent is concerned, this analysis is consistent with past practice: Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the House of Laity have articulated their personal views in earlier debates on controversial matters. The position is no different from that of the Archbishops or the Prolocutors, as regards their roles in relation to the Houses of Bishops and Clergy respectively. For example, in the Final Approval debate on women in the episcopate in November 2012, both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prolocutor of the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury made speeches expressing their views about the draft legislation.
7. However, in order to maintain clarity of role, when speaking in debates in full Synod or in the House, if the Chair or Vice-Chair refer to their office they should state clearly whether they are speaking as Chair or Vice-Chair of the House or in a personal capacity, and should signal clearly any transition from one capacity to the other.

Public statements

8. When making public statements, however communicated, the Chair and Vice-Chair should exercise the same discipline as above, so that if they refer to their office they should make it clear whether they have the support of the House to make the statement in question or do so only in a personal capacity.

The Standing Committee of the House of Laity

May 2013