

GENERAL SYNOD
PRESENTATION BY THE ELECTIONS REVIEW GROUP
ELECTING THE HOUSE OF LAITY

Background

1. It is often alleged that the House of Laity of General Synod is unrepresentative of the laity of the Church of England. Whether that is so is heavily contested, but the fact that that allegation is made makes it vital for the credibility of the House that the means by which it is elected is demonstrably fair and democratic.
2. In July 2011 Synod carried, in amended form, a diocesan synod motion calling on the Business Committee to commission a thorough review of how the House of Laity of General Synod and the houses of laity of diocesan synods are elected, particular consideration being given to: (a) whether the electorate should be some body of persons other than the lay members of deanery synods; and (b) ensuring that the diverse membership of the Church of England is fully reflected and represented. The review was conducted by the Elections Review Group chaired by Rev Canon Sue Booy, which reported in September 2012. It set out the pros and cons of 5 options for the composition of the electorate:
 - lay members of deanery synods (the current system)
 - electoral college formed of members specifically elected at APCMs
 - lay members of PCCs
 - lay members of diocesan synods
 - universal suffrage (all members of electoral rolls)
3. In May 2013 the Business Committee recommended that the current system be replaced with the second option (electoral college elected at APCMs). A debate on all the recommendations of the Business Committee arising from the work of the Elections Review Group commenced at the July 2013 Group of Sessions but was not completed. It was resumed in November. Synod accepted the recommendations, apart from that relating to changing the electorate for the House of Laity, which was rejected.
4. At no point did Synod have an opportunity to engage with the different options or to ask questions about them, and the debate on the recommendations was very unsatisfactory having been split between two groups of sessions. There was a widespread sense that an important issue affecting the democratic legitimacy of the House of Laity had not been given proper consideration and that this was “unfinished business”.
5. In view of that the new Elections Review Group, set up by the Business Committee in 2016, recommended that a seminar-style presentation be made at a future group of sessions, to present fully the pros and cons of each of the systems considered on the last review in order to help all members to understand the issues fully. Support for

each option would then be gauged via an advisory STV ballot to be held during that group of sessions. In the event of the advisory ballot indicating a desire for change it would be for the Archbishops' Council to bring forward appropriate rule changes, at which point consideration would need to be given to whether it was practicable for the new system to be in place for the 2020 elections. The Business Committee accepted that recommendation (along with all the other recommendations of the Group) and decided that the presentation would be held at the July 2017 Group of Sessions.

6. The remainder of this paper, which is largely based on the 2012 report of the Elections Review Group and the 2013 Second Report of the Business Committee, is designed to help members to prepare for the presentation which is on the agenda for the morning of 10 July.

The options

A. The current electoral system

7. At present all lay members of deanery synods in a diocese are the diocesan electors who elect members to the General Synod House of Laity.

PROS

8. The present system has the merits of familiarity and relative simplicity. It has been operated since the synodical system was created in 1970. Deanery synod members are likely to be involved with their parish and to be known within the parish, and may be more likely to meet with other Anglicans in the diocese than many PCC members. Participation in a deanery synod gives its members some knowledge of the synodical system and is suggestive of their commitment to it. In theory deanery synod members should receive reports from General Synod and report what they are told on to their PCCs and so they are likely to be among the best informed people about the issues and the candidates.

CONS

9. The Church Representation Rules do not require the number of members elected to deanery synods to be strictly proportionate to the number of members on the electoral roll. Some General Synod electors therefore represent more electoral roll members than others. Where a diocese adopts a strictly proportionate scale in order to achieve electoral fairness it results in large parishes having very large numbers of deanery synod members ex officio on their PCC: if a fully proportionate scale were adopted in London Diocese the largest parish would have over 40 Deanery Synod members, dominating both their PCC and their deanery synod. It is curious that the membership of the synodical body with the fewest formal responsibilities and operates more variably than any other in different parts of the country should have the responsibility for electing the General Synod. Crucially, the present arrangement effectively disenfranchises a large number of active church members who are the mainstay of local parish life but do not have the time or calling to serve on the deanery synod in addition to everything else they do for the church. Thus wardens, the church treasurer, those active in youth work, the PCC secretary and many others will in many cases simply have to disqualify themselves from having a vote in General Synod elections. It is not satisfactory for the key electorate of the General Synod to consist of a body of people who are chosen for another, quite different purpose and who, in many cases,

will not include some of the most active lay leaders from the parishes. In most parishes competitive elections to the deanery synod are rare, and members are often self-selected “committee culture” older people with time and a disposition to attend meetings which are not consistently interesting. In consequence there are few younger or minority ethnic people among the current electorate for the General Synod House of Laity. In 1997 a Commission chaired by Lord Bridge of Harwich (the ‘Bridge Commission’) published *Synodical Government in the Church of England: A Review* (GS 1252) in which it commented:

Because deanery synods are thought to be irrelevant by many church members, attracting candidates to stand for election to them is sometimes difficult and elections are often uncontested. Moreover, deanery synods have a wide range of functions. Those offering themselves for election may have varied and valuable experience, but their primary interests may not lie in the exercise of the franchise at elections for the General Synod and diocesan synods. That may be a contributing factor to the further criticisms we have encountered to the effect that the views of the parishes are not adequately represented at the General Synod and that in many parishes little is known about those elected to represent them.

B. A specially elected electoral college

10. The Bridge Commission recommended that 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 would elect one elector for each 50 members, or part thereof, on its electoral roll. The objective was to enable parishes to have a direct involvement in the electoral process and so to feel confidence in its outcome and to establish an electorate who would act responsibly to ensure, so far as possible, that the wishes of the parishes were accurately reflected. An elector’s sole responsibility would be “the exercise of the franchise on behalf of their parishes”. It would be possible to include a requirement for a meeting of the diocesan electoral college members at least once a year to which General Synod members would be expected to report and listen.

PROS

11. The Bridge Commission said its electoral college proposal 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. Advantages included the introduction of a measure of reporting back and communication during the lifetime of Synod, and 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. As the Business Committee found in 2013, the responsibility of electing the General Synod (and diocesan synods) is sufficiently important for it to be in the hands of those who are specially elected by parishes for that purpose by the APCM. Since membership of this electoral college would carry with it no other responsibilities it would not be a significant extra time commitment and might therefore be something which a wider range of people would be willing to consider taking on. The need for parishes to decide specifically on who was going to choose members of the diocesan and General Synod would help to raise the significance of the elections and to ensure that the APCM chose those to whom they most wished to entrust this

important responsibility. Proportionality would be guaranteed because the number of places for each parish in the electoral college would vary according to the size of the electoral roll, and there would be no ex officio members. The membership of an electoral college could be more representative than deanery synods since younger and minority ethnic people and lay leaders, who have neither the time nor the inclination to attend deanery synod, or even PCC, may be willing to offer themselves for the much less onerous roll of diocesan elector.

CONS

12. Whereas the electors' sole function would be to exercise the franchise on behalf of their parishes, deanery synod members participate in discussions about the life of the Church beyond the parish; they ought therefore to be better informed about the issues being considered by General Synod. A separate electoral college would add an additional layer to synodical government. Some question why some individuals should be given the privilege of the electoral function without the responsibility of attending deanery and diocesan synods. It might become even more difficult to get people to stand for election to deanery synods if membership no longer conferred electoral rights. The creation of further offices for election by the APCM might also increase the difficulty of attracting candidates to fill them, with the possible result that the same people would serve on deanery synods and as synodical electors. General Synod members might be less inclined to report to deanery synods if they were no longer electorally accountable to them. Several of these objections apply equally to any change from the current system.

C. An electoral college consisting of the elected lay members of PCCs

13. Under this system every elected lay member of PCCs would get a vote in General Synod and diocesan synod elections.

PROS

14. This could be seen as more representative than the deanery synod (in particular, there could be more young and minority ethnic persons on a PCC), without at the same time extending the electorate beyond those who are sufficiently committed to the Church to be willing to accept a degree of active responsibility for local leadership. Such an electoral college would also increase the number of members of the Church involved in the electoral process and thus strengthen its democratic legitimacy.

CONS

15. Since lay members of PCCs also tend to be "committee culture" people with time it is doubtful whether it would be any more representative than deanery synod members of the laity in the dioceses generally, particularly with regard to younger and minority ethnic people. The size of PCCs is not necessarily proportionate to the size of electoral rolls, and parishes with small electoral rolls would therefore have a disproportionately high number of electors unless a weighting based on electoral roll size were applied, which would be extremely complex and lack transparency. Presiding Officers would need to communicate with all PCC secretaries, meaning that the risk of mistakes and omissions in the register of lay electors (which is already considerable) would be increased further. There would thus be concerns about the accuracy of the data about the electorate, with the implications that would have in terms of possible

legal challenge through the appeals process. However, that problem could be overcome at least in part if all parishes were enabled to enter statistical data online. PCC members may be less likely than Deanery Synod members to meet Anglicans from other churches, to be interested in wider church affairs, and to know any of the candidates.

D. Elected lay members of diocesan synods

16. Under this system the lay members of the diocesan synod would be the diocesan electors. (It should be noted that, although they considered this system, no member of the previous Elections Review Group or the Business Committee supported it.)

PROS

17. The electorate would be likely to be more knowledgeable about the candidates and the issues faced by the General Synod. It would be easier to administer since the electorate would be smaller and accurately identified.

CONS

18. Many parishes are not represented directly on the diocesan synod. Diocesan synod members are themselves elected by deanery synod members so, if the electorate consisted only of the elected lay members of the diocesan synod, the gap between the General Synod and the parish could be widened and the democracy would be even more indirect than it is at present. Even fewer younger and minority ethnic people and lay leaders would be able to vote than is the case with the current system or the other options.

E. Universal suffrage

19. The term “universal suffrage” or “one member one vote” means that every individual who has chosen to be included in the electoral roll of a parish of the Church of England would have the right to vote in elections to diocesan and General Synod.

PROS

20. Universal suffrage has the attraction of immediate, direct election of synods by all church members and is the easiest to explain. It is the most democratic and inclusive option and would reach the most diverse membership as well as being the one which would do most to raise the profile of General and diocesan synod elections at parish level. In particular, by widening the electorate, those individuals who have an interest in synodical government but who are not able to serve on deanery synods due to other commitments or mobility (eg young people), would be enfranchised. It could enable a wider sense of ownership and involvement in the Church. The Church of England exists for all of the people of England and this system would enable all the baptized who declared themselves to be members of the Church of England to participate in the election of its governing body.

CONS

21. If, having enfranchised everyone on the electoral roll, only a small turnout were achieved it could undermine the credibility of the process and be a waste of time and

resources. In a system of universal suffrage, it is less likely that the electorate would have any knowledge of the candidates standing for election. Consequently, it is likely that the elections would be contested on party lines to an even greater extent than is already the case. Furthermore since every baptized person resident in a parish is entitled to join its electoral roll even if they do not participate in church life at all, there is a risk that those seeking to achieve change on particular issue (or indeed to resist it) could try to skew the electorate by persuading those who are not worshipping Anglicans to join the electoral roll and vote. It is questionable whether universal suffrage would be the best way of identifying individuals who would be suited to contribute to the Church's mission through membership of the Synod: the Business Committee in 2013 recommended that election of those who are to serve on the General Synod and diocesan synods should be in the hands of those who have chosen to signal some degree of commitment to the Church of England beyond mere residence. The ability of members of the Synod to report back to their electors and thus promote awareness of its work among the electorate would be much reduced were the electorate to be extended to all those on the electoral roll. The use of electoral rolls as a means of establishing the electorate would not necessarily create a level playing field across the country, since the requirements in relation to electoral rolls are applied differently in different places: in some parishes people are not encouraged to join the roll, perhaps to reduce diocesan "quota" liability, whereas other parishes have unusually large rolls due to the efforts of the parish to encourage people to sign up (eg to avoid closure of the church).

22. Establishing and maintaining a register of qualified electors would be a very substantial task for the dioceses and for every parish. It would need an adequate investment of resources - not just in the implementation period - to ensure the integrity of the system and to minimise the risk of error. This would not simply be a task for paid staff in diocesan offices but also for volunteers in parishes. However the possibility of introducing an electronic data capture system for direct input by parishes of electoral rolls could mitigate the risk of error. There is a potential increased risk of legal challenge. There could be issues as to the quality of the information provided by parishes as a result of failures to comply with the provisions of the Church Representation Rules relating to the entry of names in the electoral roll and their removal from it. Additional procedural complexity would be required in relation to the need to ensure that members of the laity did not vote more than once, where they were on more than one electoral roll. Although the new electronic voting system would overcome the otherwise prohibitive cost of a system of one member one vote, it would generate extra workload for dioceses.
23. The link between the 6-yearly cycle of revising the electoral roll, and the 5-yearly cycle of determining the allocation of seats between the dioceses would create a practical difficulty, although that could be overcome by a parallel change in the timing of revisions could be introduced.
24. The Bridge Commission highlighted a number of the drawbacks to universal suffrage – particularly the possible lack of desire amongst parishes to become involved with the elections process, the cost of the system (whether electronic or not) and the difficulty in ensuring the accuracy of electoral rolls. While some of the drawbacks remain relevant today, other practical difficulties could be largely overcome by using online electronic voting.

Next steps

25. After the presentation members will be issued with a ballot paper on which they will be asked to order of preference the 5 options. The vote, which will be counted in accordance with the STV regulations, is purely advisory but it will help to establish whether there is any consensus in synod for change, and if so what change. It will then be for the Archbishop's Council to decide whether to bring forward amending legislation to give effect to any change which the synod indicates it desires.

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