

GENERAL SYNOD

THE WORK OF THE ELECTIONS REVIEW GROUP: ELECTORATE FOR THE HOUSE OF LAITY AND ONLINE ELECTIONS

SECOND REPORT BY THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Summary

1. At its meeting in May 2011, the Business Committee agreed to establish an Elections Review Group, as a sub-committee of the Business Committee, to review the 2010 round of Synodical elections. The Group comprised three members of the Business Committee:

The Revd Canon Sue Booy (Oxford) (Chair)

Mr Gerald O'Brien (Rochester)

Mrs Christina Rees (St Albans)

and two members appointed by the Appointments Committee:

The Rt Revd Martyn Jarrett (then Bishop of Beverley)

The Revd Canon Tony Walker (Southwell and Nottingham)

The Hereford Diocesan Secretary, Mr John Clark, was in attendance as an assessor.

2. The Group met on four occasions to consider forty submissions received from presiding officers, Synod members and others. It also heard an oral submission regarding the electorate for the House of Laity. The Group presented its report to the Business Committee in September 2012 (see **GS 1901**).
3. The Business Committee has reported separately to the Synod on most of the issues considered by the Group, in **GS 1901**. This report concerns the distinct (but related) issues of changing the electorate for the House of Laity and introducing an online facility for nominations and voting in respect of elections to the General Synod. Since both of these initiatives would require significant preparation the Business Committee wishes to give the Synod the opportunity to decide the policy before any work begins.
4. The report from the Elections Review Group considers a number of options for the electorate for the House of Laity. The Business Committee believes that a new electoral college would be better than the present system and recommends that it be introduced in time for diocesan synod elections in 2018 and General Synod elections in 2020.
5. The report also recommends that arrangements be made for elections to the General Synod to be conducted online. The Business Committee has accepted that recommendation. It acknowledges that the complexity and scope of legislative changes and practical arrangements required for the entire electoral process to be conducted online certainly precludes their full introduction until 2020. It believes, however, that it should still be possible for the nominations process to be conducted by email for the 2015 elections and recommends that that should be the target date.

Electorate for the House of Laity

6. The report submitted to the Business Committee by the Elections Review Group sets out in some detail the present position in relation to elections by the laity to diocesan synods and the General Synod (para. 33ff). It also considers a range of options for alternatives to the current electorate, from no change at all to universal suffrage (understood in this context to mean all those who have chosen to have their name entered on a church electoral roll).

7. The Business Committee agreed that two of the options identified in the report – for an electoral college consisting of the elected lay members of PCCs and an electorate consisting of the elected lay members of diocesan synods – were unlikely to represent a significant improvement on the current system and should therefore not be considered any further.

That leaves three possible options- a specially elected electoral college elected at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting ('APCM'), universal suffrage and the present system. Each has some advantages and disadvantages.

Present system

8. The present system has the merits of familiarity and relative simplicity. It has been operated since the synodical system was created in 1970. At that time, however, it was impossible to foresee how the General Synod, diocesan synods and deanery synods would develop and from today's perspective it is undoubtedly curious that the membership of the synodical body that has 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.
9. 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.
10. In the view of the Business Committee it is not very 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.

Electoral college

11. The report of the Bridge Commission published in 1997 (GS 1252) also considered the possibility of establishing an electoral college for elections to the General Synod (and to diocesan synods), but that was as a consequence of its proposal to abolish deanery synods. The Business Committee's recommendation does not presuppose any change in the present deanery synod system.
12. The Committee's view is that 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 that a wider range of people would be willing to consider taking on.
13. 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 ensure that the APCM chose those to whom they most wished to entrust this important responsibility. Proportionality would be retained in that, just as the size of the electoral roll affects how many deanery synod members a parish can elect, so the number of places for each parish in the electoral college would vary according to the size of the electoral roll.
14. Although less far reaching than introducing universal suffrage this would be a major change and would need careful preparation and resourcing. It could not now safely be achieved in time for 2015 given the lead times for the legislation, changing diocesan systems and getting APCMs to hold the necessary elections. The college would therefore be established in time for the diocesan synod elections in 2018 and the General Synod elections in 2020 (and perhaps for casual vacancies to the General Synod from 2018).

Universal suffrage

15. The Business Committee accepted the Elections Review Group's definition of universal suffrage as meaning those who have chosen to have their name entered on a church electoral roll. The Church of England exists for all of the people of England and it remains the case that all parishioners have the right to elect churchwardens. Nevertheless, the Committee agrees that the 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.
16. The Committee accepts that of the available options this is the one that is the simplest to explain. It also accepts that the universal suffrage option would be the most democratic and inclusive and would reach the most diverse membership as well as being the one which would undoubtedly do most to raise the profile of General and diocesan synod elections at parish level.
17. However, 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 minimise the risk of error.
18. This would not simply be a task for paid staff in diocesan offices but also for volunteers in parishes. The Committee had some concerns as to whether the task might prove too ambitious.

Online elections

19. The distinct (but related) matter on which the Business Committee wishes to consult the Synod is that of providing for elections to be conducted online (see paragraphs 62-67 of the Elections Review Group's report).
20. The Business Committee has been advised that it is perfectly possible technically to provide for the whole electoral process from nomination to voting to be undertaken securely online. It believes that the Synod should move to such an arrangement as soon as practically possible, whether or not a new electoral system is introduced. It would in fact be necessary rather than desirable to move to an online system if the Synod decided to opt for universal suffrage for laity elections to diocesan synods and General Synod, since any other system would be too cumbersome, costly and impracticable..
21. The lead time for introducing an electronic system means that the first General Synod election at which it could be used for voting is, however, 2020 (it might also be possible for it to be used for diocesan Synod elections in 2018). In addition to the process of ensuring that the detail of the new arrangements was correct and watertight and making provision in the Canons and the Church and Clergy Representation Rules, the project planning and procurement work with the dioceses could not be completed in time for the 2015 elections. .
22. It is, nevertheless, entirely possible that provision could be in place by the time of the 2015 elections for the *nominations* part of the process to be undertaken by email and the Business Committee accordingly recommends that amendments should be made to the Clergy Representation Rules and the Church Representation Rules to permit that.
23. For internal elections conducted under the provisions of Standing Order 120 of the General Synod it is already possible for nominations to be made by email to the Presiding Officer and for proposers and seconders to indicate their support for the candidate by the same means.
24. Neither the Clergy Representation Rules nor the Church Representation Rules, however, make provision for any part of the elections process to the General Synod to be conducted other than on paper. (Nomination forms may be returned by fax, but a hard copy must be

received by the presiding officer no later than three days after the close of the nominations period or their name cannot be entered on the voting paper.)

25. The Synod is invited to agree that steps should be taken to make this limited change in time for the 2015 elections to the General Synod.

Conclusions

26. The Synod is invited to indicate its support for the proposals above by carrying the following motion:

‘That this Synod request legislative proposals to be brought forward to:

- (a) establish an electoral college for elections by the laity to the General Synod and diocesan synods;
- (b) make provision by 2020 for elections to the General Synod to be undertaken online; and
- (c) make provision by 2015 for nominations for elections to the General Synod to be undertaken by email.’

27. Those who support a move to universal suffrage (i.e. election by all the members of church electoral rolls) will be able to test the mind of the Synod by moving an appropriately worded amendment to paragraph (a) of the motion. Those who support the *status quo* will be able to test the mind of the Synod by moving an amendment to delete paragraph (a).

On behalf of the Committee

JULIAN HENDERSON

Chairman

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