

Briefing Paper

This paper sets out the context for the motion before House of Laity members. How we decide determines how well we resolve our differences and that is a worthwhile endeavour in difficult times with hard decisions that will need to be taken.

In 1641 Parliament presented a document to King Charles listing 204 grievances addressing the King's growing autocratic leadership tendencies: the rest, as they say, is history.

The motion brought before the House of Laity is not an Anglican 'Grand Remonstrance', but it is an attempt to draw the varied groups within the House together to formally focus and agree that many of our problems and differences have not been assisted by the manner in which Synod has been managed by those charged with the responsibility for governing this disparate and complex organisation, the Church of England.

I need not rehearse at length the mutterings in the tea rooms about democratic deficits, whether those conversations are about the non-disclosure of the legal advice given to the House of Bishops about the Prayers of Love and Faith; the suspected excessive influence of Paula Vennells and the Secretary General in the growing tensions over re-organisation of the Church or Safeguarding; or the application of Church Commissioners monies — historically intended to support ministry in poor parishes, but increasingly directed into centralised initiatives or restructurings such as in Wigan, Cornwall, or Leicester.

There are multiple strands to this sense of unease, and sometimes tensions come to the surface; the York Synod last year was an important indicator of this.

After the peremptory sackings of the ISB members before Synod had been given an opportunity to hear from them, there was an unedifying series of obstacles put in the way of Synod getting what most of us wanted - and eventually secured. Fairness and good governance required that the ISB members should at least have an opportunity to state their case. They were denied that opportunity both before and, by the platform, during the formal session of the Synod, but Synod members insisted and heard from them, if only for a begrudged few minutes. The Wilkinson and Jay Reviews are the result of our flexing our democratic muscle. We did good work that day, though there is much more to be done.

There are other areas where members have grumbled but have not yet come together to resolve.

The "Presentation with Questions," sometimes followed by an unamendable 'take note' motion that merely notes, rather than invites challenge, has become too common. There is no reason in a digital age why presentations should not be recorded and sent out in advance so that more time is available for debate. We have analogue accountability in a digital age.

The growing length of the 'Questions' session (now regularly split into two to accommodate the number of questions) reflects not only an increasing desire to call leadership to account, but also a not uncommon dissatisfaction with the answers given: evasion results in more questions being asked at the next session. We need a culture of straight answers to straight questions. We might consider that, just as some questions are ruled out of order, so should some answers be, when the respondent deliberately evades giving a proper answer. (Perhaps Standing Orders should empower the Chair to require a proper answer.)

I know some of you have struggled to be called in debates in which you have knowledge, passion, or experience to offer. Especially irritating is when one has spent hours crafting a five-minute contribution only to be given two minutes to condense it; frustration results.

Let us not overlook the power of the Chair. Who gets called, at what point and for how long, matters. I have chaired large meetings. I know the dark arts of debate management. I should also say that we have seen it done supremely well in the experienced hands of Geoffrey Tattersall, but the reason he could do that was that he had decent periods of time within which to work.

We need to consider whether we have too much on our agendas and so do not prioritise the core business of Synod, which is the governance of the Church, including the scrutiny of proposed legislation. While commentating from the sidelines on national and political issues may be a welcome distraction, we might, in the House of Laity, ask whether these are a self indulgence at this time given our internal Church crises. 'Physician, heal thyself' is sometimes good advice.

The motion before the House is not the answer to our multiple tensions and problems. At one level it simply encapsulates the widespread disquiet, and no one motion can solve all that. What it can do, however, is to fire a warning shot to those managing our business that suppressing and trying to manage our dissatisfactions out of effective expression on the floor of Synod is not the answer. We need more democracy, not less, and more time devoted to core issues.

The paragraphs of the motion seek to describe and note the various dimensions of the problem which we need to address; in the short debate that follows, members may wish to expand upon these themes. The motion deliberately invites a continuation of the debate at the next Synod in York after our elected representatives have considered what is said in the debate, reflected upon it, and consulted with others.

How well we address our problems is partly dependent on how well our formal debates are facilitated and this motion is intended to focus our attention on this.

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