

Editorial

Caesar and the bishops

February sees the return to the General Synod of the second Church of England measure to be rejected by Parliament in recent years. The rejection of the proposed Prayer Book by the House of Commons in 1927, and again in 1928, is famous, but it subsequently became so much the norm for Parliament to approve measures sent to it by the Church Assembly, and afterwards by the General Synod, and to do it with very little debate in a thin house, that people had begun to say and think that the events of 1927 and 1928 could never happen again. The reason often given was that the country had become more secularized since, that the composition of Parliament reflected this fact, and that consequently the approval of church measures was a pure formality in the life of a legislature indifferent to Christianity.

Perhaps those better acquainted with Parliament were never fully persuaded by this account of the matter, but the events of recent years have left no one in any doubt that it was a misconception. Though Parliament passed the Enabling Act in 1919 in recognition of the fact that it no longer *adequately* represented the laity of the Church of England, and that a separate House of Laity was now needed to sit alongside the clerical Convocations, it did not mean to acknowledge that it no longer represented the Church of England *at all*, still less that it had ceased to have any interest in the Church of England. Certainly, it now admitted to its own membership Nonconformists, Roman Catholics and non-Christians; certainly, the nation was no longer a *practising* Christian nation to the extent that it often had been, and might be again; and for these reasons a practical acknowledgment of the changed situation was required. But that was all. It is widely believed that Parliament did not intentionally renounce the right of *amending* measures sent to it by the church, or deliberately confine itself to accepting or rejecting them; and, as the debates on Lord Sudeley's bill in both houses have shown, it did not either intentionally or in fact renounce the right of initiating church legislation of its own.

Parliament has its chapel, its chaplain, and its daily prayers before sessions, and it has its ecclesiastical committee to make a first report on pieces of church legislation. Nevertheless, it is of course true that the number of members who are practising Christians is not very large, and the number who would normally take an interest in church legislation is not a great deal larger; and in that number, the different political parties are by no means equally represented. Attempts to mobilize opposition in Parliament to controversial church measures of recent years have not been notably successful. Yet there are

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certain matters on which no mobilization is necessary. One of these matters is the *Book of Common Prayer*, as the many hours devoted to the debates on the Worship and Doctrine Measure made clear. This measure was eventually passed, but two measures have been rejected. One of these was held to treat the clergy in a manner contrary to natural justice, and the Synod, accepting the criticism, revised the measure before sending it back to Parliament a second time. The other measure, which comes back to the Synod for reconsideration in February, is the Appointment of Bishops Measure.

The actual provisions of this measure are not very far-reaching. It abolishes the election of a new archbishop or diocesan bishop by the dean and chapter of his cathedral, which is more of an assent than an election, since the choice has already been made. The choice is made by the Sovereign on the advice of the Prime Minister, and since the present Crown Appointments Commission was set up in 1978 (by an arrangement made in the premiership of Mr Callaghan), the Prime Minister has recommended to the Sovereign one of two names selected for it by the Crown Appointments Commission. The Crown Appointments Commission has the benefit of information about clergy collected by the Archbishops' Appointments Secretary, and of assistance from the vacancy-in-see committee of the diocese concerned, but in other respects is like a subdivision of the standing committee of the General Synod.

The claim has been made that this system secures the independence of the church in the appointment of its bishops in an effective and very desirable way. The Prime Minister is even expected to choose the first of the two names with which she is presented, and when (in the case of the Bishop of London) she allegedly chose the second, there was protest. The ideal which the supporters of the new method have before them is evidently that the state should simply do the church's bidding in this matter. But since the commission had selected two names as suitable, it is hard to see what cause for complaint there was, unless the goal at which one is aiming is disestablishment, with all the consequences that it would involve.

The presentation of two names is a refinement (though a radical refinement) of the older method of appointment. The Sovereign and the Prime Minister were never free to choose whomsoever they liked, since they never claimed to ordain men as deacon or presbyter, or to decide who should be ordained to those orders. In selecting bishops, therefore, they were confined to those whom the church had selected as suitable for ordination, and had actually ordained. All that they claimed was to *place* in a particular role (that of a diocesan see) a man who had already been *chosen* and *ordained* to the Anglican ministry. That he was now elevated to the episcopate was only a change in degree and not in kind.

The rejection of the new measure must be seen as a rejection, by the members of Parliament who are concerned for the welfare of the church, of any further weakening of the role of the state in the appointment of bishops. The speeches made reflected dismay over some of the appointments that had been made under the new system, and particularly over the appointment of the new bishop of Durham. This dismay is widely shared in the church, and for good reasons. To claim that better appointments have been made, and in a better way, under the new system than under the old, would be laughable. Yet this is what one would expect if it is a better system. The Synod would be wise to take warning, and rather than try to weaken the role of the state still further, consider increasing it somewhat again. Even a purely secular system could hardly produce bishops much more secular than those we now have. And the system in England was never purely secular.

After all, the powers that be are ordained of God. No Prime Minister acts outside God's jurisdiction. The Sovereign, moreover, is always a practising member of the Church of England, and the Sovereign is not a mere figure-head in this matter, but is known to have vetoed, on occasion, a name presented to her as a potential bishop or archbishop, and (according to some accounts) has done so of recent times. The merits of the old system are rarely stated, but they include the following points. It operated with a very high degree of the necessary confidentiality (whereas the Crown Appointments Commission is notorious for its leaks). It stood outside the infighting of parties and sectional interests in the church (whereas the Crown Appointments Commission is at the heart of them). It made its choices from the church at large (whereas the Crown Appointments Commission chooses almost exclusively from the existing membership of the General Synod). And, not least, the old system was a system of lay appointment (whereas the Crown Appointments Commission, despite its degree of lay membership, is more like a system in which clergy promote each other). If the election by dean and chapter is really just an assent to a lay choice, why not? Does this differ in principle from the selection of bishops in the early church by acclamation, or from the seeking out of the Seven by the Jerusalem congregation, so that the apostles could lay hands upon them?

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