

Editorial

The past generation has seen a continuing spate of reforms in every area of church life. Some of these have been causes for regret but many of them have helped to make different parts of church life more accessible to a wider range of people and more accountable to those whom the church serves. In particular, the rules governing pastoral oversight have improved to the point where it is hard to imagine a patron appointing an obviously unsuitable incumbent or a congregation where the wishes of the majority are simply ignored. Abuses like the purchase of livings have disappeared altogether and great efforts have been made to modernize ancient offices, like that of churchwarden, even if the results are sometimes open to question. And yet in the whirlwind of change it is remarkable how calm the centre has remained. The one part of the church's structure which has survived with very little alteration is the episcopate, which has now become (if only by default) one of the chief repositories of Anglican tradition. A late sixteenth-century worshipper would find himself very much at sea in most parish churches today but he would have little difficulty in recognizing the episcopate. The only major reform since his time has been the decision to limit the term of office to 75 years of age, though as few Tudor bishops enjoyed such longevity the effect of this would perhaps go unnoticed.

Of course, as everything else changes, sometimes almost beyond recognition, the permanence of the episcopal structure is bound to seem increasingly anomalous. In a church where democratic election is increasingly the norm, the fact that bishops are secretly appointed (and cannot really be objected to) is a quaint old custom which becomes harder and harder to defend. As the parson's freehold disappears, at least for practical purposes, the notion that the man at the top is accountable to nobody but God (in whom he may not believe) cannot really be sustained either. And yet, far from directing their zeal towards dealing with this anomaly, the church's latter day reformers appear to be strengthening an institution which is daily more out of step with the constituency which it is designed to serve. Some people have even talked about an episcopal power grab and the issue is so serious that it has unexpectedly delayed the passage of the Churchwardens' Measure, because of fears that enterprising and unscrupulous bishops might take advantage of the powers it gives them and do their utmost to strangle one of the venerable strongholds of lay power in the church.

The first sign that this trend might meet with real resistance appeared in the wake of the decision to ordain women to the presbyterate in 1992. Those Anglo-Catholics who could not accommodate themselves to this

development and who did not want to defect to Rome demanded and obtained alternative episcopal oversight in the form of Provincial Episcopal Visitors. By all accounts these have proved to be a great success and it seems most unlikely that they will ever be phased out, as the original intention was. PEVs are notable for the fact that they represent a breach in the traditional episcopal order in at least two different ways. They have a roving commission in each Province, which puts them on a par with the archbishops (in some ways at least) and they represent a single strand of churchmanship, something which has never before been accepted in the institutional life of the Church of England. Evangelicals were not slow to demand similar treatment for themselves but this has been refused. It has been claimed that the ordination of women is not an evangelical issue and that therefore Evangelicals ought to be perfectly content to accept the ministry of the normal diocesan bishops and their suffragans. It has also been said that the existing evangelical bishops have resisted such an appointment, though quite why they should have done so has never been properly explained. If party-coloured PEVs are available for Anglo-Catholics, what possible reason could there be for denying them to Evangelicals as well?

One reason which might be suggested is that if credibly evangelical PEVs were to be appointed, the largest, wealthiest and most self-sufficient parishes in the country would effectively sever contact with the diocesan structure and do as much as they can to create a church within the church. Anglo-Catholics might want to do the same, of course, but they are much less well organized in this respect. For a generation now Evangelicals have been developing their own parallel organizations, like the Anglican Evangelical Assembly, which give them at least the illusion of functioning as a separate entity. More importantly, there is always the possibility that a group like Reform will shake off its image as a coalition of the disgruntled and provide a solid network for the future evangelical *ecclesiola*. It is in this light that we must evaluate the proposals which have just been put forward by David Holloway in *The reform of the episcopate and alternative oversight* (Reform Discussion Paper No 21). Many readers will doubtless want to take issue with various points which Mr Holloway raises in the course of his argument but all that need concern us here are the proposals which he is making for a way forward. He rests his case for evangelical PEVs on Canon C 17.2, which imposes a duty on the archbishops to 'supply the defects of other bishops'. Using that as his legal justification, Mr Holloway goes on to state that, as there are other bishops who are obviously defective in their doctrine and in their pastoral oversight, it is time to implement this Canon by appointing evangelical PEVs who would (in effect) be elected by members of Reform.

Let it be said immediately that the case for evangelical PEVs is a strong

one and that if the church authorities object to the fact that Mr Holloway has raised the matter again, they have only themselves to blame. Finding men who are acceptable to Reform members would obviously be necessary, since otherwise they would not be credible as Evangelicals and the whole experiment would be stillborn. It is also true that many bishops are unsatisfactory in terms of the church's doctrine and that there is almost no prospect that any of them will ever be disciplined because of that. The harm done to the church by a leadership which does not fully support or proclaim its biblical teachings is a scandal which we must certainly do everything we can to remedy. In all these things, Mr Holloway has put his finger on matters which can no longer be swept under the carpet and which Evangelicals are called to address at every level of the church, whatever the bishops who claim to speak for them might think about it.

Having said that, however, it remains true that Mr Holloway's case is morally right but legally unsound. The 'defects' which the archbishops are called upon to supply are not lapses of doctrine or of ethical teaching on matters like homosexuality. After all, what guarantee is there that the archbishops would be any less 'defective' on such matters? What the Canon is talking about concerns such things as physical or mental incapacity, as well as a bishop's refusal to carry out a part of his duties (like ordaining women or other candidates whom the church deems to be suitable even if he himself does not). This is a rather different concept from the one which Mr Holloway is putting forward under the cover of Canon C 17.2 and there is no chance that the church will allow Mr Holloway's understanding of 'defect' to be accepted as a valid interpretation of it. The reason is quite simple – to do so would mean repudiating not merely the ministry but the professed faith of a large number of the bishops, including (presumably) all those who have expressed their support for homosexual rights in the church. Such a repudiation would indeed be highly desirable but it can only come about by exercising discipline, which would have to take the form of something like a heresy trial. You cannot leave a bishop in office if it is officially accepted that he is doctrinally unsound but that is what Mr Holloway's proposal would inevitably lead to.

It is also impossible for the church to accept that a body like Reform should start appointing bishops who would be able to function in the church at large if they were asked to do so. The present system of appointment is certainly flawed in many respects but replacing it with election by a party organization is hardly the answer. After all, who controls the membership of Reform? However high-minded and sincere its leaders may be, the scope for corruption and abuse is still there and there would be little effective way of dealing with it. Besides, how long will Reform continue to exist, or to maintain its evangelical zeal? The past is

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littered with the corpses of dead evangelical bodies, many of which lost their initial fervour long before they finally expired. Something as serious as the election of a bishop cannot be delegated to so ephemeral a construction and if Evangelicals want to be taken seriously they will have to think again about how to put their proposals on a more sound basis.

None of this should be understood as a criticism of David Holloway or a repudiation of his concerns. What he wants to see is valid enough in its own way; the only issue is how to achieve it. Canon law may well be the best way forward but if that is to be used as an instrument of reform, it must be handled in the right way. At the moment, it is a case of evangelical passion coming up against sober legal realities and, in any contest between these two, it is the former which will have to give way. The challenge which faces Evangelicals in this position is to find a way to use the legal machinery of the church to achieve their desired ends. Mr Holloway has at least made a beginning. Are there others who will follow?

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