

In defence of the CofE's House of Laity

Even friends of an Established church like myself – though I'm a Catholic – should think twice about the wisdom of the idea after the naked political interference in the affairs of the CofE in the Commons. The Speaker, who is non-religious/agnostic, was among the most overt in encouraging MPs to overturn the church's decision not to approve women bishops.



Perhaps, he suggested, they might like to refer the matter to the Equalities Minister (Maria Miller)? It was more or less to say that the equalities legislation should be brought to bear on the CofE when it comes to its way of appointing bishops. Ben Bradshaw too was all in favour of parliament getting involved. So was Chris Bryant, who is not only an ex-Anglican vicar, but by his own account an ex-Christian.

Justin Welby returns to his seat at the General

Synod of the Church of England, which includes

the House of Laity.

But there were a few actual practising Anglicans among the politicians who couldn't wait to tell the Church what to do. The Prime Minister was, of course, one. 'The Church should get with the programme,' he declared, which pretty well ran counter to most of Christ's teachings about fitting in with the world. But he did have a point in saying that 'we should give them a prod' – yep, as a communicant Anglican he could indeed have got involved in the House of Laity and played a part in the vote, or if otherwise engaged, got his mother to.

But it was Frank Field, astonishingly, who was among the most aggressive on the matter. I may say that if I have a parliamentary hero it is he, but his sanity on pensions does not extend to bishops. He wanted to impose the provisions of equalities legislation to the church on the basis that it had been given an exemption simply 'to get its house in order' on the matter and had failed to do so. Therefore,

parliament should intervene. Catholics, he added kindly, could keep their opt-out on the basis that there didn't appear to be popular demand in congregations for women bishops. Frank, dear Frank, a word to the wise? The Catholic Church isn't a democracy. You may or may not buy the idea that it is guided by the Holy Spirit in the light of sacred tradition, but that's the working premise. It's not the Wee Frees, the Free Presbyterian church or other exemplary models of Christian direct democracy.

The Church of England, by comparison, is a democracy, with rather a fine balance between the interest groups within it. The bishops, clergy and laity each have a house or voting bloc and they are given due weight; a vote requires a working majority of two thirds within each of them. It gives due weight to the feelings of parishes as well as the top brass, which is, you might think, a good thing. Yet the entire secular world seems united in condemning the laity for its sheer cheek and impudence in voting the wrong way. There was an explosion of indignation across the press and broadcast media – the BBC didn't even try for impartiality – notably among those organs which are in general most antipathetic towards Christianity and most indifferent to the CofE.

As I say, I am a Catholic myself so in theory none of this affects me. But I feel a good deal of sympathy for those who took part in a vote in good faith on the basis of conviction and argument, only to find themselves condemned for their temerity in voting in a way that right-minded secular people wouldn't. As the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, pointed out, the vote was not lost on the basis of the principle of the thing: it was about the provision that was made for those with conscientious objections. They included Evangelicals, who object to women bishops on scriptural grounds, and Anglo-Catholics, who believe, inter alia, that women bishops would not represent Christ in his gender as well as his humanity – which is the case my own church advances. They are also concerned about the effects of reform on relations with Orthodox and Catholic churches. These are not negligible arguments. But opponents are being treated like heretics against the real contemporary orthodoxy of gender equality.

The secularists now lining up to threaten dire action against the Church of England now include Alistair Carmichael, the chief whip of the LibDems (that party pillar of Anglicanism), who suggests that bishops should be removed from the House of Lords, on the basis that they're selected on a dubious basis. The issue, then, is becoming a useful stick for those in favour of disestablishment to beat the CofE.

The critical issue was not so much the principle of women bishops as the provision that was made for those who can't in conscience accept it. If opponents are allowed to seek the oversight of a male bishop, then the rest of the Church can go its own way and ordain the Rev Lucy Winkett as soon as it likes. If the CofE is meant to be a broad church, then presumably that includes those who take a line on this issue that isn't approved by The Independent and The Guardian – whose chief critic of the vote,

Andrew Brown, incidentally, isn't a believer either. The would-be women bishops, in a spectacular display of intolerance, earlier this year opted not to give any such leeway to those who in conscience can't accept their ministry.

If the exercise of democracy in the Anglican Church really is that objectionable, then the more honest approach would be to scrap the three-tiered system in Synod, representing bishops, clergy and laity, and just have it run from the top like the Catholic Church. Anything must be better than having MPs – Catholics, unbelievers, the lot – running the show.

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