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APPOINTING BISHOPS

By David Phillips

It has been reported in the press recently that the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is considering giving up the role of appointing Diocesan Bishops and presumably his role in other ecclesiastical appointments. A new report has just been released on senior appointments (but not Diocesan Bishops) and the first stage of this will be debated by the General Synod in July. If Mr Brown does try to shed his role then the implementation of the report is going to be held up until matters become clearer.

If the PM does end his involvement, then how will Bishops be appointed? Evangelicals have generally bewailed the failings of the present system principally because it actively discriminates against conservative evangelicals. If we consider those who would actively identify with the classical evangelical position, and in particular accept the Biblical teaching on gender and ministry (that women should not be presbyters etc) then we have seen no Diocesan Bishops appointed in the last 20 years or more (and I cannot myself think when the last would be). The only classical evangelical suffragan Bishop is Wallace Benn. When you consider the statistics, by my reckoning classical evangelicals account for between 5 and 10 percent of the clergy and the churches in which they serve probably between 10 and 20 percent. On the clergy numbers there ought to be between 2 and 4 classical evangelical Diocesan Bishops and up to 12 suffragans. It ought to be plain to everyone that the system discriminates against classical evangelicals yet despite various protests and meetings nothing has changed.

Perhaps a new system of appointments would redress the balance. But how would it be done?

It is likely that many will press for one of two methods.

The first and most obvious would be to continue the present method but without the Prime Minister's involvement. In effect the Crown Nominations Commission would become an electoral college. The CNC is almost entirely elected but such is the method by which it is elected (6 from Dioceses, an Archbishop and then a certain number from the House of Bishops, General Synod clergy and laity) it is in no way representative.

A second possible method which is likely to be put forward would be for the House of Bishops to appoint new Bishops. I suspect that I am not the only one whose heart sinks when such a proposal is mentioned. But it could in principal ensure a degree of fairness which neither the present system, nor other alternatives could yield. Its problem would be that democracy is and has been a key feature of Church life in recent centuries and people will want this to be more so in the appointment of Bishops.

A third method would be for the Diocesan Synod to elect their Bishop. This is a method employed elsewhere and, at least on paper, appears very democratic. However, anyone who has participated in an English Diocesan Synod will know that they are generally pretty lame affairs. Also, the way in which people are elected means that they are not as representative as we would like particularly in terms of age profile.

The only truly democratic way would be for all electoral roll members in a Diocese to be given the vote. Such a procedure has been muted many times for General Synod elections and the cost has generally been deemed too high. However, such a cost, once every 5 or 10 years, for the election of

a Diocesan Bishop would be more bearable.

No doubt there are other methods and models mooted. But it is worth remembering that however anomalous it may seem our present system is at least in principle democratic. The Prime Minister is the chief officer of a government elected by the people and the Church of England likes to see itself as a Church of the people.

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