

THE BRIDGE REPORT

**Comment on the Report of the Review Group appointed by the
Standing Committee of the General Synod entitled SYNODICAL
GOVERNMENT IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND***

Hugh Craig

This group of 8 people under the chairmanship of Lord Bridge of Harwich was set up in 1993 'to review the system of synodical government in the Church of England introduced in 1970'. It aimed originally to report by 1995 or 1996 but its work was interrupted by the setting up of the Turnbull Commission and they rightly judged that they could scarcely complete their task until the outcome of that Commission was known. Now they have reported with an assumption that Turnbull will probably be broadly implemented.

After an introduction, a review of theological principles (somewhat slanted), a little history and a brief survey of the contemporary scene in Church and Society, the Report has chapters which consider the parish, the deanery, the diocese, the convocations, the General Synod, the electoral system, the relationship between Synod and Parliament and communications. Each makes recommendations which are summarised in a final chapter, followed by five appendices which take up the last 63 pages. The result is a document which it is important to study but is a strange mixture of the important and the trivial, including sound recommendations peppered with others which one suspects have not been thought through.

It lays a welcome emphasis on the **Parish**, observing that they work well, in part due to 'the flexibility ... built into the present arrangements allowing ... parishes some freedom ...'. The group rightly reject some suggestions for detailed change: but then insist people should be on the Electoral Roll for 12 months before being eligible for election to a PCC. More important, they recommend mandatory election of only a third of the PCC each year (those elected serve 3 years) in place of the current choice open to each parish. They think this will prevent a 'faction' taking over at a single annual meeting. They do not consider how hard it will make it to remove a 'faction' that has already done so! They also propose a 'norm' for PCC size. These are trivial points, largely irrelevant to the real problems at parish level.

They recommend the abolition of statutory **Deanery Synods** but then confuse the issue by requiring each diocese to produce a 'scheme for deanery arrangements' reviewed every five years. Each will have a lay chairman and rural dean to, inter alia, 'shape deanery strategy and activity'. So what really is being changed? They rightly wish to make deanery boundary changes easier.

They recommend that the annual budget and accounts be submitted to **Diocesan Synods** and that the minimum size of synod be reduced from 150 to 100. They ask for diocesan review of the composition of Bishops' Councils and (following the Turnbull distrust of the elected) hint at the desirability of more appointed members. Naively, they are 'confident that diocesan pastoral committees' will ensure that sub-committees appointed from outside their own membership 'will have suitably responsible membership'. If desired, the functions of the Redundant

Churches Uses Committee could be performed by a sub-committee . They ask for the Diocesan Secretary to be given a 'legal persona' which is helpful, but shrink from doing what the Election Review Group would have done, namely ban such from election to General Synod because of their paid employment under Rule 37 (2). Most disappointing of all, they fail to address the gathering tensions between parish and diocese, as the parishes feel increasingly treated as playthings for diocesan officials. As with Turnbull they concentrate power in diocese and centre.

They propose (not before time) that **Convocations** be abolished. It should have happened in 1970. Perhaps it will now be done.

The proposals for the **General Synod** are more sweeping. The House of Bishops is left alone, except for reducing the number of elected Suffragans by 2 and adding the Bishop of Dover ex-officio. No provision is made for the PEVs. The House of Clergy is reduced from 259 to 154 (by 41%) by reducing the elected proctors from 184 to 145 (by 21%), and by sweeping away most of the special constituencies. The House of Laity is reduced from 258 to 175 (by 32%) by reducing the elected laity from 247 to 162 (by 34%), reducing the 'others' by 1 and adding 3 elected laity of the Services Archdeaconry Synods. The reasoning has nothing to do with work-load but simply that the number of clergy and laity on the Rolls has diminished. Apparently this does not affect the number of Bishops. Yet some Bishops attend who take little part and obviously regard the Synod merely as a chore - twenty or thirty Bishops who put their heart into the Synod would make it more effective. Following the deplorable trend of Turnbull, they propose that the Archbishops can appoint 5 more members of the Synod without electoral mandate.

So each diocesan bishop will be represented by himself, each proctor will represent 88 clergy, and each layperson will represent 9076 laity on the electoral roll. The ratio of elected laity representing 99% of the Church drops from 43% to 41.5% of the Synod. One reason for the cuts is cited as cost but the vast majority of the cost is the staff at Church House, not the sessions of the Synod. That cost is left untouched. What about relating staff to Electoral Rolls?

The other main, proposed change at General Synod level relates to the lay elections. With the disappearance of Deanery Synods, the electors become parish electors appointed as such at APCMs. Their numbers are more proportional to the size of rolls and that is good. The theoretically sound but highly impractical proposal to give everyone on the roll a vote is wisely rejected. But when it is realised that these same 'electors' are to elect the lay members of diocesan synod, one begins to wonder particularly as they don't meet (and therefore may not know each other). They could meet and re-invent deanery synods under diocesan schemes, a different name, and without statutory safeguards? Detailed points the

Review Group make about Synod procedure and meetings reflect their general fear of the voice of the pews.

The Report deserves careful but not uncritical study by clergy and laity. Many of the lesser recommendations are sound but it will do little to lessen the dangerously widening gap between parish and diocese and between the Church as a whole and its episcopate. Neither will it materially increase accountability in a Church in which the centres seek to cast off restraint by those they serve.

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Church Society, Dean Wace House,
16 Rosslyn Road,
Watford WD18 0NY
Tel : 01923-235111 Fax : 01923-800363
admin@churchsociety.org