

EDITORIAL

# The Next Archbishop of Canterbury: The End of English Hegemony<sup>1</sup>

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There is nothing especially unique about the premature departure of an Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Welby left office on January 6 2025, the Feast of the Epiphany, marking the visit of the Magi to see the Christ-child. So, it is perhaps sobering to remember that, like the proverbial wise men, many of his predecessors left office to return home by some other route they had not initially bargained on.

We can date the Church of England from Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury from 1534. One of only two post-reformation officeholders to be relieved of the post, he was burnt at the stake in 1556 during the reign of Mary Tudor for being too Protestant. William Laud was beheaded in 1645, after the defeat of Charles I by the New Model Army for being too Catholic. You can't win.

However, well before Cranmer, several Archbishops had their appointments vetoed by papal authority, whilst several chosen candidates thought better of it and declined the position. Some had their elections quashed or disputed by the reigning monarch. A couple of candidates died of plague before being consecrated, while another was excommunicated. One fled accused of high treason, and others resigned on being upgraded to the rank of cardinal – a promotion. Thomas Becket was famously assassinated in 1170, and Simon Sudbury was beheaded by an unruly mob during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Once upon a time, untimely death in this office was an occupational hazard.

A personal favourite of mine is Cardinal Reginald Pole, who conveniently died of influenza just a few hours after Mary I had passed away on 17 November 1558. Otherwise, he had have been executed (for being too Catholic). Earlier in his life, he had almost married Mary I, so he was well connected and wealthy. But in 1556, he was ordained priest and two days later consecrated bishop to become the

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<sup>1</sup>Some of this material for this Commentary piece has been drawn from earlier reflections by the author in 'Credo', *The Times*, January and April 2025.

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Archbishop of Canterbury. The Tudor dynasty really knew a thing or two about how to fast track their favourites. And get rid of them when they had served their purpose.

Archbishops of Canterbury are expendable and rarely memorable. Before the reformation, sixteen were canonized. Few will recall these saintly figures. Nowadays, an archbishop might get a seat in the House of Lords upon retirement. Well, might. So, with Welby gone and soon to be forgotten, what are the lessons to be learned?

First, this is the only time the officeholder has left due to public pressure and been made to resign. Over 15,000 people signed a petition calling for him to go, and his departure is symptomatic of a public mood that has turned decisively against an unaccountable episcopacy and its ecclesiocracy. If the church resists scrutiny and external regulation, it will repeatedly fail as a credible public body and never be trusted.

Second, the resignation points to a much deeper malaise for the Church of England. This is not so much a church in crisis as a body nearing the end of its natural life. Like all organic bodies, institutions have a lifespan too; death is a normal part of the existential cycle. If there is to be a resurrection – not just endless attempts at resuscitation and rejuvenation – death must be embraced. The Church preaches this. It must live it too.

Third, the Church of England continues to live and flourish locally. All life is there, and that is truly hopeful. However, as a national hierarchical institution and international denomination, it is in an advanced state of decay. Death avoidance only means that the Church of England spends more time in a self-imposed purgatory of painful palliative stasis.

Undoubtedly, the nation (by which I mean England) is now at a turning point in history and culture. In 2034, the Church of England – a national Protestant church that decisively broke from Rome – —will be 500 years old. Lambeth Palace has no plans at present to mark this event, as Anglicans are divided on whether this is their quincentenary. Some Anglicans think that the Church of England is a continuing Catholic church, carrying on the work of St. Augustine since 597 CE.

That is not how the Vatican views this national Protestant denomination, berthed in Swiss-German Reformed theology. Unable to explain itself, the Church of England hierarchy stays quiet on such issues, doubtless hoping that keeping up appearances (literally, by dressing up like Roman Catholic clergy in everyday attire and liturgical wear) will obfuscate the reality.

One bicentenary that comes to mind falls in a few years too. In 1832, Parliament introduced the Reform Bill designed to level up the status and rights of other denominations. The Bill sought to overturn the Test Act of 1673 that had effectively barred Roman Catholics from holding public office and even attending university. The government had been chipping away at religious discrimination since 1828, with non-conformist denominations being extended some equality measures.

But in 1832, the Church of England stood its ground on privilege, and despite broad religious support for change, bishops in the House of Lords voted against to help defeat the Reform Bill on its first reading. Cue protests and mayhem. The Archbishop of Canterbury was heckled in public, the carriage of the Bishop of Bath and Wells stoned, and a crowd of almost ten thousand turned up to watch an effigy

of the Bishop of Carlisle being burned. On the third reading of the Reform Bill, no bishop was found to be in opposition.

The Victorian era marked a sea change in how the public viewed the Church of England. The first census of 1851 found that of the 18 million population of England and Wales, around a quarter were Anglican – only fractionally more than those who identified as non-conformists. Pressure to reform led to the disestablishment of Anglicanism in Ireland (overwhelmingly Roman Catholic) and eventually Wales in the Edwardian period. The changes were slow but inexorable.

Perhaps the most significant shifts were directed towards the entitled, lofty elitism often displayed in the Church of England's hierarchy. The USA had acquired its native bishops in 1784 following the defeat of the British in the American War of Independence. Yet, well into the 19th century, Church of England bishops declined to recognize and affirm visiting American clergy, insisting they should be regarded as laypeople since they could not affirm allegiance to the crown. This 'religion of class', as John Henry Newman dubbed it, still believed in *Rule Anglicana*, and presumed to treat other denominations as inferior species, and even other parts of the Anglican church outside Britain as second-class citizens. Furthermore, it is protected by its own system of law, which now feels increasingly out of step with common law and the national appetite for regulatory accountability.

### A Law Unto Themselves?

Debates over rules and regulations for religion are hardly new. When Jesus wriggles out of a trick question on tax evasion ('Render to Caesar what is to Caesar, and to God what is God's' – *Mark 12: 17*), he acknowledges that there are obligations to God, whilst others pertain to the state.

In short, there is sacred and secular law. But following W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman (*1066 And All That*), it does not follow religious law is necessarily a Good Thing. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans (2: 14) delivered a chastening verdict levelled against the pagans. They were apparently 'a law unto themselves' and did as they pleased, replete with their own self-justifying codes of practice.

So, to whom are religious bodies accountable? The answer from the church leaders for two millennia has been consistent: God. Yet, it has never been that simple. In the aftermath of the revolutions that swept Europe across the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Catholics were left with two competing schools of thought on how the church was to be governed.

Some clung to what became known as the Ultramontain position (literally, beyond the mountains). This was a clerical political conception which maintained that the independent powers and prerogatives of the papacy came from beyond but could overrule in secular affairs. That the church was indeed a law unto itself. Others opted for the Gallican school of thought, which maintained that secular authority – the state or the monarch – could trump Roman Catholic religious law.

English Anglicanism adopted a compromise, upholding the authority of the church in some spheres, whilst also affirming the primacy of common law in others. Many English people regarded this hybrid as a paragon of virtue. But as secularization began to gain a grip in the 19th century, the Church of England was

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plunged into internecine legal disputes over ritualism. The Oxford Movement and its successors led to the reintroduction of surpliced choirs, candles, incense, bells, vestments and other pre-Reformation practices into ordinary English parish churches. Some reacted with visceral horror to 'Romish' influence. Some Church of England priests were actually jailed for ritualism, and there was even an attempt to put the then Bishop of Lincoln, Edward King, behind bars.

On the surface, this was a theological war (of sorts). However, the underlying causes of the conflict lay in jurisprudence. Was the Church of England a self-governing self-regulating body, or was it under the law of the land? What quickly became clear was that the secular courts were disinclined make rulings on whether or not a priest or congregation had decided to embrace smells and bells.

The government had to act in the wake of these bitter local disputes. A Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline was established between 1904 and 1906. In their final report, it recommended that the law on public worship should be devolved and the Church was given powers to make such changes.

A revised constitutional settlement in 1919 created the first devolved parliament for the Church of England (then known as the Church Assembly). It was eventually superseded by the General Synod. This should mean that the Church of England was governed under a capacious dome of democracy. Today, however, on governance, safeguarding, equal marriage, gender, sexuality, transparency, and accountability, the Church of England has arrived at an entirely new impasse.

The General Synod of the Church of England ought to be the ecclesial parliament that delivers self-governing and self-regulation. But just as ritualism ripped the church apart over a century ago, General Synod now finds itself mired in disputes it cannot resolve. To make matters worse, its democratic processes have been undermined and depleted by the combined forces of episcopacy and unaccountable ecclesiocrats. General Synod has shown itself to be incapable of adopting standards of truthful conduct that are otherwise expected of normal public institutions.

Bishops have been seduced by Ultramontanist outlooks. They have adopted the heresy of impeccability and believe that episcopal office and the church are to be without sin. Furthermore, in conflating their identity with God, they are omniscient too. So they function as though they cannot err, and there is nothing on which they are not expert. Today's more Galician public don't buy this for a second. Standards of justice, HR, safeguarding and accountability in the Church of England are many miles below the most basic protocols operating in the public sphere. The gulf between models for honesty and integrity within the church compared to secular-public bodies has become colossal.

This moment of crisis – an opportunity – has arrived. The Church of England's hierarchy can continue with their exceptionalism being a law unto themselves. That road leads to disestablishment and more decimating internal disputations. Alternatively, as national church, it can become a law-abiding, fully transparent and accountable institution as other public bodies are.

At present, the Church of England hierarchy wants to have its cake and eat it. So, run like a quasi-regal and elitist private fiefdom, covering up abuses of power and authority with endless opacity, yet enjoying all the privileges of a public platform. But when a national church no longer meets the bar for basic standards of conduct in public life, the time has come for a new Royal Commission.

The Church of England needs the next Archbishop of Canterbury to lead it out of the self-imposed exile of being a law unto itself and into the responsible freedom of becoming a properly accountable public institution. The church must be subject to fully independent regulation and comply with normal secular law. Only then could it recover itself to serve the English nation as a body fit for purpose in the 21st century.

There is now mounting pressure on the Labour government to reform the House of Lords and, with that, address the anomaly of Church of England bishops sitting in the legislative chamber as of right. The Establishment has its stock of old canards to meet such demands. These include all the arguments about Church of England schools, and even occasionally, a conservative commentator might venture that bishops in the House of Lords go back to feudal times.

In truth, the history is more complex. Wales only gained parliamentary representation in 1536, Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1801. The anomaly of English bishops sitting in a UK parliament looked even stranger when the Irish and Welsh Anglican bishops were removed in 1869 and 1920, respectively. Scottish Anglican bishops have never been represented in the House of Lords. Reforms to bishops sitting in the House of Lords are nothing new. The Clergy Act, also known as the Bishops Exclusion Act (effective from 1642), prevented clergy from exercising any temporal jurisdiction or authority. It was repealed in 1661 with the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. For many reformers in the 17th century, this represented a catastrophic defeat – though I suspect their time may come again.<sup>2</sup>

In the 21st century, under Charles III, there is no case for privileging English peers in the House of Lords, let alone a tiny group of ‘Lords Spiritual’ who cannot conceivably represent Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

## A Matter of Trust

This may all sound too much for some Anglicans because the church leadership has groomed congregations and parishes into thinking quasi-regal models of episcopacy. These constructions of episcopal identity have consequences for ecclesiology. Namely, a top-down hierarchical polity where those on the ground can neither question or challenge the power being exercised. But this is a dangerous road for global Anglicanism to travel, as it asserts some very directive Catholic-Orthodox notions of authority, when in fact Anglicanism is inherently Protestant, albeit with Catholic-type liturgy and morphological similarities. But the similarities are ones of style, not substance. And globally, Protestant denominations tend to be more open to internal democratic process.<sup>3</sup>

In English Anglican polity, the quasi-regal and monarchical construction of episcopal identity often leads to bishops being conflated with attributes that only belong to God: omniscient, omnicompetent, unerring, impeccable and unaccountable (omnipotent). This may once have been a matter of mystique. But it is now a cause of alienation, and more likely to lead to decline. What global Anglicanism

<sup>2</sup>See Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries*, London: Viking, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion, see Martyn Percy, *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism: Empire, Slavery and Revolt in the Church of England*, London: Hurst Books, 2025.

must wrestle with now is what it means to be a Protestant denomination that retained bishops and begin to work out how they, and the wider polity, can be subject to democratic accountability.

We must reckon with what the first Christians understood by faith. We moderns think of it as belief, meaning a set of dry doctrinal and rational propositions. But the Greek word for 'faith' (*pistis*) in the New Testament is better rendered as 'trust in' or 'divine persuasion', rather than 'believe' or 'belief'. Thus, John 3:16 is better read as 'for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever trusts in him shall not perish but have eternal life'.

Of course, I don't have to believe everything a bishop tells me, and that is just as well because I often don't. Sometimes, even as a teacher of the faith, they're just wrong. Sometimes, with a thin grasp of affairs, their analysis is weak and awry. Sometimes, their media training leads them to say things that are meant to sound good, reassuring and convincing, but they are neither true nor convicting. I can live with that, in small doses, because belief is not ultimately crucial to our relationships, including those between ourselves and God, and ultimate salvation. But trust is indispensable, integral and essential to faith.

Like doubting Thomas, I may not easily be persuaded, but I am nonetheless asked to trust. I may see the risen Jesus and not know what, how or why I have, and I cannot explain it. But like the women at the tomb, I am asked to trust. Trust is the key to faith, and it is the key to salvation. When you cannot trust church leaders, no amount of assertion of what is meant to be believed to attain salvation or keep the show on the road will ever compensate for the absence of trust. Faith deserts us at this point. Because if the church cannot be trusted, then nothing it says or does can really be believed.

Children will eventually learn that not everything their parents told them was believable. Sometimes, a parent may tell a child something that, though untrue, was only to protect them from harm or trauma. However, what any child cannot easily recover from is a parent they cannot trust. Faith is trusting in the person, even though you may not have the reasons to believe them (just yet), or the knowledge to confirm your gut instincts and intellectual hunch.

When the church puts its PR or propositional belief statements above trust, it binds itself to a self-secularizing future that only ends in heresy, failure and divorce. True religion is ultimately only secured in authentic trust and love. Belief and knowledge come in some distance behind, in joint third place. Yet church leaders imagine that if only they keep loudly spouting beliefs and propositions, the tide of secularization will somehow turn. It won't.

## A Post-Colonial Archbishop of Canterbury?

In a recent article for *The Critic* ('More Than Just a Figurehead?', 14 February 2025), its influential Anglican columnist the Revd. Marcus Walker took aim at the alleged plans to strip the See of Canterbury of its international primatial symbolism. The arguments marshalled by Walker for the global significance – prestige, even – of the seat of St. Augustine rested on a number of very English presumptions that assumed a certain pre-eminence. Awkwardly, rather like British Prime Ministers and

American Presidents, there is presupposed to be some 'special relationship' between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury that no other denomination enjoys.

Walker is at pains to highlight the various tokens and gifts that successive Popes have bestowed on Archbishops of Canterbury, as though these were expressions of how the papacy *really* thinks of and esteems the Church of England, rather than the 'official' Roman Catholic position, which (uniquely) decreed Anglican claims to holy orders as 'utterly null and void' (Pope Leo XIII, 'Apostolicae Curae', 1896). Leo XIII was far from being some ecumenical reactionary. His papacy ushered in an era of transparency and democracy in the church. Leo XIII commissioned the first Vatican Council and made strenuous political strides in promoting trade unions, rights for workers, improving health and social conditions across Europe for the working class, including the establishment of a hospice in the midst of a cholera epidemic. Leo XIII also elevated the Anglican convert John Henry Newman to the status of Cardinal.

Facts tend to get in the way of arguments for esteem. Westminster Cathedral lists Archbishops of Canterbury, but the roster stops at William Warham (1503-32). The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the presumptive occupants of the See of Saint Augustine after that date, since the Church of England broke away from Rome. The difficulty of English Anglicans talking up the 'special relationship' with the papacy is that other denominations and their leaders also get special treatment and receive warm, filial symbolic tokens connoting degrees of recognition and ecumenical hospitality.

The presumptive nature of English Anglicanism is infused – salted with – a kind of Empire-mythos, which even in the wake of the post-war settlements (i.e., after 1945) assumes that the status of Britain (but really England, in fact) retains some global significance that sets it apart from its near-competitors in Europe. In this Empire-mythos, the Second World War precipitated the weakening of British extensivity but left its intensity of influence largely intact. Whilst some case can be made for this outlook, most scholars would see the post-war world in a different light.

For example, Ashley Jackson and Andrew Stewart carefully note in their *Superpower Britain: The 1945 Vision and Why it Failed*<sup>4</sup> that the British thought that the very idea that China might be regarded as an emerging superpower was 'poppycock'. Eden, writing in 1942, opined that the American view that China ranked alongside Russia as a superpower was plainly erroneous. Churchill wrote to Eden in even more colourful terms, stating 'that China is one of the four great world powers is an absolute farce' and 'it is nonsense to talk of China as a great power'.

Peter Clarke (*The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*, 2007) and John Darwin (*The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, 2009) concurred that the strategic catastrophe of the Second World War had a devastating impact on Britain and that any recovery after 1945 only amounted to the briefest remission. It is only with hindsight that this is now grasped; it was not seen at the time.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ashley Jackson and Andrew Stewart, *Superpower Britain: The 1945 Vision and Why it Failed*, Oxford: OUP, 2025, pp. 214-15.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*, London: Allen Lane, 2007; and John Darwin (*The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).



The British struggle in the post-war period was rooted in the global decline in deference towards the Empire and shaking off imperialism in favour of national democracy. Britain found herself – still – casting herself as the mother of modern parliamentary democracy, yet only very begrudgingly setting aside its steady-state imperialism that it still used to rule over its dominions. The global Anglican Communion held up a mirror to this polity too. Devolved authority, democracy, equality and independence – yes, of course; but not yet, and only when we are ready to give the green light.

English Anglicanism, with its inherent class-based elitism, frequently operates with the same presumptions that shaped earlier British Empire-mythos which assumes models of hierarchical and quasi-imperial governance. In turn, and in the episcopacy, this is often quasi-regal, presuming local deference and obedience towards the hierarchy to be superior to democracy and devolution.

As with post-war Britain, the leadership of the Church of England cannot conceive of a global Anglican polity that is not infinitely better off with English Anglicans in charge and Lambeth Palace central to the future direction of the denomination. Democracy and meritocracy are therefore subordinated to the ongoing culture of deference and elitism. The consequence of this (rather strange) worldview is that many English Anglicans overestimate their significance in Anglican global affairs and are both puzzled and perturbed when ignored or snubbed by their denominational kith and kin.

The underlying fear for English Anglicans is comparable to those that overshadow the post-war Empire and the end of imperialism. If Britain is no longer a global superpower, then it becomes (again) what it was under Henry VIII. Namely, a nation with some regional power, but by no means pre-eminent. That would be true for Britain and the English in the 21st century – it lags behind China, Russia and America, and in Europe, behind Germany and France.

For English Anglicans, the reality is similar. Despite a fondness for talking up the number of Anglican adherents globally to 88 million, it is more likely to be 50–55 million. Numerically and in terms of extensity, it is likely that Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Lutherans can make comparable or better claims on numerical strength and range than Anglicans. In short, English Anglicanism is no longer a global ecclesial superpower. It is collapsing back into what it began as, namely a European Protestant national church, albeit with some regional denominational strengths. But that is a long, long way off being a global ‘Communion’ (i.e., ‘ecclesial superpower’), in much the same way as the British Empire, or the successor Commonwealth, can no longer exist or rule by imperial decree in a post-war world. And certainly not in the 21st century.

In this, there are many in the Church of England who are adrift of the wider polity in the Anglican Communion. As Peter Clarke records of the British in 1948, most were unable to explain the difference between the Empire and the Commonwealth and between a colony and a dominion. (The difference is in governance, with a colony under the direct rule of the empire, whereas a dominion has attained a degree of self-governance, whilst yet remaining within the British family ethos.) In the same way, most English Anglicans would struggle to differentiate between autonomous provinces of the Anglican Communion, dioceses outside the Church of England that link directly to the Archbishop of Canterbury,



extra-provincial areas, churches in full communion with Canterbury but were not in fact Anglican, and so forth.

Clarke goes on to note how many in Britain in 1948 could not contemplate national survival without the Empire for support.<sup>6</sup> I suspect the same pertains to the Church of England. It cannot imagine itself without the wider Anglican Communion, and it cannot conceive of a world in which it does not continue to be *primus inter pares*. To lose that status will seem unbearable to those who cling to the myth of being an ecclesial superpower. Somehow, to just regress into being a national Protestant church would mean it becoming some very Small Thing. And yet that is exactly what it was in 1534 – the Church of England. That, and that only. Not of Wales, Scotland or Ireland, let alone some international ecclesiastical confection. The Church of England has, like the British Empire, eventually ceded its powers abroad, retired to being at home, and must now turn its attention to its own convoluted internal affairs.

## Next Steps

The English Anglican Communion leaves behind an extraordinary global legacy. Moreover, some of those bonds remain powerful and vibrant such as the Mothers Union and continue to shape local and regional initiatives. But like the British Empire of old, and more recently the Commonwealth, the Anglican Communion need not heed the bidding of the Church of England. Those days are over, and the once-upon-a-time pre-eminence of the global Anglican Communion, now just a memory.

So, is the Archbishop of Canterbury more than just a figurehead in the wider world? Probably not, although the answer may depend on who you ask. But it seems clearer now, more than ever, that the See of Canterbury is no longer pivotal to how Anglican polity thrives or survives in other parts of the world. Devolution and democracy are here to stay. The old order of white-male English, elitist imperialistic deference has passed away. Anglicanism is not an ecclesial superpower, and no number of gifts and gestures from the papacy can hide that. But what new forms of organization, federalism and polity that will eventually take the place of the global Anglican Communion are yet to be born.

One can contemplate the lengthy wish list compiled for the next occupant of Lambeth Palace. Many will call for calibration based on high-low, left-right, liberal-conservative calculations. One assumes prayerfulness, wisdom, compassion, pastoral care, depth-inspiring spirituality and theological nous would be taken for granted. Let us hope so.

But I think one feature needed in the selection process this time will be new: realism. The Church of England does not need another rallying call for revival. The people's hopes in the pews rest on an authentic and honest candidate who does not deny reality. The church needs an Archbishop of Canterbury in the future who recognizes that less will be more. Cutting back on the hierarchy and top-down management of churches – 'heavy pruning', to borrow a phrase from Jesus'

<sup>6</sup>Peter Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*, London: Allen Lane, 2007, p. 506.

teaching – might let in some much-needed light and air for local recovery and growth at ground level. Therein lies the hope.

Rather than trying to evade the death of an out-of-touch aloof hierarchical institution, the next Archbishop might embrace the end of the ecclesiastical establishment status theatre that hampers the Church of England in this kingdom. Let it die a natural death; or opt for an assisted end. Only then might the church gain some purchase on that other kingdom, much closer to the one Jesus so often spoke of and practised.