

EDITORIAL

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Writing as the House of Commons prepares to select a new Speaker, I was struck by the fact that Gordon Brown (who may still be Prime Minister when this issue is published) confessed that the avarice of his fellow Members of Parliament offended against his ‘Presbyterian conscience’. This is in marked contrast to his predecessor Tony Blair, whom Alistair Campbell famously declared ‘didn’t do God’. Curiously, since leaving office Mr Blair has been doing a lot of God, not least in waging peace in the Middle East, thereby taking irony to new heights. Times must indeed be desperate when a Prime Minister, even one without a popular mandate, needs to parade his religiosity and reach for his tarnished moral compass in order to prolong his tenuous grasp on power.

While the emergent knowledge of quite how far our elected representatives have had their feet in the trough is concerning, there is something distasteful in the level of ridicule and obloquy to which they have been routinely subjected in the media. The Archbishop of Canterbury was absolutely right to call for an end to the ritual humiliation of the wrongdoers. Trial by tabloid is distinctly unattractive. Those who have erred will be dealt with by way of resignation, de-selection, or prosecution. What matters for the future is the restoration of confidence in governance, and who better than the leader of the established Church in England to make a rallying cry?

The promotion of integrity in public service and the policing of financial regulations does not require constitutional change of the type recently outlined by Gordon Brown. I use the word ‘change’ advisedly in preference to ‘reform’, since the latter expression tends to carry an aspiration of improvement, which is usually lacking. We should not allow the hothouse atmosphere in the Palace of Westminster to precipitate knee-jerk reactions. There has been enough of this already: the attempted abolition of the office of Lord Chancellor, the creation of a costly and unnecessary Supreme Court, and the abrogation of the Prime Minister’s responsibility for ensuring that the Bench of Bishops serves the wider and long-term needs of the nation and not merely the immediate fads and fashions of Church and diocese.

Changes to the Constitution have rarely been as extensive and as rapid as have been witnessed since the New Labour government took power in 1997. I suspect much has been unintentional, but constitutional convention has never stood still and, as with an elaborate tapestry, pulling a loose thread in

one part may inadvertently distort another. The relationship between Churches and state (and I deliberately use the plural because the models of establishment in England and Scotland are quite dissimilar) is a small, but significant, part of the Constitution. Were a wholly elected second chamber to be substituted for the current House of Lords, there would be no place for senior Church of England bishops in Parliament in the exercise of either its legislative or its deliberative function. Inevitably, I venture, this would mark the demise of any spiritual presence in public life: a curious result when religious political parties are on the ascendant elsewhere in Europe.

I do not intend to use the privilege of this Editorial to advocate any particular change, but I do consider it appropriate to note that the continuance of the status quo is untenable. Deference to our current monarch is a powerful brake but we must prepare for the inevitable disinhibition that will follow upon the accession of the next. We need to discuss openly and intelligently the role of the national Church and the benefits and burdens that flow from establishment. In *Aston Cantlow*, the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords rightly recognised that ‘the Church of England remains essentially a religious organisation’, and that neither the existence of church schools nor the duty to solemnise marriage nor the legislative function of General Synod ‘should be regarded as infecting the Church of England as a whole, or its emanations in general, with the character of a governmental organisation’.¹

With the risk of the current Parliamentary expenses crisis precipitating ill-judged constitutional change, religious organisations in general (and the Church of England in particular) must guard against being caught on the back foot. The Church of England can pride itself in having been at the forefront of evolutionary re-establishment over the past century: the Moberly and Chadwick Commissions of 1952 and 1970 respectively, and the more narrowly focussed work of Howick and van Straubenzee in 1964 and 1992. The *Church and State Report*, being the product of the Chadwick Commission, was hugely influential and led to a re-evaluation of the Church of England’s self-understanding and ecclesiology and to a redrawing of its relationship with the state.

The time is ripe for the Church of England once again to take the initiative and not to be caught napping as ephemeral governments take decisions of political expediency that could have devastating effects for the spiritual heart of our increasingly plural, but far from secular, society. A person of the calibre of Owen Chadwick may not be easy to find. However, the responsibility rests on all our shoulders. The real challenge in these early years of the twenty-first century is to seek out and articulate new ways of being the *established* Church. And this process should not be reactive, buffeted by the exigencies of political crises,

1 *Aston Cantlow and Wilmcote with Billesley Parochial Church Council v Wallbank* [2004] 1 AC 546, HL; [2003] 3 All ER 1213, HL, per Lord Nicholls of Birkenhead at para 13.

but measured and proactive: informed by history and fostered by the ecclesiological and constitutional features that affect a national Church in a twenty-first-century, multi-faith society. Re-establishment is gradual and evolutionary, and, as Shakespeare's Friar Laurence enjoins us: 'Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast.'²

I hope that future issues of this *Journal* will contribute to this debate, influencing the process rather than merely reporting it.

2 *Romeo and Juliet*, II. iii. 94.