

General Synod, Westminster, November 2010

Monday 22nd November

So another quinquennium of fun and frolics started with about 160 new faces in the crowd, so to speak. The first group of sessions is always a very strange one as one begins to make new friends and mourns the absence of old friends who failed to get re-elected.

The day was given over to obtaining passes and attending an induction session. For me this was, for the very first time, as a returnee due to previous electoral issues in 2000 (insufficient votes) and 2005 (electoral irregularity). I was therefore able to participate by helping the freshers find their feet. The most exciting part for me was the small drama in which we, old lags, acted out a couple of Synod debates and a question time to give the new folk a flavour of what it was all about. It almost went entirely to script until towards the end when I, as acting Chair, asked for approval to extend the session and the "audience" declined and I had to ad lib rather quickly. I think I got away with it!

I felt that the day went well overall and the staff have begun to make it a really informative day, demonstrating the complexity of legislation and the logistics associated with debates and voting etc. Even Stephen Slack got a joke into his contribution.

Tuesday 23rd November

The splendour and majesty of the inaugural ceremonials came from the splendid Hats of the House of Laity and the Majesty of the Realm who always graces us with her presence both in the Abbey and in Church House. I can't swear to it but there was a definite theme running through the Sermon (from Dame Mary Tanner), the Queen's address and the subsequent Presidential address from the Archbishop of Canterbury. How can we do things differently? How can we ensure that we navigate through the potentially shark-infested waters ahead and maintain integrity, dignity and grace?

I confess I am not a great lover of Cathedral style services but the pageant of the whole proceedings is rather magnificent - especially seeing the Archdeacon of Lewisham & Greenwich leading her Diocese in, in the absence of her Bishop. The shape of things to come? Who knows!

The business started after lunch with the debate on the Agenda followed by a debate on the Big Society. The air here was not of wanting to embrace Tory political ideology but rather to find ways in which we could ride on the back of the initiative. Even the Archbishops were prepared to admit to this naked opportunism. It was interesting that we were debating about how to free things up to act locally (real subsidiarity and freedom to act) when looming on the horizon for tomorrow was the prospect of responding to the Anglican Covenant which appears to be designed to restrict the freedom to

act innovatively. Maybe I was the only person to feel this way. The debate was a good one and due to its length it meant that a following motion that was proposed lapsed.

No first major day of Synod would be complete without Questions. A miracle occurred in which we processed all questions asked. One slightly bizarre thing happened. Questions can be for oral or written answer. One of the questions which required only a written answer was answered orally. This came about because two people had asked very similar questions - one for oral and one for written reply. On reflection this final session went well but there were some questions (and one supplementary in particular) which were answered rather abruptly which seemed a little disrespectful. Having said that the First Estates Commissioner was as lively as ever.

Having had the induction day before and seen that some people were saying that they would be holding back until they found their feet, I found it very encouraging to see the way in which new members threw themselves into the fray. It bodes well for the health of the Synod but might have been worrying for the Business Committee if they were hoping for the smooth passage of specific items later.

After the sessions were over some fringe meetings took place and hence the opportunity to unwind. In the Open Synod Group we had a lively discussion following on from question time focussing particularly on questions about the sale of the Zuberan Paintings in Durham and secret proceedings in the House of Bishops. Much unease was expressed relating to the sharpness of some of the replies (as referred to already).

Wednesday 24th November

Today we started with morning worship and then after a few preliminaries went straight into the debate on the Anglican Covenant. A lot of the pre-Synod press and social networking coverage (except the notable outburst regarding the forthcoming wedding) had been about the covenant. Is it a way of defining Anglicanism and prescribing penalties for those who don't toe the line? Or is it an affirmation of Anglican values with a code of conduct that would enable the family to keep together better? Or was it something in between. More importantly, were we adopting the covenant or just nudging further on its journey with a decision to be taken some time later.

Well, it was clear that much of the "policing" elements had been toned down significantly in the latest text and that we were not signing up to it today. What was to happen was that we should take note of the report recommending that it should go to Dioceses to be further debated. Worries were expressed that it was likely to get caught up with the Women Bishops legislation and also that although it was a solution that it was the wrong solution. The liveliest contribution came from the retiring Bishop of Lincoln, John Saxbee, who will be sorely missed.

A couple of amendments were lost as people attempted to remove some of the

residual wording that suggested "relational consequences" for Provinces that stepped out of line as was a following motion aimed at reducing the log jam of emerging business within the dioceses. We haven't had any Article 8 business sent to the Dioceses for ages and now, rather like London buses, 2 are coming at the same time.

The voting was interesting as the main motion received over 82% in all three houses. Considering that the buzz beforehand had suggested that there might be serious opposition the fact that only 57 voted against was quite a surprise to some. Needless to say the vote is only to take it to the next stage and there may still be formal opposition later.

The arrival on the agenda of several following motions over the two days was interesting. These can be proposed as motions to "follow" a substantive motion particularly where there is no provision for amending the main motion. The requirement to take them is purely based on time and if insufficient time is available they lapse and can only be brought back with the permission of the Business Committee.

The rest of the day was taken up with legislative business relating to either Clergy Terms of Service or Marriage. The marriage debate was the most interesting on paper as it dealt with an expansion of the regulations for qualification. Chancellor Briden was rather dull in his presentation and some of the other contributors failed to light a flame under the debate either. The one major casualty for the group of sessions was the Amending Code of Practice under the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003. It failed to be debated and so we can look forward to that treat in February.

After the main Synod was prorogued the Convocations and the House of Laity met for initial presentations from those seeking to be Officers. In the House of Laity 13 out of the 14 candidates strutted their stuff and then we all departed. A long 3 days.

One very interesting theme followed Synod around during the week. This was the suggestion that we should not debate major issues (e.g. the Anglican Covenant) on the first session. Fortunately this idea was firmly knocked on its head as several new members spoke well during the debates. It can be a baptism of fire but I think they did very well and laid that one to rest. We are in for an exciting 5 years.

Tim Hind
Bath & Wells