

Mr President or My Lord Archbishop?

On Friday 7th September 2012 the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Rev'd Dr. Rowan Williams granted an interview to Benedict Brodan, correspondent for the British newspaper, the Daily Telegraph.¹

Known for its conservative position on most matters the paper did not shy away from producing a striking headline, 'Archbishop of Canterbury: I don't think I cracked it'. In the interview Rowan Williams essentially offered an apologetic for his decade in office by way of a caveated *mea culpa* for the divisions in the Anglican Communion that have emerged during his oversight.

Most intriguing however was Benedict Brodan's assertion that: 'He discloses that the Church is considering spreading the load to a "more presidential figure" alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury'.

It was this suggestion that immediately attracted newspaper and newscast headlines and a rapid denial from the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion Office, headquartered in West London. Just 24 hours later the Anglican Communion website carried a brief item calling the Telegraph article inaccurate and stating:

The opening paragraph of this article is mischievous,...There are no such plans. The Archbishop of Canterbury simply said in the interview that he could see that in the future there might be some reflection on how the administrative load associated with the Anglican Communion might be better shared. The Anglican Communion has several decision-making bodies, one of which is meeting in a few months' time. Nothing like what this newspaper has suggested is on the agenda.²

There is no reason to doubt the Secretary General but Archbishop Williams may have had in mind a 2001 report, commissioned by the then outgoing Archbishop George Carey, the awkwardly titled, *To Lead and to Serve: The Report of the Review of the See of Canterbury*.³

This Review, chaired by the Rt Hon. the Lord Hurd of Westwell and one-time conservative British Foreign Secretary, examined the workload and responsibilities of the Archbishop of Canterbury under various headings including: Interfaith, ecumenical responsibilities and other matters as well as his function as Bishop of the Diocese of Canterbury and his national and Anglican Communion roles.

¹ See (accessed September 2012): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9529526/Archbishop-of-Canterbury-interview-I-dont-think-I-cracked-it.html>

² See (accessed September 2012): <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2012/9/8/ACNS5179>

³ The Report is listed under Church House Publishing as being unavailable and is no longer generally accessible on official websites but the blogsite 'Thinking Anglicans' has hosted it. See (accessed September 2012): <http://thinkinganglicans.org.uk/uploads/leadserve.html>

A number of recommendations were made including a divesting of day-to-day running of the Diocese of Canterbury and:

Separating the Archbishopric of Canterbury from the Presidency of the Communion is the logical preference for those who believe that the present system is out of date, but who have to accept the Archbishop will continue to be British. This separation need not mean that the Archbishop of Canterbury would never be President of the Communion merely that he need not necessarily be so. This idea may well gather strength as the years pass.⁴

In practice the idea gathered not so much strength as dust, only occasionally being mooted in comments online and otherwise being forgotten or never raised, certainly not by the incumbent Williams himself during his tenure. So why mention it at this point?

Rowan Williams' musings can sometimes take on a certain inscrutable or even abstruse nature. Perhaps his employment as Master of Magdalene College Cambridge, a post which he is due to take up in the New Year, may give opportunity for further reflective clarification about how he assesses the period of his ministry which is now coming to a close? His successor may wish to read what he writes for he will inherit the same toxic legacy, in particular over sexuality, which so blighted and burdened the Williams' reign.

Easing the burden and irksomeness of office for an Archbishop with a colleague Presidential figure, with what seems suspiciously like a device to transcend the difficulties of a particular period in time, is insufficient reason to introduce what would be an untested novelty in Anglicanism. As such it is difficult to see how the advent of a President in the wider Communion would improve communication or authority or even make sense. True, the existing 'Instruments of Communion'⁵ have in recent times groaned and bent under the weight of conflicting tensions but a President in whatever form would merely add a further complication and hardly improve what is already a difficult situation. Indeed it is easy to imagine an Anglican version of the *Western Schism*⁶ as associated with Avignon and Rome in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The risk of alternative leaderships vying for domination in the Communion is as realistic a scenario as it is naïve to suppose that people of sufficient calibre could emerge, out of the inevitable preceding ecclesiastical machinations

⁴ (To Lead and to Serve 2001) Section 7. The Anglican Communion: Throwing appointment open, or separating the Presidency from the Archbishopric (i and ii) para 4

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1. The Archbishop of Canterbury as a focus of unity
2. The decennial Lambeth Conference of the world's Anglican bishops (first held in 1867)
3. The Anglican Consultative Council (first convened in 1971) including elected representatives, episcopal, clerical and lay from the 38 Anglican Provinces
4. The Primates Meetings (first met 1979)

⁶ The so-called *Western Schism* 1377 - 1417 - a period when rival elected popes presided at the same time, whilst claiming the allegiance of different parts of the Church. To this day the Roman Catholic Church has not made any official pronouncement about the resultant 'lines' of succession.

related to the appointment of a President. The sharing of authority, however clearly delineated, could not come without eventual conflict.

It is certainly true that any contemporary Archbishop of Canterbury has a busy and seriously overloaded schedule. It is also true that great expectations are laid upon him (perhaps *her* too in the future) but none of these detract from the archiepiscopal primary role as that of a focus of unity. Being in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury is the definition of being Anglican. Alternative lines of authority should not be allowed to disturb or question this.

In which case, a fresh look at parts of the 2001 Hurd Review could be contemplated. There is a serious need to provide the Archbishop of Canterbury with sufficient resources to undertake his role in its different manifestations. Some tasks, such as chairing British national ecumenical meetings could easily be delegated, other burdens could be lifted by a properly appointed, funded and functioning staffing of expertise with delegated and accountable to the Archbishop. Some of these suggestions have already been undertaken, none need approach a Presidential status.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not, we are frequently and rightly reminded, a Pope, but neither should he be confused with a President. As there is no such thing as an Anglican Church, in one sense at least, the Archbishop of Canterbury only needs 'to be', to exist and the Provincial and synodical governance of the Anglican Communion does the rest. This is a salutary reminder that any initiatives (including the abortive Covenant) for a change of structure to meet a particular issue of the day need to be approached with great caution.

It is likely that in October the name of the next Archbishop of Canterbury will be revealed. We can be assured that there will have been no shortage of candidates for the Crown Nominations Commission to consider. It is also certain that very few might have turned the job down because of the anticipated workload or because of the absence of a President.

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