

Briefing paper for EGGs

Proposed amendments to Standing orders relating to Crown Nominations Commission (CNC)

Scheduled for 2.30pm, Friday 22nd February.

1 PAPERS

EGGS members are invited to refer to :

- GS 2119 - 54th Report of the Standing Orders Committee
- GS 2120 – Follow up to ‘Discerning in Obedience’
- First Notice Paper (FNP) – items 30 to 38

2 SUMMARY

Members and friends will notice that central members (including myself and Jane Patterson) support the proposals addressed in items 30 to 33 (inc.) on the First Notice Paper.

However there are we believe strong arguments against the proposals at Items 34-36, which will if carried :

- Change the required votes for a nomination (Item 34 on FNP)
- Remove the secret ballot (items 35 and 36 on FNP)

3 ITEM 34 – REQUIRED VOTES FOR NOMINATION

3.1 EGGs members are invited to consider this as not just a ‘nerdy’ technical concern – rather something more substantial. In short, the rather technical discussion between ‘two-thirds’ as against ‘two-thirds of those present and voting’ is more important than it superficially appears.

3.2 In the first place, the advice in paragraph 28 of GS 2120 (see page 6) is inaccurate insofar as the statement: *‘Anyone with reservations about a candidate could still vote against’* is nonsensical. There are only two voting options (to enter a candidate’s name or not to). This is different to Synod votes where there are 3 options – for / against / abstention.

GS 2120 compares the general position regarding Synod votes (paragraph 28) with those of the CNC – but unless CNC voting is changed to offer had 3 options we do not feel that comparisons between Synod procedures and CNC procedures are merited. We are not comparing like-for-like.

3.3 In the current final voting of a Commission, 2 candidates need to secure 10 votes each (i.e. two-thirds of those present in a commission) to get past the ‘bar’ – before a simple majority vote between the 2 to identify the person to be nominated. This existing requirement ensures that nominations receive a high level of support, thus giving confidence in episcopal appointments to the House of Bishops. To amend two-thirds for ‘two-thirds of those present and voting’ lowers the bar to a potentially confidence-undermining level – see the scenario that follows .

Scenario - what if the first person to get past the ‘bar’ did so with only 8 votes (made possible by the change in standing orders) and the second with less. The simple majority vote between the two could then lead to a candidate being nominated with the support of less than half the commission.

Do we really want this in the important appointment of diocesan bishops?

3.4 It has been suggested that recent Commissions which were unable to nominate on their first round (Hereford and Oxford) were a 'failure' and that this could have been avoided by amending the Standing Orders as proposed in Item 34. We do not share that perspective – and experience in appointments elsewhere suggests that sometimes processes have to be conducted a second time in order to secure the right appointment.

4.0 ITEM 35 and 36 – REMOVAL OF SECRET BALLOT

4.1 EGS members and friends are invited to examine the paragraph from 'Discerning in Obedience' (quoted on pages 6 and 7 of GS 2120) which is used to build a case for removal of the secret ballot. A number of points can be made by way of critique of this.

- Firstly, the language is unhelpfully emotive - see '*to create a veil of mystery*' – that is entirely a matter of perception (and one that we do not share).
- Secondly, the phrase '*dividing those who need to be able to co-operate more*' is an unsubstantiated observation. We are not aware of any evidence that would lead this phrase to be defensible.
- Thirdly, and similarly to point two, the assertion '*that the secrecy of the ballot may actually encourage the dysfunctional syndromes it is meant to guard against*' is once again conjecture.
- Fourthly, the suggestion in 'Discerning in Obedience' regarding the order in which people vote is helpfully positive in that it is suggested '*the archbishops, no doubt, after everyone else*'. The reason for this of course is that people could otherwise be unduly influenced by the opinion of the archbishops. However, there is no suggestion that this should be written in to standing orders – a necessary safeguard if that is the intent.
- Finally, the suggestion that '*it may also be a better defence against the temptation to breach confidence, simply because it allows members to talk more openly to one another*' is a further indemonstrable assertion. Yes of course it may be true – but equally, it could generate/permit a whole series of alternative blockages to more open discussion between members.

4.2 Standing back from the detail, it is important to understand what it is that 'Discerning in Obedience' has been seeking to achieve in its proposal to remove the secret ballot.

In short, we suspect there are two (laudable) concerns :

- To avoid the possibility of diocesan teams voting 'en bloc'.
- To avoid members of the commission arguing one way in discussion and voting the other.

It is necessary to acknowledge that both of these are possibilities. However, it is our suggestion that there are even greater risks in removing the secret ballot.

Firstly, because of the unhelpful impact this could have on relationships within the diocesan team. It is very difficult for one individual who might wish to vote in a different way to the other five in a diocesan team to be able to do so without fear of relationships being impaired.

Scenario - There might be occasions when the relationship between a clergy person and an archdeacon or other senior member of Diocesan staff could be put 'under strain' by them discovering they had very different opinions on who should be nominated.

It is also the case that members of the diocesan team might find it very difficult to vote differently to the archbishops in the event that the archbishops were to indicate their preferences first (see 4.1 above - 4th bullet point).

Secondly, there is also the issue of individuals feeling 'pressurised' to vote in accordance with any overarching narrative that has been introduced into the discussion of the commission – a narrative that their own convictions might be uncomfortable with.

4.3 The 'conviction preserving' value of secret ballots.

It seems ironic to me that, regardless of what we do in General Synod with electronic voting, we have retained the democratic principle of a secret ballot in so much of national life – eg at the General election ballot box - and yet here we are considering losing such gains. EGGs members will remember the Trade Union struggles over this – and how secret ballots were necessary to secure individual freedom in voting.

At a time when the mutual flourishing we are committed to is under pressure, C of E doctrine on a number of issues is being challenged, and overarching cultural narratives are increasingly divergent from the truth claims that undergird our faith, it seems to me that we need to be preserving the conscience of individuals and their right to vote in keeping with it. To remove the secret ballot risks all of this – for no guaranteed gain.

Rev John Dunnett
Chelmsford 81

Miss Jane Patterson
Sheffield 406