

The Parson's Freehold...

The General Synod of the Church of England has voted to abolish the ancient arrangements concerning parson's freehold. Does anyone care? Isn't this an issue as obscure as antidisestablishmentarianism ever was with no place in thrusting modern Britain? Actually, no: parson's freehold is one of the great political checks and balances and a principal safeguard of individual freedom.

Under the terms of the freehold, a clergyman is instituted into all the rights and privileges of his parish – he actually owns his vicarage and church for the duration of his incumbency. And he can be removed only for “conduct unbecoming”, that is a lapse of morals which used cheerfully to be described as “open and notorious evil living”.

The proposed abolition of freehold would transfer the ownership rights of beneficed clergymen to the diocesan boards of finance. These are the bureaucratic bodies which have everywhere sold off the grand old vicarages – usually at the bottom of the property market – re-housed the clergy in modern dwellings now generally in a state of disrepair and pocketed the cash.

By itself that is a curtailment of the priest's liberty, but it is nothing beside the consequences which abolition of the freehold would bring. Freehold is a truly democratic and libertarian institution and its chief benefit is that it gives the parish priest a measure of independence from the authority of his diocesan bishop. He can speak his mind on doctrinal, ecclesiastical, parochial and political matters without fearing the loss of his job. And this amounts to much more than an individual's freedom: it is a political safeguard which ensures liberty of conscience and the parson's freedom to speak up for his parishioners.

The move to abolish freehold is actually only the bishops' latest move in their policy of doing away with the independence of the clergy and establishing themselves as all-powerful managers. For decades they have tried, with much success, to get rid of the private patrons of parishes – those squires, farmers and brewers who held ancient rights of appointment to Anglican livings. Thus centralised bureaucracy has achieved its aim of obliterating the Established Church - which was an easy-going institution for the benefit and representation of all the people whether they attended church or not - and replacing it with a sect for the “committed” and likeminded.

The new proposal contained in the official report *Review of Clergy Terms of Service: Part Two* declares that the ending of freehold is necessary precisely because of what reasonable people would see as its main virtue: property rights “akin to ownership”. Under the proposed new arrangements clergy will be subject to “a capability procedure” if they are reckoned to “fall below an accepted minimum standard” – and thrown out of their vicarages.

The report adds by way of clarification: “The procedure is likely to apply to those clerics who are not competent or where the job is being done but pastoral relationships are breaking down, because of say an abrasive personality...a mismatch between the requirements of the job and the person doing it”.

“Falling below standard”? “Not competent”? “Pastoral relationships breaking down”? “Abrasive personalities”? they should start with the bishops!

Of course, the new rules will be used to get rid of parsons who don't toe the revisionary line relentlessly pursued by the centralising and modernising bureaucracy – the well known Bishops' Agenda. It is most likely to be applied to “awkward” clergy who resist the parcels of innovation thrust upon the parishes and who prefer to keep the *Authorised Version* of the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*. The new procedure might have been expressly written for the benefit of the Rt Rev'd Mark Santer, former Bishop of Birmingham, who once wrote with satisfaction to tell me, “I don't have any Prayer Book enclaves remaining in my diocese”.

In any case, no Bishop with even the residue of pastoral sense could countenance the combination of the roles of Father in God and line manager. The glory of the old settlement is that it liberated the parish priest to disagree “in all things lawful and honest” with his Bishop.

This fresh outbreak of iconoclasm comes at a cost. The report calculates that the new system will require the creation of an additional eighteen “human resources” posts costing £1.5million *per annum*. And here we are, poor bloody infantry in the parishes, constantly being forced to increase our annual contribution to diocesan finances – or else closed down. Bishops will need extra “human resources training” and all clergy will be compelled to undergo “a regular ministerial review”.

Management jargon in the service of bullying. More power to the revisionary bureaucrats and the centralised authorities which have already given us more than enough evidence of their gross incompetence. The proposed abolition of the parson's freehold is a frontal attack on one of the ancient guarantees of freedom of speech in the realm of England. It should be resisted – in the courts and as far as the threat of imprisonment, if necessary.

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