

Parsons' Freehold to be replaced by Common Tenure

A new arrangement by which the clergy of the Church of England hold office will come into force by law at the end of next year. This is called Common Tenure and it will replace the historic Parsons' Freehold, which will be abolished.

This is only the latest and most destructive bureaucratic swindle operated by the bishops and general synod in order to transfer power from the individual parson to the central authorities. Parsons' Freehold is an arrangement of genius adopted by the C. of E. in the Middle Ages from a similar practice in Orleans and Lyon five hundred years before that. So of course it has to be done away in the interests of the centralising ecclesiastical apparatchiks who have already almost abolished private or lay patronage of parochial livings and secured maleficent instruments by which parochial property can easily become assigned to the dioceses.

The Parsons' Freehold is not – as its vicious opponents insist – a cumbrous and outmoded system which needs to be “modernised.” It is an arrangement proven by time and use to help provide a degree of independence and protection for the incumbent. Along with the equally ancient office of churchwarden, it is one of the checks and balances which for a thousand years have provided a decent foundation of autonomy for the parish.

There was, until the current Measure, a four-fold principle of interdependence which involved the parson, the churchwardens, the patron and the bishop. Authority was proportionate and shared among these parties so that none could coerce or bully the others. There were always procedures by which a criminal or negligent parson – or one who was “an open and notorious evil liver” – could be removed. These procedures were administered through the consistory court which, because it was presided over by the independent judiciary, provided a convenient and humane authority for the good order of the church.

This convenient and humane arrangement has now been destroyed by the very men who were appointed to preserve it – the bishops, aided and abetted by the modernising general synod which increasingly seeks to model its procedures on the managerial methods of secular bureaucracy. To give them credit, they admit as much and so all their talk is of “grievance procedures”; “many of the procedures available to office holders outside the church”; and “job security.” But all those protections were already being met by Parsons' Freehold. And so the only reason to change a fair and balanced system for one that is partisan and despotic is in order to grab supreme power for the secularising central bureaucracy.

Again, the secular structure of the new form of governance is admitted by the innovators who say, “Bishops' human resources responsibilities will increase exponentially with the coming into effect of this Measure.” Which, being interpreted, means a whole lot more secular managers

and administrators will be appointed and, of course, paid for by the parishes out of the tax known as the Diocesan Quota or Common Fund.

Astonishingly, the authorities state: "Those of you with the Freehold will be invited to indicate whether you are willing to move to Common Tenure." This is to ask turkeys to vote for Christmas. Since it is the parochial clergy who are already pressured intolerably by central authorities to raise vast sums from their longsuffering congregations to compensate for the colossal wreckage which the same authorities have made of the church's finances, that "invitation" to opt for Common Tenure amounts not only to the turkeys being asked to vote for Christmas, but also to contribute to the cost of their stuffing.