



29. Why Should The Prime Minister Choose The Archbishop Of Canterbury?

In mediaeval England, the Archbishop of Canterbury was a very important person. He headed the largest organised body of literate people in the kingdom. Men and women gathered in church week by week to be addressed by members of his organisation. The Church was, in effect, the equivalent of the BBC, the teaching profession and the Civil Service rolled into one. It was important that the Archbishop should be someone on whom the king could depend absolutely; yet the Archbishop was responsible to the Pope.

In theory, the bishops and archbishops were elected by the Cathedral chapters. However, from the time of William the Conqueror onwards, English kings insisted that persons elected as bishops and archbishops must be acceptable to them.

The later mediaeval popes, particularly Boniface VIII (1294-1303) increasingly centralised church appointments into their own hands. They would order the Cathedral chapters to elect the persons they chose or 'provided'. This meant that they could award preferments in the church to those who were prepared to pay for them, and who might, in fact, never leave Italy or France. In the reign of Edward III, the Statutes of Provisors (1351), forbidding this practice in England, and Praemunire (1353) limiting appeals to Rome, were passed by Parliament.

When Henry VIII broke with Rome, he made use of these Statutes to enforce his will on the church. The Pope might no longer force the cathedral chapters to accept his nominees, but the King still could. Although the state was no longer dependent to the same extent on the Church for a supply of literate civil servants, the political reasons for the Crown to retain a say (in practice, a decisive say) in appointments still held good. The clergy were still important opinion-formers, and it was important to keep the Bishops on-side.

In the next two centuries, power gradually passed from the sovereign to Parliament. The first Georges relied on their Prime Ministers to advise them. This included advice on the appointment of Bishops and Archbishops. The Prime Minister, latterly, relied on the advice of his Appointments Secretary, who, according to legend, is said to have checked such

things as the number of candles on altars when trying to find suitable candidates for preferment.

A revised system has been in operation for a few years now for dealing with appointments for high office in the Church of England. When a see becomes vacant a Commission of eminent people representative of all strands of opinion in the Church is convened, under the chairmanship of an impartial figure such as a judge.

After considering the possible candidates, they submit two names to the Prime Minister. He (or she) may select either name, or ask for other names, though the convention intended to operate is that the first named is the candidate preferred by the Commission.

In no other country is the Anglican Church established by law. In Scotland the Established Church is Presbyterian, and although the Queen's Commissioner is present at meetings of the General Assembly he does not preside.

The Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Church of Ireland and the Church in Wales are not Established. They select their own bishops and Archbishops. The same is true of the Anglican churches in the United States and other countries of the Commonwealth.

Many see the present method of appointing to high office in the Church of England as an anachronism, and if moves towards unification with the Methodist Church proceed, it will inevitably have to be reconsidered.