

The Proposals for the Self-Government of the Church.

THE claim that the Church of England should be granted powers of self-government is no new one. It dates back certainly to the days of King John, and was then so far conceded that Magna Charta declared, "The Church of England shall be free." Whether it can honestly be said that the Church of England has ever been really "free" depends, however, upon the view that is taken of the Papal Supremacy on the one hand, and of the Reformation Settlement on the other. But it is no part of our present purpose to indulge in historical reflections. Those who wish to have an impartial account of the relations of Church and State in England from the year A.D. 200 down to the present day will find it in the second section of the Report of the Archbishops' Committee on the Relations of Church and State, prepared by two members of the Committee, Sir Lewis Dibdin and Mr. A. L. Smith, *al.* it may safely be said that it would be difficult to find in the whole realm of historical literature a statement of those relations more concise, more interesting, or more illuminating. And yet if we deliberately pass it by on this occasion it is because it seems to be more important under present conditions that we should face the too often forgotten fact that we are not living in the thirteenth century, or the sixteenth century, but in the twentieth century. The circumstances of our time, great, as we are so often told, beyond expression, are wholly different from those at any other period of our national history, and if the Church of England is now to fulfil its mission to the nation it must be prepared to adapt its machinery to the altered conditions of these times. It is a mere truism to say that the Church has a great task awaiting it. On the spiritual side, the National Mission has done much to awaken both corporate and individual responsibility, and we may hope to see a considerable growth in spiritual activity; but it must be clear to all who consider the question with any degree of care, that a Church which has no independent legislative powers is hindered, and gravely hindered, in pursuing its own free development. It will be agreed that the Church ought to possess

some such powers, but the question arises, can they be granted without injury to the relations which at present exist between the Church and the State? The Report of the Archbishops' Committee answers the question in the affirmative, and presents for the candid consideration of the Church a scheme which, if it materialize, will effect changes in our present procedure little short of revolutionary. Under its provisions the control of Parliament, as at present exercised, over Church affairs, will be taken away; the Church will have its own legislature.

Whatever opinions may be held regarding the particular proposals put forth by the Archbishops' Committee, there will probably be a large measure of agreement among Churchpeople that it is high time that some alteration was made in the power exercised by the House of Commons in the matter of Church legislation, seeing how on some occasions that power has been shamelessly and scandalously abused. It is impossible to forget what happened (to take a fairly recent case) over the Clergy Discipline Bill of 1892. The sole purpose of that measure was to simplify the machinery for getting rid of immoral and evil-living clergy, yet it was resolutely opposed by the faction in the House of Commons which thought it its duty to oppose all Church legislation, and it was only by the personal intervention of Mr. Gladstone that the Bill was got through. The new Act enabled the Church to get rid speedily of a large number of "black sheep," many of whom, if the anti-Church section in the House of Commons had had its way, would still be snugly ensconced in their benefices and still be exercising the cure of souls! It will be said that this is an extreme case. It may be so—let us hope it is—but at any rate it illustrates some of the evils of the present system. The fact is beyond dispute that during the last thirty years it has become increasingly difficult to get Church Bills through Parliament. The Report of the Archbishops' Committee states that during the years 1880-1913 out of 217 Church Bills introduced into the House of Commons only thirty-three were passed, and yet very many of the remaining 184 dealt with important reforms which could not be carried out because of the hostility or indifference of the House of Commons towards Church legislation. Such a position is frankly intolerable. Moreover, can it be said that the House of Commons, as now constituted, is a fit and proper assembly for the treatment of Church affairs? It is argued

that, with all its disabilities, the House of Commons is still the surest safeguard of Protestant liberties. Are we quite sure of that? No doubt it was so once, but recent developments within the House itself make it extremely doubtful whether it is so to-day. The House of Commons is now—what it will be after the war we cannot say—little more than the tool of the Government of the time. The day of the private member has gone; no strongly contested measure has a chance of passing unless it is backed by the Government; and it might well be that legislation most hostile to Evangelical interests would be adopted by the Government of the day if the Prime Minister had received assurance from the Church's episcopal leaders that the measure had received the imprimatur of the Convocations or the Representative Church Council (as representing the mind of the Church. If, then, there is no sure guarantee under present conditions of Evangelical interests being respected in the House of Commons, it is clear the party would not be worse off, and possibly might be much better off, under such a scheme as that propounded by the Archbishops' Committee, for it would at least ensure that the voice of genuine representatives of the faithful laity would be heard upon any measure that was brought forward under its provisions. But however that may be, let us be quite clear in our minds upon this point: that if the new scheme become effective, Parliamentary control, as we have hitherto understood it, will be gone.

The important question at once arises, will Parliament consent to relinquish its old power over Church legislation? It is impossible to answer the question with any degree of definiteness. If a Radical Government were in office it is at least possible that the proposals of the Archbishops' Committee would be summarily refused. It would be argued—and argued with some degree of force—that so long as the Church of England is Established by law, so long must Parliamentary control continue. But a blank refusal is not the chief or the only danger to be faced. It is possible—some think it is highly probable—that, when these proposals are seriously brought forward, Parliament may say: It is right that the Church should possess powers of self-government, but the only practicable way of acquiring it is through disestablishment; and we may thus find ourselves suddenly confronted with a strong demand for the disestablishment and the disendowment of the whole Church.

The danger is no imaginary one. Whether the condition of the country after the war will make it more formidable or less formidable than it otherwise would be, is difficult to forecast. There are considerations which tell either way. On the one hand the old and bad system of political partisanship will have passed away—at least we hope so. This would tell in favour of preserving the establishment. On the other hand, money will be required for a variety of purposes, and those who have laid violent hands upon the Church in Wales, and have declared that on the day peace is declared the ancient endowments shall be confiscated—presumably as a suitable contribution to peace rejoicings—may cast hurtful eyes towards the vast endowments of the Church of England. There is no mistaking the direction in which that feeling would tell, and it is equally clear that if, at the same time, there existed within the Church of England an agitation for extensive powers of self-government the movement for disestablishment and disendowment would receive from it an extraordinary impetus. This danger was present to the mind of the Archbishops' Committee, some members thinking that disestablishment "would prove to be the only way of securing spiritual independence to the Church" (*Report*, p. 39), but "nearly all the members of the Committee" attached "importance" to the Church remaining established, as "an underlying condition" of their scheme (Sir Lewis Dibdin's *Memorandum*, p. 292).

But now, shutting our eyes as closely as we can to the disestablishment danger, let us examine the scheme itself. Much will depend upon the angle from which we regard it. If Churchmen consider it with their party prejudices strong in their mind it is most probable they will see in it much that will provoke their opposition, and this is true not of one party only but of all the parties into which the Church of England is unhappily split up. We need, however, to realize, strong though our party feelings may be, that the Church of England—Catholic, Apostolic, Reformed, Protestant—is infinitely greater and nobler than any party within it, and that it has the strongest claims upon our love, our loyalty, our devotion, our service. In these circumstances should not our examination of this scheme be directed to seeing whether it will prove, if and when adopted, for the greater welfare of the Church? We shall, naturally and properly, be anxious to safeguard those

interests and positions which we honestly believe give strength and stability to the Church, but should not our primary consideration be the well-being of the Church itself? Evangelical Churchmen can the more readily approach the Report of the Archbishops' Committee in this spirit because, for the first time in history—or at any rate in modern history—the faithful laity—with emphasis on the word “faithful”—will be given, under this scheme, a real voice in the management of Church affairs. Evangelical Churchmen have always held—and rightly held—that the overwhelming majority of lay Churchpeople are in full sympathy with the Evangelical position, and it follows, therefore, that, providing the lay representation is a true reflection of lay feeling, the Evangelical position under the new scheme ought to become stronger and Evangelical influence more potent than they have been for many years past.

The scheme as set forth in the Report of the Archbishops' Committee is so widely known that only a brief outline of it need now be given. The Committee had to propose the formation of a legislative body, and in the constitution of the existing Representative Church Council they found practically everything that would meet the need. Most Churchpeople, at one time or another, have indulged in a certain amount of cheap sarcasm at the expense of what they call that “glorified Debating Society,” but let it not be forgotten that, although quite a voluntary body, it has shown the way by which a Church Council, with statutory powers, can be safely and easily constituted. Archbishop Benson builded better than he knew when first he called into being the Provincial Houses of Laymen. The Church Legislative Assembly, to be called the Church Council, which the Archbishops' Committee propose should be created, will consist of three Houses, viz., (1) The House of Bishops, composed of the members of the Upper Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York; (2) the House of Clergy, consisting of the members of the Lower Houses of the two Convocations with slight variations; and (3) the House of Laity, to be elected in much the same way as the present Provincial Houses of Laymen. In regard to the House of Bishops it is not explained in the Report why membership of it is confined to Diocesan Bishops. The Upper Houses of Convocation are thus limited, but seeing that the Church is making a new departure it is passing strange that Suffragan

Bishops should be excluded. Their ecclesiastical position is inferior to, but their episcopal orders are the same as, those of the Primates. They may be elected to the House of Clergy, even as some of them are now to the Lower House of Convocation, but there seems to be reasonableness in the contention that men in episcopal orders should sit in the House of Bishops. In regard to the House of Clergy the variations from the constitution of the Lower Houses of Convocation are chiefly these: that all duly licensed priests and not merely the beneficed clergy will have the right to vote at the election of proctors, and that Deans are no longer to be ex-officio members of the House—a proposal which has already called forth a strong protest from the Dean of Durham, and more will certainly be heard of it. The House of Laity will consist of “actual lay communicants of the Church of England, above twenty-one years of age and of the male sex.” How is membership of the House of Laity to be attained? With very slight and, for our present purpose, immaterial change the existing franchise of the Houses of Laymen is adopted, that is to say every parish will elect its own Parochial Church Council, which in its turn will elect to the Ruridecanal Conference and to the Diocesan Conference. Each Diocesan Conference will elect to the House of Laity in proportion to the population of the diocese. This membership of the House of Laity is reached through the lesser bodies. The alternative plan would be direct election, as to the House of Commons; but it is open to doubt whether this would be more effective than the system adopted by the Committee for the attainment of the purpose in view, viz., the true representation of the laity, while it would certainly be more cumbrous and more costly.

Having noted the qualification for membership of the House of Laity, and indeed for all these Church assemblies, it may now be asked, What will be the qualification of an elector to the Parochial Church Council, which is the body from which all the others spring? It is important that the exact words of the clause should be quoted:—

Qualified electors in a parish must be above twenty-one years of age and may belong to either sex, provided that they either (1) are actual communicants, or (2) have been baptized and confirmed and are admissible to Holy Communion, and do not belong to any religious body which is not in communion with the Church of England. Their names are to be kept on an electoral roll; and any one wishing to be placed on it must sign a declaration that he or she is qualified to be enrolled.

It will probably be around this question of the franchise that one of the chief battles will be fought. It is held in some quarters to be too narrow in its basis, and if the objectors are told that it is the franchise prepared by the existing Representative Church Council, they reply, in effect, that so long as Church Councils are voluntary bodies, possessed of no legislative or other power, it does not much matter what the qualification is; but if the Church is to be entrusted with self-government, the initial franchise must be on a much broader basis, or else, so they argue, the National Church will be reduced to the level of a sect; and they urge that baptism, plus the declaration as to not belonging to any other religious body, ought to be sufficient qualification. The argument is more specious than convincing. If baptism were the only test it would confer the franchise upon large numbers of men and women who are absolutely indifferent if not openly hostile to all religion; and to give such people a voice—and a substantial voice—in the real government of the Church is, from the point of view of religion, as indefensible in theory as it would be intolerable in practice. St. Cyprian is sometimes quoted in support of giving ample powers to the laity. But his promise that he would do nothing without their assent was not made to the laity in general, but to the “faithful laity.” In like manner the great Cambridge Memorial of 1885 on Church Reform, when pleading that the most urgently needed reform was the admission of laymen of all classes to a substantial share in the control of Church affairs, distinctly limited the plea to those who are “*bona fide* Churchmen”; and if the Church of England to-day is to preserve its spiritual character, the greatest care must be taken that this distinction is adequately observed. Eloquent protests against “denationalizing the National Church” may sound very well on a Church Congress platform, but when a new scheme for self-government is in the making, the only true and safe principle to be observed is Church government by Churchmen; otherwise we might as well, perhaps better, remain as we are. There will not be, however, any “denationalizing” of the National Church under the present scheme, for it is expressly stated that “the existing rights of such parishioners as are not qualified electors” will remain intact (*Report*, p. 42).

The absolute necessity for safeguarding the electorate will appear more clearly when we consider the very important duties

which will be entrusted to Parochial Church Councils. It is not only that they will elect to the higher assemblies ; the Archbishops' Committee recommend that they be empowered by statute to perform a number of important duties. These Councils will arrange, with the incumbent, the Parochial Church Budget and the number and allocation of the collections in church ; they will co-operate with him generally in Church work, and will keep the electoral roll. It is proposed, also, that they should be the normal channel of communication between the parishioners and the Bishop, their right to make representation covering a wide area, including alterations in services and ornaments ; that they should have the right to accept and hold gifts of property and to levy a voluntary Church Rate ; and that they should take over and exercise all the powers of the vestry, and also many of the powers, duties and liabilities of churchwardens who, if qualified for membership, are to be members of the Council without election. The members of the Parochial Church Council will be the sidesmen of the parish. The position of the incumbent is left open in the Report, members of the Committee apparently not being able to agree upon it. But whatever may ultimately be decided upon in this regard, it is clear that the existence in a parish of a council with statutory authority, cannot but exert a very strong moral power over the actions of the incumbent. What would be the position of the parties in the case of a deadlock between the Council and the incumbent is not clear. The point will, no doubt, be considered by the central Church Council as soon as it is legally constituted, for it is provided that a clause shall be inserted in the Constitution of that body requiring it to present a measure conferring powers on Parochial Church Councils already set up as part of the parochial machinery (*Report*, p. 47). The scheme of the Archbishops' Committee clearly contemplates giving Parochial Church Councils real power, and this ought greatly to quicken the interest of Churchpeople in every parish.

But important as the work of Parochial Church Councils will be, the greater interest will be centred in the position of the highest body, the Church Council, which is to be entrusted, under the scheme of the Archbishops' Committee, with " full power to legislate on ecclesiastical affairs " and, in course of time, if not at once, with " the power of making canons, now existing in the provincial Conventions," such canons, when they have received the Royal Assent,

to be "regarded as having authority over all Churchmen" (*Report*, p. 49). In regard to questions of doctrine and discipline the constitution of the present Representative Church Council has been followed. In this it is provided that no proceeding of the Council can "interfere with the exercise by the Episcopate of the powers or functions inherent in them or with the several powers and functions" of the Convocations; and that "it does not belong to the functions of the Council to issue any statement purporting to declare the doctrine of the Church on any questions of theology." But, thus limited, "questions touching doctrine and discipline may be discussed, and resolutions relating thereto may be passed by the Council," although "any projected legislative measure" on such questions "shall be initiated in the House of Bishops, and shall be discussed by each House sitting separately, and the Council shall either accept or reject the measure in the terms in which it is finally proposed by the House of Bishops, after that House has received and considered the report of such separate discussions." There are those who would prefer to see a larger liberty in this matter granted to the House of Clergy and the House of Laity, but the provision is not unreasonable; and it should be remembered that before *any* proposal can pass the Council it must receive the assent of each House, such assent being signified by a majority of the members present and voting. It is a well-established *dictum* that "minorities must suffer," but in matters of such vital importance as those which will come before the Church Council it is open to grave question whether the passing of a proposal by a bare majority would really meet the justice of the case. In all matters touching doctrine and discipline a majority of two-thirds of those present and voting in each House should be required before the proposal can be said to be passed by that House.

We proceed now to consider the position of the State in relation to this proposed change. The Report claims to have devised a plan which will preserve to the State "an effective control over the legislation of the Church." It is as novel as it is interesting, and provides that every measure, after it has been passed by the Church Council, shall be submitted to an Ecclesiastical Committee of the Privy Council consisting of about twenty-five Privy Councillors. In view of the nature of the work to be entrusted to them, it is strange that no religious qualification is required of members

of this Committee. The reason, perhaps, is to be found in a footnote to the proposal, stating that "The King in Council, when he speaks through this specially constituted Committee of the Privy Council, will speak in the name of the State and not in the name of the Church" (*Report*, p. 58). Upon such an interpretation of the duties of the Ecclesiastical Committee it is certain that several very important questions will arise. But let us follow the course of the prescribed procedure. The Ecclesiastical Committee, after consultation, if necessary, with the Legislative Committee of the Church Council, will proceed to make their report to the King. If the measure proposed were to be dealt with by a Canon the royal authorization would then be either granted or refused according to the advice of the report. If the measure be deemed to require Parliamentary sanction, both the measure and the report shall then be forthwith laid on the table of both Houses of Parliament. The report of the Ecclesiastical Committee is intended to show the effect of the measure in question, what alterations in existing Acts of Parliament its enactment would entail, and whether there is any objection from the point of view of the State to its passage. If the report is favourable the measure will automatically be presented for the Royal Assent on the expiry of forty days, unless either House of Parliament by resolution direct to the contrary. If the report is unfavourable, the measure shall not be presented for the Royal Assent unless both Houses of Parliament by resolution order that it shall be so presented. Any measure on receiving the Royal Assent shall acquire the force of an Act of Parliaments

It is obvious that much will depend upon the view the Ecclesiastical Committee take of their responsibilities. It has been widely assumed that they will exclude all religious considerations, and examine the measure in the interests of the State on its secular side alone. But is it quite certain that they will so restrict their inquiry? The Church, it must be remembered, will still be the National Church, the Church of England as by law established. Moreover the King, in whose name they are to act, takes oath at his Coronation that he will "maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof as by law established in England." In face of these facts is it not clear that members of the Ecclesiastical Committee would be entirely within their rights if,

in examining Church legislation from the point of view of the State, they considered what would be the bearing of the measure upon the religious life of the nation. To take a concrete example: Suppose the Church Council passed a measure ordering the Mass Vestments to be worn at every celebration of the Holy Communion in every church throughout England. Can it be imagined that the Ecclesiastical Committee would say that such a proposal, so revolutionary in its character, changing the fundamental basis of the National Church, was entirely outside the province of the State? If so, we might quickly find ourselves face to face with a position which seriously menaced the Reformed character of the Church of England. In any case, the provision is one which need further explanation, and if this is not satisfactory, it will be necessary, when the proper time comes, to press for drastic amendment of the powers of the Ecclesiastical Committee.

It only remains to add that the Report recommends that the proposed new constitution shall be framed by the present Representative Church Council and recommended by both Convocations to the Crown. This done, it would have to be embodied in an Enabling Bill, a draft of which appears as an appendix to the Report. When this Bill has passed, the reform will be accomplished, and the Church of England, while remaining established, will be free to manage its own affairs. But that time is not yet. Nothing can even be attempted until after the war. In the meantime it is the bounden duty of Churchpeople to study the scheme in all its bearings, so that when it is brought within the sphere of practical politics they may be ready with an intelligent and practical policy in regard to it.

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