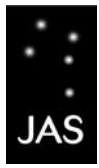

Reflection on the Cambridge Conference to Mark the Bicentenary of the Birth of G.A. Selwyn, First Bishop of New Zealand

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All I want to do by way of conclusion is to pick up a couple of themes that have been running through several of the discussions during the day as an agenda for what we should be thinking about and acting upon in the future.

The first point I want to make, of course, is the obvious one that some of the tensions that we have been considering in the nineteenth-century context go back to the very beginnings of the Anglican enterprise itself: they are not simply accidents of the nineteenth century. The Church of England began as an institutionally separate body using the familiar Reformation tool of state intervention in ecclesiastical affairs (so-called 'Erastianism') to get out from under an oppressive and corrupt centralism. State involvement in the Reformation was initially meant to be a guarantee of freedom for the local church. At the same time, it was very important for those who were its beneficiaries to be able to say to the wider Christian world, Catholic and Reformed, 'you ought to be able to recognise us as more than simply a local phenomenon in the British state'. Some of the debates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – whether it is Hooker fighting off Cartwright on the left, or Laud fighting off Fisher on the right – are about the recognizability of the Church in England to a wider constituency representing a kind of catholic wholeness, whether that catholic wholeness is understood in terms of a more traditional set of approaches to theology or in terms of the renewed catholicity represented by 'the best Reformed Churches', to use that fine mid-seventeenth-century phrase. The point is that there is a tension built in; and to understand that is also to understand that

1. Archbishop Williams gave these concluding remarks at the end of a conference held in Cambridge, UK. The programme for the conference has been described in the introduction to the conference in this issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies*.

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structures exist initially to solve particular problems. When structures become problematic, one of the questions you need to be asking is, 'are those structures now addressing the problems they were meant to resolve, or are they simply the deposit of a history that has moved on?' That is part of the background that I see in the effort by Selwyn and others in the nineteenth century to assert provincial autonomy in the Anglican Communion.

It was a slightly paradoxical situation, in that what began as an attempt to secure the liberties of the local church from a malign centralism had become another kind of malign control. For churches in the colonies, Erastianism was deeply problematic, both theologically and practically. And so the assertion of autonomy, and the attempt to find structures appropriate for the autonomy of local churches outside the British state, was not so much an assertion of the dignity of the local church as an attempt to recover a catholicity increasingly stifled or frustrated by state control.

Ironies abound in all this, as we have gathered today. One of the ironies of the nineteenth-century's controversies, as they appear to us now, is that the creation of autonomous constitutional structures in some parts of the Communion was an attempt to move towards a non-centralized, non-state-controlled international convergence, rather than an uncontrolled pluralism. This came out quite clearly in some of what we heard today about the fascinating byways in the development of early thinking about the Communion, not least around the early Lambeth Conferences. So if there is a lesson to be learned from that, it is that in our contemporary Anglican setting the questions are still about defining autonomy. Do these structures now solve the problems currently being presented? What problems were these structures designed to address? What structures might be needed to address the problems of today, rather than the ones that we once had, think we had (or still have), or would like to have (because sometimes there are problems we would like to have since we know we can solve them)? I elaborate this point with some theological forethought to remind myself as well as others that the notion of the autonomy of the local church is by no means a self-evident or lucid concept in our current debates, or indeed more generally.

A second theme coming through in today's discussion is to do with patterns of authority and representation in synodal government. If 'autonomy' is a word that needs quite a lot of work to get it clarified, so I think is 'synodality'. There is a way of reading synodality, quite popular in some quarters now, as simply a matter of fully representative church government, with 'fully representative' understood in a fairly

political and rather secular way. Selwyn and many of his contemporaries would not, I think, have wanted to start from that point but would have wanted to argue that authority in the Christian Church properly has what you might call a 'nested' quality – an inadequate metaphor but let us stay with it for the moment. Authority works within supporting structures, relational patterns. It does not work simply as a flat surface with an authority on top of it. Authority works relationally. It works through subsidiarity: through the capacity in an organization to recognize at what level decisions are taken, and who is responsible for what.

That authority is differentiated is part of our understanding of the body of Christ in the Pauline sense: in the Christian body it is to be expected that different responsibilities attach to different parts of the body and that authority therefore is never exercised without an understanding of plurality and inter-relationship. That is what I am calling the 'nested' quality. When that is replaced by a notion of synodality that is simply about representation in the sense of the flat surface of representative democracy (one person one vote, and no more to be said) something of profound significance is lost in the theological understanding of how the Church makes its decisions. That is a rather roundabout way of saying that we need to continue thinking about 'the bishop in synod' as the model of the exercise of Christian authority – the bishop in synod, understanding the synod as not simply either the body of the clergy or an undifferentiated 'parliament'. The bishop in synod exercises authority in what we might describe as an informed and reinforced way by the shared discernment of the whole Body of the Church: not removing from the bishop the responsibilities that inexorably belong to that office, nor separating the bishop's exercise of authority from the 'nest' in which it exists, the relations in which it makes sense.

There is more reflection needed on what that might mean in our present setting, not only in the Communion generally but specifically in some of our own provinces. I understand what Dr Colin Podmore was saying about the 'papal risk' of the Archbishop of Canterbury's position as it is sometimes imagined or understood at present; and I think that there was a danger at the last Lambeth Conference of that pattern being realized in unhelpful and misleading ways. But we do have to reinvent something of what the archbishop's role is within the Communion. And I say that simply as a historian, rather than an autobiographer. I am not simply saying that I felt very isolated at the Lambeth Conference, but that there was (and is) something about the *structure* of the Conference that unhelpfully isolated the archbishop's

role, and this needs addressing by a re-theologizing of authority-in-relation, in its 'nest'. We need to bear in mind the way in which the organization of representative bodies by orders, can in certain contexts pull against the imagery of the Body. That is to say, instead of understanding that there are responsibilities belonging here and here and here, it promotes the emergence of interest blocks voting in competition. Anyone who thinks that is an academic observation might well watch the activities of various synods.

Those two themes are the main points I want to put before you as we draw this fascinating day to a close.

It seems to me that all that has been said about the great Bishop Selwyn during the day has reminded us of the way in which (as I said at the opening) the Anglican identity still remains to be worked at, to be imagined and re-imagined. We may take some courage from the way in which it was re-imagined by someone like Selwyn in the nineteenth century, someone who brought to bear on the structural problems of Anglican identity two great bundles of conviction which I think are the only places we can look for clarity and vision these days. They are, first, those considerations that he expressed in terms of *church principles*. It is a slightly chilling phrase, and yet behind it there lies the sense, which has surfaced several times today, that the Church is not simply the convenience of any state or society, but a community that exists by divine invitation. The appeal to 'church principles' is fundamentally the constant and very difficult struggle to work out what it means to exist as the Church because of God's action and invitation rather than anything else.

The second concern is mission. What Selwyn was thinking about – and what he was doing in terms of his constitutional proposals, his radical initiatives and vision (in New Zealand and then in England and in the Communion more widely) – was concerned with mission, with the Church as not only a body existing by divine action and invitation but existing so as to replicate its gift in ever more diverse contexts. That certainly is something that our own Church of England currently struggles with in terms of the Fresh Expressions initiative and in other ways. It is also another of those narratives which, as Bishop Gregory Cameron reminded us, are around in the Communion more widely. But without relating what we are saying to this particular missional question – of how the Church allows the gifts it has been given to come alive in diverse situations – we are actually drawing ourselves back into a kind of vicious theological circle of self-reference. The last thing one could accuse Selwyn's missionary work of was of being self-referential: that is, of being unwilling to raise

its eyes to look at the actual challenges – social, evangelistic, political even – in the context around.

And so as we come to the end of the day, I want to express my hope that the way in which Selwyn drew on both those sources to re-think, to re-imagine, Anglican identity in a deeply theological and missional way, will be resources for those of us now, who are faced with the same, somewhat formidable, but intermittently rather exhilarating challenges and opportunities.