

Bill No 11

Proposed by Canon Brian Courtney (Clogher)

Embargoed until delivery

Archbishop, members of Synod, last year General Synod defeated a Bill that sought to change substantially the nature of this House. After many meetings and with the support of Standing Committee the Synodical Structures Working Group presented you with the opportunity to reshape General Synod by reducing its size and updating Diocesan representation. A large number of the speeches opposing that Bill focused on the danger involved in reducing the size of Synod. We were warned of the pitfalls involved in our Church being governed by a smaller and more elite body. Today we bring before you a Bill which seeks to redress one main area of Synod, namely, Diocesan representation.

You and I have been elected to this Synod in keeping with principles laid down in 1870. They are good principles, the figures for each Diocese were based on a ratio of two lay people for each clerical member, based on 10% of the serving clergy in each Diocese. The great flaw in what we have inherited is that instead of building a percentage into our Constitution our forebears legislated on the basis of the numbers those percentages at that time resulted in.

Those who laid down such principles could not have foreseen the changes in our Church population, changes that mean that for many years this Synod has become increasingly less representative of our Church. This Bill seeks to protect the numerically small Dioceses and abolish the built-in aberration that deprives us of being able to claim we are a people who practice fairness and equality as well as preaching it. This reform seeks to secure a representation that reflects more accurately the current membership of our Church and, because it is based on a percentage of cures, it should continue to reform itself.

What you are being asked to accept today is a proposal to base representation on 50% of the cures in any Diocese, with no Diocese being allowed to have less than four clerical and eight lay representatives. Should there be subsequent increases or decreases in the number of cures in any Diocese then adjustments in allocations can be made. On the basis of existing figures this would result in a net increase in Synod size of less than 10%.

I ask you not to demean this Synod by allowing the present inequality to be perpetuated, and perpetuated in your name? Is injustice only to be criticised when it is in other places, in political institutions or social structures? Is sectarianism only something that exists towards others or is there a contrived sectarianism within our own Church? We claim to be Gospel people and that means that we should have structures and values that honour God.

I wish to convince you, not antagonise you. This Bill is not the last word on Synod reform but it is an improvement on what we have. I would urge you to vote to reform a system that is unfair and indecent; I invited you to vote to put right a wrong that has been ignored for too long; to vote to restore fairness and the integrity of this House. To continue to do nothing about the present unjust system of representation is to demean every decision of this General Synod of the Church of Ireland.

It is my privilege to propose this Bill.