

The value of the Provincial Synod

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29 September 2007

Historical background

There can be few subjects which have attracted the amount of attention in our Provincial Synod that the question of the future of the provincial structures has. The question first arose in 1889 and was addressed in virtually every meeting of the Synod until the 1970's, but in fact it has its antecedents in the very origins of the Provincial Synod, and its statement of purpose adopted in 1861.

The original statement of the purpose of the Synod of the Province of Canada included the goal of consolidating the governance of all the dioceses of British North America under its umbrella.¹ To that end it welcomed delegates, first from Nova Scotia, and then from the diocese of Fredericton. Legislation was also secured to bring these two dioceses into the fold. Later the Provincial Synod would court the Diocese of Newfoundland for half a century before it finally agreed to join our provincial structure, the decisive factor being the Dominion of Canada's agreement to join Newfoundland in Confederation.

Consolidation, in the mind of the Provincial Synod, logically included approaching the dioceses to the West to invite them into the fold, and this was done pursuant to a motion adopted in 1889. The "Joint Committee on the Consolidation of the Various Branches of the Church of England in British North America" reported to the Synod in 1892 as to its progress. The Committee had approached the various dioceses in British Columbia and Rupertsland via a circular letter, proposing a conference in Winnipeg in September, 1890. The Committee's report noted that, "upon receipt of this circular, exception was taken by the Most Reverend the Metropolitan of Rupert's Land to the action of the Committee in addressing the individual Bishops and Synods of his Province on a matter which was under discussion of his Provincial Synod and reserved for the consideration and decision of that corporate body." Or, as Philip Carrington puts it in his history of the Anglican Church in Canada, "the Bishop of Rupertsland received the communication in his capacity as a diocesan bishop, and was hurt because he had received no official notification in his capacity as Metropolitan."²

The Committee members seem to have been taken aback by the umbrage of the Metropolitan, and in a conciliatory move they agreed to meet with representatives of the Western dioceses in the context of a meeting of the Provincial Synod of Rupertsland in August, 1890. The Winnipeg Conference, as it is known to history, agreed to two key points: that it was "expedient to unite and consolidate the various branches of the Church of England in British North America" and "the

¹ Declaration of Principles, paragraph 6, *The Ecclesiastical Province of Canada Constitution and Canons*, p. 9.

² Philip Carrington, *The Anglican Church in Canada*, p. 188f.

necessity of the retention of Provinces under a General Synod.”³ This second point was rather different from what was originally foreseen in the Province of Canada. That Synod would have seen itself become the General Synod for British North America, but it is clear that the Metropolitan of Rupertsland would have none of such a scheme. Carrington notes that “the only diocese in Rupertsland to discuss the question fully was Qu’Appelle, which issued a report which includes a remarkably clear analysis of the situation.... It seemed on the whole to incline towards the theory of one province for British North America, in which it disagreed with its Metropolitan, but ... it suggested as an alternative the creation of four provinces, British Columbia, Rupertsland, Ontario and the Maritimes (which was to include Montreal and Quebec); and this is precisely what we now have.”⁴ But in the end, the decision was taken by the Provincial Synod of Rupertsland to adopt the recommendations of the Winnipeg Conference, which had proposed a scheme for the creation of a new General Synod, as well as a time and place for the first meeting.

Back in Canada, the Diocese of Montreal instructed its delegates to the Provincial Synod “to oppose the formation of a General Synod, if Provincial Synods be retained as part of our Ecclesiastical system.”⁵ It may be, as Carrington suggests, that the Montreal Synod “envisaged Consolidation as an extension of the Province of ‘Canada’ to embrace the whole Dominion, and still perhaps to meet as a rule in Montreal.”⁶ Huron appears to have conceded the retention of Provincial structures as a necessary concession to Rupertsland, but proposed that the Provincial Synods should only meet when summoned by their Metropolitans, rather than at regular intervals.⁷ As we know, the General Synod was indeed brought into being in September 1893, as first proposed by the Winnipeg Conference.

After its meeting of 1898, the Synod of the Ecclesiastical Province of Canada began a period of decline. Although it continued at first to meet regularly, the frequency of its meetings began to be reduced. Much of its activity in the early years of the twentieth century involved transferring its functions to the General Synod as that body began to function. For a time the Provincial Synod continued to grant theological degrees on behalf of the General Synod until legislation could be secured to allow General Synod to take over that task. At one point the Provincial Synod pointedly reminded General Synod that it had still not got round to securing this legislation. Eventually, as had been proposed by Huron, the meetings of the Provincial Synod began to be *ad hoc*. It met in 1912 to ratify the General Synod’s creation of the new Province of Ontario, and to say farewell to the Ontario dioceses, and then not again until 1917 when the question of Prayer Book revision was on

³ Province of Canada, Fifteenth Session, 1892, p. 100.

⁴ Carrington, p. 190.

⁵ Province of Canada, Fifteenth Session, 1892, p. 105.

⁶ Carrington, p. 189.

⁷ Province of Canada, Fifteenth Session, 1892, p. 108.

the agenda.

In the 1917 meeting, Archbishop Clarendon Worrell addressed the question of the purpose of the Provincial Synod, noting that “if our whole purpose is nothing but the making and remaking of Canons and discussions on points of order, it would be better to dissolve at once.”⁸ But Archbishop Worrell felt that there was work for the Synod to do beyond its legislative responsibilities, and thus proposed that regular meetings should resume. He also suggested forming a Provincial Council, as Ontario had done.⁹ Neither suggestion was brought to full fruition immediately. Meetings continued to be sporadic and the Provincial Council would not be created for nearly three decades.

In 1936 the new Metropolitan, Archbishop Richardson, noted that “more than eleven years have passed since the Synod of this Ecclesiastical Province has been convened.... We need not pause to inquire why the Synod was allowed to become practically moribund. If the question were asked at all, it would find its answer, I imagine, in a widespread feeling that the extraordinary development of the General Synod has made unnecessary the Provincial Synods, - a sort of fifth wheel to the ecclesiastical coach, as it were.”¹⁰ Eight years later, two Metropolitans and most of a World War later, Archbishop Philip Carrington would convene the next meeting of the Provincial Synod, remarking that “there has only been one Session during the past twenty years.”¹¹ Later, Carrington would look back on Richardson’s comment from 1936, and comment that “when I first came into touch with it, I thought, like many others, that the Provincial Synods were unnecessary and made our organization too unwieldy, a fifth wheel to the coach, as some one said in our Synod of 1936. But my coach has a fifth wheel, and when I have a flat tire, I am very thankful for it.”¹²

Throughout this period there are a number of attempts at setting the Provincial Synod back in motion. Each new archbishop seems to discover the value of the Synod, summons it to meet and makes comments about how it ought to meet more frequently, and then the Synod returns to its “practically moribund” state, to borrow Archbishop Richardson’s phrase. Again and again we see a sort of grasping at a sense of purpose for the Synod, which eventually seems to devolve into a rather bland statement that “This is nice; we should do it more often.” It was Archbishop Carrington who would breathe new life into the Synod, and give it a new sense of purpose.

Value of Provincial Synods - Hard Themes

Broadly speaking, we can describe the value and role of the Provincial Synod under two rubrics:

⁸ Province of Canada, Twenty-second Session, 1917, p. 12.

⁹ Province of Canada, Twenty-second Session, 1917, pp. 12f.

¹⁰ Province of Canada, Twenty-sixth Session, 1936, p. 10.

¹¹ Province of Canada, Twenty-seventh Session, 1944, p. 10.

¹² Province of Canada, Twenty-ninth Session, 1953, p. 13.

Hard Themes and Soft Themes. With respect to the Hard Themes, the Synod retains a specific legislative jurisdiction. This includes the regulation of diocesan boundaries, the regulation of the ministrations of the clergy, notably with respect to oaths and licensing, the regulation of the episcopacy, and the provision of a provincial court structure. Some of these responsibilities are not often used, especially the court structure, which I understand has been called upon only twice in the history of the Province. But others do have a day to day application in the life of the Church.

Commenting on the role of the Provinces in regulating diocesan boundaries, Archbishop Carrington suggested that “there seems nothing to be said for asking the representatives of distant Dioceses to adjudicate on these questions.”¹³

Similarly, regarding the regulation of the episcopacy, Carrington suggested that it was better handled at a local level rather than transferring the jurisdiction to the General Synod, as it is in the Episcopal Church. At the Provincial level we can respond quickly to the need to confirm an election of a bishop, and having the Provincial Metropolitan as chief consecrator and pastor to the bishops, as well as being the one to whom episcopal resignations are submitted, seems a perfectly sensible division of labour given the demands on time and travel for the Primate. It is also at the Provincial level that we take responsibility for the discipline of bishops. It is interesting, as an aside, that the proposals for creation of a canonical infrastructure at the General Synod level for the election, appointment, consecration and resignation of a National Indigenous Bishop omitted any reference to the question of discipline.

The Provincial Court serves two vital functions. First, it is the court of first instance in the trial of a bishop. Although it is to be hoped that the court will never be used for that purpose, we must provide for it as long as bishops are human. The second purpose for the court is to act as a court of appeal from the diocesan courts. Justice demands that there be an avenue of appeal from a judgement of a lower court because courts are fallible. Of course, even appeals courts are fallible, but the maintenance of this infrastructure is essential. If we didn't supply a court of appeal, someone else would have to.

Value of Provincial Synods - Soft Themes

If all the Provincial Synod did were tied to the hard themes, then these could simply be transferred elsewhere in a fairly straightforward manner, but there are other aspects to the existence of the Synod that must also be accounted for. A significant aspect of the life of the Synod of the Province of Canada is the fact that we meet in a group which is beyond the borders of our respective dioceses but at a scale which is more manageable than the General Synod, and does not carry that body's enormous legislative load. Having shed some of our responsibilities, such as sending missionaries to Japan and administering theological education and granting theological degrees, we have the luxury, at very low cost I might say, of engaging in the kinds of conversations that help us to move beyond the confines of our dioceses, to compare notes and share helpful ideas and have some experience of the wider Church yet still at a manageable scale. Again I resort to Archbishop

¹³ Province of Canada, Twenty-Seventh Session, 1944, p. 11.

Carrington, who noted in 1944 that “we would be stronger as Dioceses if we had fellowship together in directing the work of the Church; but General Synod, inspiring as it is, cannot provide this kind of fellowship; it is too large and diverse and does not meet often enough.”¹⁴ Again, a theme we find in the Metropolitan addresses to the Synod is the Provinces’ role in balancing the centralization of the General Synod against the parochialism we find at the diocesan level.

Goal-oriented people will find the soft themes frustrating, but process-oriented types will revel in them. Notwithstanding that I tend toward the goal orientation, I do suggest that the soft themes of our Provincial structures do have real value.

Aspects of the Provinces

The various provinces approach their lives differently. We have four provinces in our Church and no two are exactly alike. For example, Ontario, perhaps more than the other three, is quite effective in relating to the civil provincial government. It actually maintains an office and an executive officer whose main task is to maintain relationships with the government of the civil Province of Ontario on a range of matters of ecclesiastical interest. Nominally that is also a role of the Province of Canada, though in practical terms it is best handled here at a diocesan level.

Rupert’s Land also has a much more centralized feel than Canada. It is interesting, for example, to examine their canon for episcopal elections, on which ours is based. In Rupert’s Land, the sense is that an episcopal election is a Provincial matter, which occurs within a diocese; in Canada, it is a diocesan matter which may invoke the assistance of the Province.

British Columbia and Yukon makes provision for the election of a bishop who is a suffragan to the Metropolitan. It is this provision that was used (and perhaps developed) to allow for episcopal oversight in the former Diocese of Cariboo, now administered by a metropolitan suffragan in the guise of the Parishes of the Central Interior.

Canada is known as the most laid-back of the four Provinces, and here it is the relationships that seem to matter most. But relationships matter! Archbishop Peers used to delight in quoting a comment that he attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to the effect that what holds the Anglican Communion together is that “we meet.” We meet, in the Province, beyond the bounds of our dioceses, and in a format which is conducive to allowing those meetings to foster relationships rather than big debates on Important Issues Of Our Time, as at the General Synod level. And there is a value in that which is well worth the small cost in time, effort and, yes, money. Again, to quote Archbishop Carrington, “if our Church is to be a force in this Dominion, churchmen must get together more often than they do.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Province of Canada, Twenty-Seventh Session, 1944, p. 13.

¹⁵ Province of Canada, Twenty-Seventh Session, 1944, p. 13.

Governance Report to General Synod

Al Capone is said to have stated that he didn't know which street Canada was on. The same might be said of the General Synod. If we look at the official map of our Church, it is clear that the General Synod does not know where Canada begins and where Ontario ends. The governance report presented to the most recent meeting of the General Synod seems to begin with an *a priori* bias in favour of downgrading the Provincial structures if not eliminating them. It proposes three possibilities: (1) eliminating the Provincial structures, (2) downgrading the structures to some form of non-synodical meeting without legislative jurisdiction, (3) replacing the Provinces with some purpose-based collectivities such as the Council of the North, which would ultimately not include all of the dioceses, and which would be potentially a serious violation of Catholic order. The one thing the report does not seem to have considered is strengthening the Provinces and perhaps even giving them a voice at the General Synod level.

Writing on another issue, George Radwanski recently suggested that the onus is on those who wish to introduce radical change to demonstrate its necessity. I suggest the same applies in our case. Downgrading or eliminating the provincial structures in our Church would be a radical change, and so the onus is on the Task Force, if that is what it is proposing, to demonstrate clearly first, what precisely is broken in our system, and second that the proposed changes actually will fix what is demonstrably broken. It is one thing to assert that we are over governed as though it were a self-evident fact; it is quite another thing to demonstrate that this assertion is true. It is one thing to assert that the solution to this problem, if it does in fact exist, is the downgrading or elimination of provincial structures; it is quite another thing to prove it.

On our part, it seems that is it in the power of the Synod of the Province of Canada to strengthen our structures, to staff them with the best and brightest of our people, and to make them a force for the future.

Once, our little Province was one of the first Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Once, *we* suggested that there should be an international meeting of bishops, which resulted in the Lambeth Conferences. Once, *we* sent missionaries to Japan and China and South America, including many of the early bishops in the Orient. Once, *we* administered theological education, set the exams and granted theological degrees, for budding clergy in our Province. Once, it is true, we floundered about for a *raison d'être*, and hardly met at all. As we approach our sesquicentennial, there is no reason why the Province of Canada cannot be renewed in its mission and discover anew a sense of purpose for the next 150 years. It is clear, however, to give Archbishop Carrington the last word, that "if we consented to become a shadow organisation with formal functions and no real work, I do not think we would ever meet again."¹⁶

¹⁶ Province of Canada, Twenty-Seventh Session, p. 13.