

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

BILL NO 2

Proposed by Bishop Patrick Rooke, Bishop of Tuam, Killala & Achonry

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I propose that leave be given to introduce Bill No 2.

Your Grace, Members of Synod

I am pleased to propose Bill No 2, which in short, requests an extension of two years for the Episcopal Commission on Ministry and Structures to complete its work.

I should declare that I am not a member of the Commission so I have no axe to grind. I've simply been asked to propose the Bill as one who has a particular interest in where the work of this Commission might take us.

I also want to say that in proposing this Bill I have the support of my Diocesan Council. In Tuam we too have been discussing Episcopal Ministry and Structures and we are not in any way fearful of the proposals that might come from this Commission. That may surprise you as it was Tuam's refusal to contemplate any change three years ago that led to the setting up of the Commission. I think most will understand that the circumstances then were different. Tuam was without a bishop and the perception, rightly or wrongly, was that in our weakened position we were being victimised. The work of the Commission on the other hand is looking at Episcopal Ministry and Structures across the whole Island.

Hence it is complicated and diverse, and as you can see from their report on pages 383 following it touches upon so many areas of church life and ministry. What began as a debate perceived as bringing about boundary changes to the numerically smallest diocese in the Church of Ireland, has

now broadened to an examination of almost every aspect of episcopal life, starting with the appointment process for bishops and pre-consecration training for those newly elected.

I welcome this and I know that the Commission has been extremely thorough and professional in the manner in which it has gone about the task – its report, I believe, is proof of this. It was asked to have a firm evidence base, including statistical data, for any recommendations it may make – this has proved time consuming but will give added credibility to those recommendations if we are patient enough to give the Commission time to complete the task.

I don't intend to delve into the particular issues for that is not for now – when we come to the Report of the Commission there will be ample opportunity to debate any aspect of it's work.

Some have said to me why not one more year – can they not complete the task in a shorter time frame? My reply is that there is ample evidence to demonstrate the complexity of the task ahead. My fear is not that two more years is too much time but is it enough? And I qualify this by saying that I will certainly not be returning in two years to propose a further extension – if you pass this Bill, I believe the work must then be completed by May 2016. Work of this nature does need a deadline in order to focus minds.

In this connection, I want to say a couple of things.

I believe the Commission could learn from the Liturgical Advisory Committee's presentations to Synod in the past. Knowing they had two or three years work ahead of them, they used the interim synods to pass some of their proposals so that all was not left to the end. I for one will be disappointed if this Commission doesn't have most of its proposals in terms of Episcopal Ministry before us at next year's General Synod so that in May of the following year we'll be looking at their proposals on Episcopal Structures.

I want to applaud the Commission's emphasis on ministry and mission coming before structures – the structures are there to support the ministry, not the other way round. That said, for many of us, the future structure and shape of our particular diocese is the elephant in the room. Tuam is one of what the bishops have identified as five numerically weak dioceses – each with under 30 cures that are likely to decrease further over the next few years. To date, the Commission has not revealed its thoughts on what new diocesan boundaries might look like and this is a debate that must begin now – it cannot simply be sprung on us at the tail end of the Commission's work. The whole Church needs to be involved in this so that there is a logic and coherence across the Church of Ireland that is understood. Without that discussion and the necessary time frame, people will vote according to their emotions and that would not be good for the Church, certainly it will not be conducive to effective ministry and mission. So I appeal to the Commission – now is the time to start the debate on structures and the Bishops have assisted you in this by providing a discussion paper.

In that discussion paper, the Bishops draw the parallel to Disestablishment in 1869. Then, no one wanted it. Today, few of us relish the thought of what ministry and structural changes might mean for us. But as Disestablishment energised the Church in 1869, so the outcomes from this Commission can be the launching pad for the ministry and mission of the Church that can take us forward from the 150th anniversary of Disestablishment in 2019. So let us honour the memory of that event by demonstrating the same courage and forbearance in the face of inevitable change.

Finally, I want to thank Mrs Harkness and the members of the Commission for the work already undertaken and to wish them well for what lies ahead. The Bill enables two co-options and for the filling of casual vacancies. There is a mammoth task ahead, and I propose we give the Commission another two years to complete it.

I propose that the Bill, Bill No 2, be given a second reading.

