

THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

BRIAN McHENRY

The government of the Church of Ireland is derived from the Irish Church Act 1869, which dissolved the statutory union between the Churches of England and Ireland, and the General Convention of 1870 which declared that a General Synod of the bishops, and of representatives of the clergy and laity, should have chief legislative power in respect of the Church so far as was consistent with its episcopal constitution.

The General Synod consists of two Houses, the House of Bishops and the House of Representatives. The House of Bishops consists of the Archbishops of the two Provinces (Armagh and Dublin) and of the 10 other diocesan bishops. The House of Representatives consists of 216 clerical and 432 lay representatives, elected every three years by the diocesan synods. Both Houses sit together in the General Synod, which meets once a year for a three day session.

Draft legislation is entitled a Bill. If the Bill is passed, it becomes a Statute, binding on all members of the Church of Ireland. Legislation must be passed by both Houses (Bishops and Representatives). In the case of Special Bills (proposing doctrinal and liturgical change) a vote by orders in the House of Representatives must be taken and a two-thirds majority in each order is necessary. This two-thirds rule applies to certain earlier stages of a Special Bill and not just the Third Reading of the Bill (ie the equivalent of the English Synod's Final Approval stage). A vote by orders may also be requisitioned in the case of other Bills, at the instigation of ten members of either order.

The Bill procedure approximates to that of Parliament – leave to introduce a Bill, Second Reading, Committee stage (in full Synod), Report Stage, and Third Reading. Bills are drafted by the proposers (who in particular matters are members of a Select Committee elected by the Synod to initiate policy proposals, or in other matters may be the House of Bishops, the Standing Committee, the Representative Body – the Church of Ireland equivalent of the Church Commissioners, or the Pensions Board, or just ordinary members). There is no Standing Counsel but a Bills Committee sits to consider legal and drafting aspects of the texts of the Bills.

It is possible in the case of uncontentious legislation for the earlier stages to be taken on the first day of the session of the Synod, and for the final stages to be taken on the third and final day of the session, so completing the exercise in one Synod. But in the case of a Special Bill, leave to introduce the Bill must be obtained at one session and then it cannot be processed further until the next session. Notice of amendments to Special Bills must be given at the previous session.

(The author was the Church of England's representative at the 1993 Synod).