

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Election of an ‘Outsider’ Archbishop

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## Abstract

The 1984 election of David Penman as Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne was surprising, coming at the end of a controversial process in which two better-known candidates had consistently been the front runners. His election disrupted the longstanding power base of Melbourne Diocese represented by the two men passed over. But his election disrupted more than that – it disrupted the stalemate preventing the ordination of women in the Anglican Church of Australia. His election was crucial to the struggle to have women ordained in the Australian church. As Melbourne Diocesan Synod prepares to elect its next archbishop in 2025, it is timely to re-visit the 1984 election.

**Keywords:** Archbishop election; David Penman; James Grant; Peter Hollingworth; women’s ordination

In 1984, David Penman was elected Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, the second-largest of the twenty-three dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia. His election, by a twelve-person Electoral Board (the Board),<sup>1</sup> was perhaps the most controversial election of a Melbourne archbishop. It was so difficult and distressing that Penman promptly initiated changing the process to election by synod. In 2025, following the retirement of the current archbishop, Dr Philip Freier, next February, a meeting of synod members will elect the next archbishop. An eighteen-member Board of Nominators, currently meeting, will bring the names of between two and six candidates to the synod meeting from which they can choose.

The papers of the Electoral Board that chose David Penman have recently come to light,<sup>2</sup> making it possible to analyse that controversial election in detail, and also with the passage of time, to recognize that the outcome of this most troubled election was not only surprising but significant.

<sup>1</sup>The Electoral Board comprised six clergy and six lay people, elected by the 1981 Melbourne Synod.

<sup>2</sup>This discussion is drawn from the handwritten records of the meetings of the Board (henceforth called the Electoral Board minutes,) made by the chair of the Board, Professor Kevin Westfold, an Australian academic and radio astronomer. It is not known if copies were made available to the other members of the Board. These and other materials relating to the election are among papers given by Professor Westfold before his death in 2001 into the care of my late husband, the Reverend Dr Brian Porter. They have been deposited in the Melbourne Diocesan archives.

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The Board began its work on 1 August 1983. Its role was quite simple: it was to elect an archbishop within twelve months by a vote requiring the agreement of four of the six clergy and four of the six laity. It met twenty-two times before it was finally able to elect on 21 May 1984. Initially, it surveyed a wide range of possibilities, looking at Australian diocesan and regional bishops, as well as overseas and local clergy.<sup>3</sup> Among them from the beginning was Penman, then a Melbourne regional bishop, and the two Melburnians who quickly became the front runners: Melbourne regional bishop James Grant, and the executive director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence,<sup>4</sup> Canon Peter Hollingworth. Both Grant and Hollingworth were also members of the Board. Penman's name kept re-surfacing, even as a deadlock developed between Grant and Hollingworth. It was an interesting deadlock because, although Grant and Hollingworth were in many ways quite different, they were similar in crucial respects.

Grant, who died in 2019, was 52 in 1983. He was a conservative who had been close to the apex of power in the diocese for many years, first as chaplain to Archbishop Frank Woods from 1966 and then as a regional bishop in the Diocese from 1971. While the Board was meeting, he became Administrator of the Diocese following the retirement of Archbishop Robert Dann in November 1983.

Hollingworth, later Archbishop of Brisbane (1989–2001) and then Governor-General of Australia (2001–2003), was 48, tall, handsome and charming. After parish ministry, he had joined the Brotherhood in 1964 initially as a chaplain until, having completed a master's degree in social work, he was appointed executive director in 1980. While Grant was known mainly in church circles, Hollingworth enjoyed a high profile in Australian society for his policy work and advocacy for the poor.

They were alike in that both were from the Anglo-Catholic side of the diocese,<sup>5</sup> and both were establishment figures: Grant was an alumnus of Trinity College, a premier college of the University of Melbourne, where he had also served as chaplain; Hollingworth, who had also studied at Trinity College, was an alumnus of Scotch College, Melbourne, a leading independent boys' school. Both had substantial support from different sections of the Diocese. Grant's supporters, mainly more conservative Anglo-Catholics, saw him as a pair of safe hands who would not rock the boat; Hollingworth's supporters included more progressive Anglo-Catholics, and church people committed to social justice issues who believed he would engage the church with the issues and concerns of modern Australia. 'Transformational' was a description often used for him at the time.

Quite early in the process, there was speculation in the Melbourne media about the progress of the election. In the 1980s, the secular world, and hence the secular press, was still very interested in the internal issues of the churches. The churches still had real cache in wider society. Some press reports were clearly prompted by

<sup>3</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 6, 24 October 1983, and meeting 7, 7 November 1983.

<sup>4</sup>The Brotherhood of St Laurence is one of Australia's premier social justice organizations. Founded in Newcastle, NSW, in 1930, it relocated to Melbourne in 1933.

<sup>5</sup>Melbourne Diocese has historically comprised both Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic factions, though neither faction has been extreme; its archbishops have been either of Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, or broad-church sympathies. In the 1980s, the Anglo-Catholic faction was quite strong. In the twenty-first century, Evangelicals in Melbourne, as in the Anglican Church of Australia generally, are in the ascendancy.

leaks from the Board, an issue sometimes raised at the Board, though no member was publicly accused of it.

*The Age*, a Melbourne daily newspaper of record, explored the election in some detail in November 1983.<sup>6</sup> Reporting that Grant and Hollingworth were the two leading candidates, it was bemused that they were both among the six clergy on the Board. ‘The two front runners will deliberate, debate and finally vote on the next Archbishop’, the article said, noting that while it assumed the Board members would do what they believed to be the will of God, ‘self-interest has a way of intruding in even the best-organised minds’.

Grant was named in the article as the favourite, claiming that his election ‘would represent a continuation of the status quo’, which also seemed to be Grant’s opinion. ‘In many ways I think the diocese is set’, he was quoted as saying. Hollingworth’s profile on social issues was ‘not so much high as Olympian’, the article said, adding that he is ‘visible and popular, and the election board is believed to have been flooded with support for him’. His profile was also his weakness, it added; one church observer had dismissed him as ‘just a social worker’. Many did wonder at his views and performance outside social welfare, the article said.

Penman was named as one of the ‘undeclared front runners’, along with Bishop Oliver Heyward of Bendigo and Archbishop Keith Rayner of Adelaide. (Rayner would become Archbishop of Melbourne in 1990, following Penman’s early death.) According to *The Age*, Penman was the least likely to be elected. Although he had had a big impact in Melbourne already and was popular, he was an ‘outsider’, the article concluded.

As the Board continued to consider the names before it, there were some consistent views shared about the main candidates, sometimes reflected in various press reports. Grant was described as having ‘episcopal bearing’, good at meetings, with a considerable memory and knowledge of the Diocese. There were also accusations that he was a gossip who had favourites, and that some clergy would not welcome him as archbishop. Hollingworth was described as a distinction to the diocese because of his significant public profile. Grant supporters – and he had at least one particularly strong advocate on the Board – vehemently denied the ‘favouritism’ accusation and claimed the church needed more than Hollingworth’s ‘social gospel’.<sup>7</sup>

Vote after vote revealed a deadlock between Grant and Hollingworth. By Christmas 1983, the Board was at an impasse. Should they re-open other names? Should the two contenders leave the Board? Should the Board itself resign? They ploughed on however until another vote ended in the same deadlock the following February. So a larger field of possible names was considered.<sup>8</sup>

And the outsider’s name came back into the discussion. While in general, Board members spoke well of Penman, there were comments that though he was a good regional bishop, he was not ready to be archbishop. He had some learning to do. He was considered by some as an outsider, even a parvenue.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>‘An election for God’s eyes only’, by Kerry Wakefield. *The Age*, 2 November 1983, p.11.

<sup>7</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 7, 7 November 1983.

<sup>8</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 10, 15 December 1983, and meeting 12, 15 February 1984.

<sup>9</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 13, 20 February 1984.

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He was certainly a newcomer to the church in Melbourne in comparison with Grant and Hollingworth. Born, educated and ordained in New Zealand and having served as a missionary in Pakistan and the Middle East, he had come to Melbourne only in 1975, when he was appointed principal of St Andrew's Hall, the training college for the Evangelical-aligned Church Missionary Society (CMS). Four years later he had returned to parish work in New Zealand, before returning to Melbourne on appointment as a regional bishop in 1982. In 1983, as the Board met, he was 47.

So by early 1984, there were three consistent contenders – Grant, Hollingworth and Penman – though Grant and Hollingworth were still the front runners. Their support on the Board was virtually equal, though Hollingworth commanded more support from the lay members. This was not surprising, given two of them – Mrs Diane Heath and Deaconess Marjorie McGregor<sup>10</sup> – had a strong commitment to social action through their work and ministry. In the end, although Hollingworth had the support of four lay members – the requisite majority – he could not get beyond the support of three clergy members, four also being the required majority. A decisive vote in which he failed led him to resign from the Board by March 1984. His place was taken by the next on the supplementary electoral list, Archdeacon Hugh Girvan, who was closer to Evangelical than Anglo-Catholic.<sup>11</sup>

As Penman's name came to the fore, churchmanship issues became prominent. Penman would probably not be comfortable with practices in two-thirds of the Diocese (presumably Anglo-Catholic practices), one Board member, Bishop Grant's main supporter, said. He would prefer not to wear a cope or chasuble. This was disputed by another member, who said Anglo-Catholics were very happy with him. Would he draw the Diocese closer to Sydney-style Evangelicalism? His Evangelicalism was not comparable with Sydney's at all, another Board member insisted.<sup>12</sup>

Penman was clearly an Evangelical. He had been a CMS missionary, he was on all the 'blue ribbon' international Evangelical networks, and he was widely reported to be a close colleague of Archbishop Donald Robinson of Sydney. He had been a key speaker at a major Evangelical conference held in Sydney in the previous year. As if to confirm these fears, the *Australian Church Record*, an Evangelical newspaper in the Reformed Anglican tradition published in Sydney, hailed Penman's eventual election on its front page, writing that 'Evangelicals will be thrilled with his appointment'. It noted however with some disappointment that he was a 'liberal Evangelical' whose support for the ordination of women would 'create tension'.<sup>13</sup>

As Penman the Evangelical's name drew closer to election, churchmanship concerns surfaced beyond the Board. Clearly, there was strong leakage from one or more Anglo-Catholics on the Board because the Anglo-Catholic faction in the Diocese went into panic mode at the thought of an Evangelical archbishop.

<sup>10</sup>Mrs Heath was public affairs manager at the Mission of St James and St John. Ordained in 1993, she died in 2011. Deaconess McGregor was a parish social worker ministering at St Stephen's Church, Richmond. Later Archdeacon McGregor, she died in 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 16, 15 March 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 18, 28 March 1984.

<sup>13</sup>*The Australian Church Record*, 11 June 1984, p.1. The Diocese of Sydney's implacable, continuing opposition to women priests was already clearly evident in 1984; Archbishop Robinson was a leading opponent.

On Saturday morning 7 April 1984, Anglo-Catholic clergy and laity met in a hastily convened meeting at St Bartholomew's Church, then a strongly conservative Anglo-Catholic parish, in the inner Melbourne suburb of Burnley (the Burnley meeting). According to the meeting's formal minutes and the hand-written notes for the minutes, there were 68 present; 75 names however were listed on the letter sent to the Board following the meeting to include proxies.<sup>14</sup>

The chair of the meeting was Dr Robin Sharwood, a leading Anglo-Catholic layman, establishment figure and canon lawyer. In his opening address to the meeting, included in the minutes, he insisted that the meeting was not 'an indignation rally directed against a particular person' nor 'an ecclesiastical version of a football cheer-squad barracking for a favourite son'. This was disingenuous. The meeting was clearly a panic station's meeting attempting to stop Penman's election and force the election of an Anglo-Catholic instead. From the names of those attending, most of whom were part of the Grant 'faction' in the Diocese, the 'favourite son' was almost certainly James Grant rather than Peter Hollingworth.

Dr Sharwood had on occasion written to the Board commending Grant, and just a few days before the meeting, had written an extremely frank confidential letter to the chair of the Board, Professor Kevin Westfold. 'The strengthening rumour that David Penman is to appear as the *deus ex machina* gives me great cause for concern', he wrote. Penman 'was just not in the class' of Grant and Hollingworth, he continued. 'I find it extraordinary that he should seriously be preferred to Peter and James'. He begged Professor Westfold 'in all charity to consider the position James would find himself in if David were to be elected'. Grant could cope with Hollingworth's election, 'but to be passed over in favour of his junior (in every respect), and a new-comer (sic) at that, would be profoundly hurtful to him, not to say insulting'. Clearly irate at the thought of Penman's possible election, he added: 'In my view, it would do [Grant] a very grave injustice. What on earth do your Board members suppose he would do? Have they given any thought to that? Or don't they care, and, if not, why not?' He asked for an informal meeting with Westfold for 'a few of us' to talk 'about this matter'. A handwritten note at the bottom of the letter said a meeting was planned for Sunday 8 April. It is not known if that meeting occurred, given the Burnley meeting of the previous day.<sup>15</sup>

According to the Burnley meeting minutes, Dr Sharwood did not convey these strong pro-James Grant feelings to the Burnley meeting, nor are they present in the irenic formal letter he wrote to the Board members following the meeting. There can be little doubt however that the meeting Dr Sharwood chaired was a last-ditch attempt to make James Grant the next Archbishop of Melbourne.

<sup>14</sup>Brian Porter, 'Minutes of a meeting held at St Bartholomew's Church, Burnley, at 8am on Saturday April 7, 1984'. The typed minutes, together with Porter's original hand-written notes and numerous other papers related to that meeting, were in the author's possession. They have been placed in the Melbourne Diocesan archives.

In the following days, the attendance figure varied. The letter Dr Sharwood sent to the Board on behalf of the meeting claimed that 'over 70 clergy and laity' attended; the press release he authorized said 'about 75' were present, and *The Age* report the following Monday morning 9 April said there were 80 present. The letter to the Board also included the names of 16 people 'not able to be present but who had indicated a wish to be associated with such a resolution'.

<sup>15</sup>Photocopy of letter from Robin Sharwood to Kevin Westfold dated 2 April 1984.

It was clear that people who had flourished under the old regime – which had effectively been in power for more than a quarter of a century – had much to lose with the election of David Penman. Coming from well outside their networks, Penman would have not only a different agenda but also a different group of backers to promote. The old patronage system, which had influenced all major Melbourne appointments for decades, would no longer operate.

On the morning of the meeting, an exposé of the situation had appeared in *The Age* and was dutifully read to the gathering by one of the meeting's organizers.<sup>16</sup> 'A new appointee to the board, Archdeacon Hugh Girvan of Geelong, may have opened the way for reconsideration of earlier candidates, including Bishop David Penman . . .' the article said. Archdeacon Girvan 'is considered more "middle of the road"' in churchmanship terms, the article continued. Girvan was quoted extensively in the article, indicating that the Board was 'looking at other candidates' other than Grant and Hollingworth. The minutes of the Burnley meeting note that 'feelings of consternation and hilarity were expressed' at the reading of the article.

The upshot of the meeting was a letter to the Board, calling for it to be dissolved. The letter, signed by Dr Sharwood, included a formal resolution, passed unanimously:

This meeting affirms that the decision to elect an archbishop for the Diocese of Melbourne, given its provincial and national significance, ought in no way be made in haste or under any sense of duress. However, in the present situation this meeting of clergy and laity express (sic) their concern that any candidate now elected by this present Electoral Board [underlining in original] might not enjoy the full confidence and support of the Diocese and could be seen as an unsatisfactory compromise. We therefore urge the members of the Electoral Board to cause the Electoral Board to be dissolved under section 14 of the Act and allow a new Electoral Board to be elected by the Synod.

It is clear both from the formal Burnley meeting minutes and the original handwritten notes that the meeting was fully informed about the Board's decisions and deliberations. At the outset, the meeting was told that, in a vote at the latest Board meeting, Bishop Penman had gained majority support from the laity and was one vote short in the clergy. That was indeed the result at the Board meeting held on 28 March, when a vote was taken between Penman and Grant. The two bishops had each gained three votes from the clergy; Penman had gained four lay votes to Grant's two votes.<sup>17</sup> Hollingworth's votes had been transferred to Penman, the Burnley meeting notes claim, describing what someone present at the meeting claimed was the 'erratic movement of the Electoral Board under pressure', resulting in an outcome that was 'hurtful' both to Peter Hollingworth and James Grant.

The Burnley meeting, then, was called specifically to pressure the Board to resign, presumably in the hope that a new Board would then elect either Grant or Hollingworth rather than Penman. According to the minutes, after an introductory statement from Dr Sharwood, the meeting's discussion opened with the

<sup>16</sup>Search for the next Archbishop seems to have widened', by Olga Fernley. *The Age*, 7 April 1984, p.18.

<sup>17</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 18, 28 March 1984.

foreshadowing of the motion calling on the Board to resign. While the resolution was eventually passed unanimously, there was more disquiet than the vote suggested, according to the original notes for the minutes. Some present were concerned about the tactic, saying they were reluctant to be there 'for fear of further pressuring the Electoral Board'. An unnamed person or persons at the meeting countered that view by claiming that there was 'strong feeling within the Electoral Board that it should resign', a claim the Board minutes do not bear out at that stage.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the Board member or members providing information to the organizers of the Burnley meeting wanted the Board to resign to prevent the election of David Penman. However, as at least one person at the Burnley meeting commented, a call for the Board to resign might ensure that the 'reverse' would happen: the Board might 'dig its toes in'. And that is what did happen.

On the following Monday morning, *The Age* ran a comprehensive report of the Burnley meeting.<sup>19</sup> Dr Sharwood was quoted extensively, noting concern that there had been 'an almost wholesale transfer of support from Canon Hollingworth to Bishop Penman'. He continued: 'What this shift shows is that the board has gotten to the end of its capacity to examine the possibilities in a sensible fashion'. That was an extraordinary claim, if indeed it was an accurate report of Dr Sharwood's comment to the reporter.<sup>20</sup> *The Age* report says that a copy of the Burnley meeting resolution had been delivered to all members of the Board the previous evening. The press release from the Burnley meeting must have been delivered to *The Age* at the same time.

The Board was not due to meet again until the following week, but under this enormous and unprecedented political pressure, it called an emergency meeting for Tuesday 10 April. Its minutes show that the meeting was possibly intended to bring forward an election, in reaction to the Burnley meeting, given that the minutes contain an outline of the procedure to be followed once an election had occurred. There is no indication it considered resigning, as the Burnley meeting had demanded.<sup>21</sup>

In the event, an election was deferred. To elect would look as if it had indeed been pressured by the fuss; the person elected would have been elected in less than auspicious circumstances, members said.<sup>22</sup> And once again, the result was speedily reported in the press.<sup>23</sup> It is not clear whether this was the result of a leak from the Board, or whether Professor Westfold, who was quoted in the article, had initiated the press contact. 'We're going to stay in office until we finish the job we were

<sup>18</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 18, 28 March 1984.

<sup>19</sup>'Anglicans split over election of archbishop', by Olga Fernley. *The Age*, 9 April 1984, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>The Diocesan Chancellor, Justice Clive Tadjell, wrote to Dr Sharwood on 9 April remonstrating with him for his comments in that morning's *Age*. He was concerned that the publicity was 'calculated to undermine the Board' and was by extension, denigrating the diocese. It was inappropriate 'coming from one in your position in the Diocese'. In reply on 11 April, Dr Sharwood said the article 'did not accurately reflect . . . what I had thought to be the careful statements I had made to the reporter'. Copies of both letters were provided to Professor Westfold.

<sup>21</sup>Electoral Board minutes, extraordinary meeting 18A, 10 April 1984.

<sup>22</sup>Electoral Board minutes, extraordinary meeting 18A, 10 April 1984.

<sup>23</sup>'Church Electoral Board rejects call to quit over bishop selection', by Olga Fernley. *The Age*, 12 April 1984, p.3.

elected to do', he is quoted as saying. Although the Board had been subjected to 'intense pressure to reach a decision', it still enjoyed the confidence of the diocese and would announce their decision in their own time, he said.

The Burnley meeting caused considerable controversy around the diocese. The editor of an independent weekly Anglican newspaper *Church Scene*, Gerald Davis, was clearly furious, as can be seen from an article he published in his paper. The struggle on the Board was not a 'naked churchmanship struggle', he insisted. Rather, the struggle, he said, 'from the viewpoint of a minority', was 'about status, power, influence and the preservation of power groupings from recent times'. These people, he wrote without naming anyone,

have tendentially leaked selected information from an early stage in the election process. The appearance of a churchmanship row is their achievement . . . the perpetrators have been of a single broad churchmanship tradition, in fact a 'Clayton's churchmanship', which has much to do with a long stewardship of power and securing its needs in administration, than vision or ideals.<sup>24</sup>

The Anglo-Catholics, he claimed, were already preparing a voting ticket for a new Board should it be required, but the Evangelicals were not 'because they have not perceived the struggle as about churchmanship'.<sup>25</sup> It is not hard to guess that Davis was targeting Grant in his attack.

Following meetings of the Board show that the Burnley meeting and the publicity it had generated were causing significant debate. With Penman still clearly in focus, Grant's supporters were still agitating for the Board to resign. Other members insisted the Burnley meeting was not so influential in the diocese. Some claimed the diocese was riven with disunity; others did not agree. Penman was still being described as a 'novice' by the Grant supporters. Other names were being canvassed, and Hollingworth's name re-emerged in the straw voting.<sup>26</sup>

A clearly pained David Penman wrote to all members of the Board on 5 May.<sup>27</sup> The 'hurtful and callous campaign' conducted against him in 'some sections of the church and community' gave him a 'special obligation' to express his disquiet to the Board, he wrote. He continued:

For selective leaks to have occurred at crucial stages of the Electoral Board's progress can only be seen as deliberative and mischievous. I am aware of these and of some of their sources and must express to you all my deep sense of dismay at such a disregard for confidentiality and integrity . . . at no stage did [he and his family] ever dream there could be such maliciousness and aggression between brothers and sisters in Christ as we now all know has occurred.

<sup>24</sup>*Church Scene*, 18 May 1984, p.1.

<sup>25</sup>*Church Scene*, 18 May 1984, p.1.

<sup>26</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meetings 19, 16 April 1984, and 21, 3 May 1984.

<sup>27</sup>Letter from Bishop David Penman to Professor Keven Westfold, dated 5 May 1984. A typed note added: 'Individual copies to all members of the Electoral Board'.



He echoed Gerald Davis's claim that moves were afoot in preparation for the election of a new Board:

You should also know that a certain unrepresentative minority within our Diocese, which has already brought us all some unsavoury publicity, plan a meeting towards the election of a new Board, within the next few days, well before the Board meets again and finishes its task. This is a cynical and divisive decision and a rejection of all that proper and ordered government within the church implies.

He added: 'I know of no other "group" or "faction" within the Diocese that has acted with such disregard for our procedures'.

There is no extant evidence of any further moves by the Burnley agitators as suggested by both Gerald Davis and David Penman. If any such move was mooted, it came to nothing.

The same meeting of the Board that received Penman's letter on 21 May, elected him. A final straw vote between Penman and Hollingworth saw the votes evenly divided. Four clergy supported Hollingworth, and four laity supported Penman. After separate discussions within the separate 'houses' of clergy and laity, all the lay members decided to support Penman, while two of the clergy who had supported Hollingworth, changed to Penman. When the final formal vote was held, Penman was elected unanimously.<sup>28</sup>

Although the minutes of the meeting recorded that there was an 'information embargo to be kept by all members until procedures have been completed' with a possible announcement to be made the following Wednesday, leakage happened one final time. Before the announcement could be made formally, the Wednesday edition of *The Age* led its front page with the report that 'Anglicans elect Penman as their new archbishop'.<sup>29</sup> 'Church sources yesterday said that the 12-member committee commissioned to find an archbishop reached a decision late on Monday night', the article said, noting that the announcement was to be made that day. The decision was 'likely to provoke controversy within the church', it said.

While it is possible that the leak came from the persons who had to be informed of the decision in advance – the Chancellor of the Diocese and the bishops of the other dioceses in the province of Victoria, among others – it is highly improbable that they were the source. *The Age* article repeated the kind of criticisms about Penman that had been aired at Board meetings, and among Grant's supporters in the Diocese. 'He is seen as standing well within the "evangelical" camp, along with the Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Donald Robinson. The church in Sydney takes a strong stand against the ordination of women, and is characterised by a more fundamentalist approach to church belief', the article claimed. This claim, from an unidentified source or sources, could not have been further from the truth, as subsequent events made clear. The article quoted Gerald Davis, the editor of *Church*

<sup>28</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 22, 21 May 1984.

<sup>29</sup>'Anglicans elect Penman as their new archbishop', by Olga Fernley. *The Age*, Wednesday 23 May 1984, p.1.

Scene, as saying that 'many of the people who had reservations about Bishop Penman' were 'ill-informed'.

Penman was indeed the disrupter that some had feared. The day after the formal announcement of his election, *The Sun* newspaper headlined its report with 'Penman to rewrite the rules'.<sup>30</sup> The rules he wanted to rewrite according to the article were those governing the election of an archbishop. It was, he said, a 'priority task'. 'The electoral methods used this time must be altered irrevocably so that we will not have this problem again', he said. 'The process has been unhelpful to unity'. The problem he identified was that the process had taken such a long time, reaching a stage where people were saying that 'the person finally elected would be the last wombat left'. He added: 'I feel like a wombat today'. (From then on, wombats became a kind of totem for him.)

In reality, the problem was not that the election took so long. Taking just under ten months, it was not at all unusual. The 1956 election of Frank Woods, under the same process, had taken eleven months.<sup>31</sup> Later elections by the new synodical electoral process Penman introduced have taken even longer. Keith Rayner was not enthroned as Archbishop of Melbourne until December 1990, nearly fifteen months after Penman's early death. It was the leakage from the Board and the external agitating that the leakages provoked that were the real issue.

Penman's comment that he felt like the last wombat standing suggests he also felt his election did not have a high level of support in the Diocese, whereas he believed a synod election would ensure this support. Perhaps he had imbibed the claim of the diocesan agitators who had claimed in the resolution of the Burnley meeting that 'any candidate now elected by this present Electoral Board might not enjoy the full confidence and support of the Diocese and could be seen as an unsatisfactory compromise'. But he was not the last wombat standing in the election Board process, as has been seen. His name was one of the top five names considered by the Board from the outset, and his name rarely dropped off their radar. In any case, synodical elections are not indicators of widespread support. The synodical elections of Melbourne archbishops since Penman's time have been heavily contested churchmanship bouts, requiring two election rounds on two occasions.

In the first interview following his election, Penman quickly dispelled some of the claims that had been made about him. He told Rex Lopez of *The Sun* that he stood for the ordination of women, coming as he did from the church in New Zealand where women's ordination was 'a normal part of life', and that he was a 'liberal Evangelical', clearly repudiating the claim that he would draw Melbourne Diocese into the anti-women fundamentalism of the Diocese of Sydney.<sup>32</sup>

From the beginning of his archiepiscopate, he made clear that he would be a campaigner on many fronts, firmly entering the 'social gospel' space. In his enthronement sermon on 28 July, he called on the church 'to treat with increasing seriousness the demands for justice and fair play from many groups in our society'. He denounced racism and declared he was 'firmly committed to multiculturalism', a commitment he quickly put into practice in the Diocese. He continued: 'Our church

<sup>30</sup>Penman to rewrite the rules', by Rex Lopez. *The Sun*, 24 May 1984, p.3.

<sup>31</sup>Electoral Board minutes, meeting 22, 21 May 1984.

<sup>32</sup>Lopez, 'Penman to re-write the rules'.

and our community have much to answer for in their treatment of many minority groups – and this is especially so for the original inhabitants of this land, our Aboriginal people’.<sup>33</sup>

It did not take long for him to face a conservative backlash in the community. By September he was being castigated for becoming involved in society’s concerns instead of worrying about his church’s ‘empty pews’ by the president of the Victorian Returned Services League, Bruce Ruxton. Mr Ruxton accused him of ‘adopting Leftist political causes’, in particular in relation to justice for Aboriginal people. The Archbishop quickly responded, claiming he was merely repeating the concerns of the Melbourne Synod and that it was ‘outmoded nonsense’ to suggest that the church had no role in community concerns. ‘The church is not going to stand by while any in need in our society are castigated and further deprived’, he said. ‘That would be contrary to the Gospel and our Western democratic way of life, and Mr Ruxton knows that.’ Penman, the article said, had taken a ‘high profile on social issues since his election, saying Australians should find a national sense of social justice and compassion for the under-privileged... a need to end racial intolerance fanned by the immigration debate’ and that ‘his office invited him to speak out on matters of community concern’.<sup>34</sup> No wonder supporters of Peter Hollingworth quickly became supporters of David Penman – he was as much an outspoken advocate for social justice issues as Hollingworth.

Fearless in responding to attacks such as Ruxton’s and quick to speak out on any community issues, he became a press favourite, not least because he always welcomed press contact and treated journalists with a level of friendship and respect they rarely received from community leaders. At press conferences at his home, Bishopscourt in East Melbourne, his wife Jean would hand around tea and coffee and home-made scones – an unexpected and much-appreciated treat. In return, he attracted a high degree of press publicity, which he clearly enjoyed. His death was marked by the kind of press coverage that celebrities or politicians receive. He had exploded onto the Melbourne scene in a way not seen before by any Anglican church leader. Yes, he was a disrupter, disrupting the formal reticence that had always marked the church’s leadership.

The church issue where he was most seriously a disrupter however was the ordination of women, a subject that was rarely discussed by the Board according to the minutes. It was his leadership on that issue that had a profound and decisive impact on the Anglican Church of Australia. From my personal knowledge and experience, it is my belief that neither James Grant nor Peter Hollingworth would have offered the same kind of bold, upfront leadership on that issue. They and some of the Anglo-Catholic leaders who tried to prevent Penman’s election, while they accepted women clergy once their ordination was achieved, never to my knowledge initially displayed the same degree of enthusiasm for this momentous change in the life of the church.

Penman had in fact shown his support for women clergy before the Board met. He was disturbed at the way Archbishop Robert Dann was treated when, in April 1983, he sought the approval of the annual Australian bishops’ conference to allow

<sup>33</sup>‘Penman preaches a multicultural goal’ by Olga Fernley. *The Age*, 30 July 1984, p.3.

<sup>34</sup>‘Ruxton’s prejudices an embarrassment’, by Jane Munday. *The Age*, 4 September 1984, p.3.

him to offer Eucharistic hospitality to the Reverend Joyce Bennett from Hong Kong who was to visit Australia in September. The Australian bishops disapproved powerfully. Penman was disturbed by the tenor of the meeting, feeling that Dann had been treated unsympathetically, even rebuked for his courteous request.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Miss Bennett, forbidden by Archbishop Dann to preside alone, concelebrated the Eucharist at St Stephen's Church, Richmond, alongside the vicar, Archdeacon David Chambers. Her low-key involvement nevertheless led to a storm of angry responses that bubbled away for some months.

The Bennett matter was a turning point for Penman, making him determined to treat women priests from other countries with the same courtesy routinely afforded visiting male clergy. As Archbishop of Melbourne, he took the issue to the 1985 Australian bishops' conference. Though he reported that this time the issue was discussed in an 'open, serious and constructive' way, despite his efforts, he did not win their support. Once again, the cautious bishops insisted that nothing happen until after a possible resolution from either the forthcoming General Synod or the Appellate Tribunal.<sup>36</sup>

Just days before it was due to meet, the 1985 General Synod emerged as a potential watershed, when the Appellate Tribunal effectively ruled that there was nothing in the constitution to prevent the ordination of women, and therefore no legislation was necessary. In other words, there was nothing to stop a bishop from ordaining a woman. Penman, in collaboration with the Archbishop of Perth, Dr Peter Carnley, swung into action, forcing legislation onto the General Synod agenda. As I wrote in 1989, 'such assertive, even aggressive action from bishops was new to the Australian church, used to excessive caution and mild manners from the episcopal bench'. Some church officials dismissed the two archbishops as 'brash new boys'.<sup>37</sup>

It seems that the two archbishops, well aware that the Tribunal's rules meant no legislation was necessary, wanted the General Synod's sanction, if not blessing, for the ordination of women. They did not get it, and though many expected that Penman, Carnley and some other supportive bishops would go ahead and ordain women regardless in the aftermath, that did not happen. It was rumoured at the time that a 'gentleman's agreement', that no bishop would act unilaterally, was engineered among the Australian bishops, presumably to protect the unity of the national church.<sup>38</sup>

The 1985 General Synod did offer a partial way forward, however. It passed legislation for women to be ordained as deacons, the first step towards priesting, and surprisingly, passed it with an overwhelming level of acceptance. Melbourne Diocese was the first to adopt the new legislation; its Synod did so with a 93 per cent majority.<sup>39</sup> In his address to the Synod, Penman announced not only that he would

<sup>35</sup>Muriel Porter, *Women in the Church: The Great Ordination Debate in Australia*, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, pp.100–101.

<sup>36</sup>Muriel Porter, pp.108–109. The Appellate Tribunal, the Australian Anglican Church's highest court, was called on a number of times to determine the constitutional validity of the ordination of women. In 1985, it was once again examining the issues, including hospitality for visiting women priests.

<sup>37</sup>Muriel Porter, p.111.

<sup>38</sup>Muriel Porter, p.115.

<sup>39</sup>The Australian Anglican Church is effectively a federation of dioceses, a mirror of the Australian federation of states. General Synod legislation in most areas, including ordination, does not come into effect

ordain women deacons the following February, but that visiting women priests would be offered the same hospitality as male priests – two ‘firsts’.<sup>40</sup>

The crucial ‘first’ implemented by David Penman was the ordination of Australia’s first women deacons on 9 February 1986. Eight women were ordained in that historic ceremony, but if Penman had not been archbishop, it is doubtful it would have happened. Five days before the ordination – the date for which had been announced the previous October – opponents of women’s ordination mounted a legal challenge. The ordinands were about to enter their ordination retreat when the news broke that thirty members of General Synod had petitioned the Appellate Tribunal to rule that the 1985 legislation was unconstitutional.

The leaders of the move clearly expected that the planned ordination would not go ahead. Penman was ‘morally obliged to desist until the legal doubt (was) resolved’, one said. Penman was furious, particularly because of the timing of the move, given he had given several months’ notice of the planned ordination. He decided to go ahead anyway, the women were duly ordained, and within days, he had appointed one of the new deacons, Marjorie McGregor, as deacon-in-charge of a Melbourne parish.<sup>41</sup>

Other bishops, emboldened by Penman’s courage, quickly moved to ordain women deacons as well. By the time the Appellate Tribunal met in December 1986 to discuss the challenge, the Australian church had twenty-six women deacons across a number of dioceses. In March 1987, the Tribunal ruled six to one that the legislation was constitutionally valid.<sup>42</sup>

The number of women deacons in Australia increased rapidly over the following years. Some were appointed in charge of parishes like Marjorie McGregor. Others became parish curates and school chaplains. Liturgically robed and barely indistinguishable from priests to the non-expert eye, they assisted in Holy Communion services, led other church services and conducted baptism, wedding and funeral services. So quite quickly, Australian Anglicans in the dioceses that had adopted the 1985 General Synod legislation became used to the reality of women clergy. The support for women priests in those dioceses sky-rocketed. This undoubtedly paved the way for the eventual acceptance of women priests through General Synod legislation in November 1992. Not that that final, successful General Synod legislation came easily. Conservative opponents continued their opposition, aided by the church’s constitution which gives great power to minorities. In the end, it was only won because the other ‘brash bishop’, Peter Carnley, had ordained Australia’s first women priests unilaterally in Perth in March that year, making a mockery of continuing opposition.<sup>43</sup>

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in a diocese unless the diocese’s synod adopts it. The 1992 General Synod legislation for women priests is still not in place in three dioceses – Sydney and two dioceses aligned to Sydney, Armidale NSW, and North-West Australia.

<sup>40</sup>Muriel Porter, pp.119–125

<sup>41</sup>Muriel Porter, p.120

<sup>42</sup>General Synod, Anglican Church of Australia. Report of the Appellate Tribunal Re Ordination of Women to the Office of Deacon Canon 1985, 4 March 1987. ‘The Tribunal (Archbishop D.W.B. Robinson dissenting) has held the canon to be valid . . . This decision of the Appellate Tribunal upholds the validity of the ordination of those women who have been made deacons under the provisions of the canon.’

<sup>43</sup>Perth Synod had passed diocesan legislation for women priests; it survived a last-minute court challenge, allowing the first Australian women priests to be ordained in Perth on 7 March 1992.

If Penman had not been Archbishop of Melbourne in 1985–86 – if one of the other leading candidates had been archbishop – it is highly unlikely that first women deacons' ordination would have proceeded as early as it did and, crucially, in the face of the legal challenge. It took a 'brash bishop', a disruptor, to make that brave move.

And without Melbourne's initiative, other dioceses would almost certainly have crumpled. There would have been no women deacons until after the Tribunal brought down its decision in March 1987, and perhaps not even then. We have to ask – would it have been the same decision? Who knows whether the fact of so many women already ordained across the country influenced its outcome? A decision invalidating the 1985 legislation in the face of all those women deacons already ministering would have been an extremely hard call. We will never know.

It is unlikely that either Grant or Hollingworth would have pushed so hard and so creatively for women clergy in those early years. The eventual ordination of women priests would have occurred – there was too much pressure across the church and among other bishops for it not to have happened – but it might well have taken several more years, perhaps as much as a decade longer.

Penman continued his fight to see women ordained as priests after the failure of a special meeting of General Synod, held in 1987 in another attempt to pass legislation. A motion was brought to the 1987 Melbourne Synod in response to the General Synod failure, calling on him to act unilaterally. It was surprisingly successful, beyond the expectations even of the movers.<sup>44</sup> It achieved 62 per cent majority support, although all the diocese's regional bishops, including Penman's erstwhile competitors James Grant and Peter Hollingworth, voted against it.<sup>45</sup> (Hollingworth had been made a regional diocesan bishop by Penman in 1985.)

Penman was not afraid of the many threats made to him and other diocesan bishops of the dire consequences they might face if they took any unilateral action. At one stage, pro-women bishops received letters from at least one lawyer threatening legal action that would severely impact their diocesan finances if they made any such moves. Where others retreated, Penman's response was to say he would see them in court.

Following the 1987 motion, Penman decided he would go ahead, though not as early as had been hoped by the motion's movers and backers. He decided on a middle course, announcing he would ordain women priests in February 1990, backed by enabling legislation to be brought to the 1988 Melbourne Synod. That legislation duly passed and was sent off to the Appellate Tribunal to ensure it was constitutionally safe – a security check that was part of the legislation. It was hoped the Tribunal would move quickly to settle any doubts. That was not the case – the Tribunal took more than a year to reach its decision that the act did not conform to Melbourne Diocese's constitution. The Tribunal's decision was clear: it was 'satisfied that the Synod of the Diocese of Melbourne had no constitutional power to pass the Ordination of Women to the Office of Priest Act 1988'.<sup>46</sup> Sadly, when the Tribunal's

<sup>44</sup>The motion was moved by Muriel Porter, with the Reverend Dr Charles Sherlock seconding.

<sup>45</sup>Muriel Porter, pp.133–136.

<sup>46</sup>Anglican Church of Australia, Appellate Tribunal 1989, 'Report and Opinion of the Tribunal on the "Ordination of Women to the Office of Priest Act 1988" of the Synod of the Diocese of Melbourne', p.32. Melbourne Diocesan Synod, initially called an 'assembly', was formed in 1854, one of the earliest Anglican

disappointing report landed on 2 November 1989, David Penman was dead. He had died on 1 October, some weeks after suffering a massive heart attack.

In the event, Melbourne had to wait until General Synod finally passed legislation enabling the priesting of women in November 1992. Melbourne's first ordination of women priests occurred on 13 December that year, the second diocese after Adelaide on 5 December.

There were a number of other bishops who campaigned hard to see women ordained in the Anglican Church of Australia, but as I said in 1991, when the issue was still not resolved, 'he put the whole church on notice in a way that no-one had done before. . . . He initiated, challenged and pushed, again and again'.<sup>47</sup>

From this perspective alone, the 1984 election of the 'disruptor' David Penman was highly significant not only for the Diocese of Melbourne but also for the Anglican Church of Australia.

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While it is possible that a local candidate will be elected archbishop in 2025 as happened in 1984, it is highly unlikely. Since 1984, archbishops have been elected from outside the diocese – from Adelaide, Sydney, and the Northern Territory.<sup>48</sup> So it is not likely it will be a contest between known favourites. The contest this time will be clearly on churchmanship grounds, though not the usual Evangelical versus Anglo-Catholic division. Given the strength of the Evangelicals in Melbourne at present, the successful candidate will almost certainly be Evangelical, with the contest between liberal and conservative Evangelicals. The main division will be over the same-sex issues currently in play in other parts of the Anglican Communion. Given the conservatism of most Melbourne Evangelicals, the next archbishop will not be likely to authorize the blessing of same-sex marriages, as is possible under a ruling of the Appellate Tribunal.<sup>49</sup> Will the next archbishop at least be tolerant of clergy and laity in same-sex relationships, as is the case at present in Melbourne? Or will they be a member of, or fellow traveller with, GAFCON, with consequent hardline views about same-sex unions?

At least it is reasonably safe to assume that the next archbishop will support, and even promote, the ordination of women as priests and bishops. At the time of the election, Melbourne Diocese's senior regional bishop, a woman, will be

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diocesan synods in the world. Its founding legislation, 'An Act to enable the bishops, clergy and laity of the United Church of England and Ireland in Victoria to provide for the regulation of the affairs of the said Church', passed by the Parliament of Victoria on 30 November 1854, known as 'The 1854 Act' is, unsurprisingly, very limited.

<sup>47</sup>Alan Nichols, *David Penman: Bridge-builder, Peacemaker, Fighter for Social Justice*, Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1991, p.203.

<sup>48</sup>Keith Rayner, Archbishop of Adelaide, elected to Melbourne 1990; Peter Watson, regional bishop in Sydney, elected to Melbourne 2000; Philip Freier, Bishop of the Northern Territory, elected to Melbourne 2006.

<sup>49</sup>In 2020, the Appellate Tribunal ruled that the blessing service for married same-sex couples approved by the synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta, a regional diocese in Victoria, Australia, was authorized by the General Synod Canon Concerning Services 1992, and was not 'inconsistent with the Fundamental Declarations and Ruling Principles of the Constitution of the Church'. Appellate Tribunal of the Anglican Church of Australia, 'Primates' references re Wangaratta Blessing Service', 11 November 2020. It is believed that numbers of services using the Wangaratta liturgy have since been held quietly in different parts of Australia under this authority.

administering the diocese, and there will be two serving women bishops in the diocese as well. According to the latest available figures, women priests currently make up more than a quarter of the total active priests in the diocese.<sup>50</sup> Hopefully, those levels will continue into the future, honouring the legacy of one of women clergy's greatest champions, David Penman.

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<sup>50</sup>*The Anglican Church of Australia Directory 2022/23*, Mulgrave, Vic: Broughton Publishing, 2022, p.26.