

When religion mattered

In days when religion mattered in England it was thought that a priest should not also be an MP, or if you prefer, that an MP should not also be a priest. Each of these high vocations must, it was felt, be all-consuming of the energies of one human life. The same man (it was always of course a man) could not conscientiously do both jobs.

Hence the passing of the House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801, brought into law because a remarkable Church of England priest, Horne Tooke, won a parliamentary election for the unreformed rotten borough of Old Sarum.

Times have changed, and on February 6 the House of Commons gave a Bill to repeal this archaic measure (as it is now described) an unopposed second reading. MPs pontificated, one way or another, and there was some doubtful historical scholarship on display.

It reminded me of that time when the Bill to disestablish the Welsh Church was introduced and the barrister F. E. Smith, later Lord Chancellor Birkenhead (Conservative), wrung his hands at the spiritual loss this would entail. It was, he said, a Bill "which has shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe". The Roman Catholic poet G. K. Chesterton famously riposted-

It would greatly, I must own,
Soothe me, Smith!
If you left this theme alone,
Holy Smith!
For your legal cause or civil
You fight well and get your fee
For your God or dream or devil
You will answer, not to me.
Talk about the pews and steeples
And the Cash that goes therewith!
But the souls of Christian peoples . . .
Chuck it, Smith!

What would Chesterton have made of the fact that the present Bill was brought forward to suit the convenience of one man? He is Mr. David Cairns, a former Catholic priest who wishes to stand as the Labour candidate for Greenock and Inverclyde at the next election. The Government spokesman moving the second reading, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department Mr. Mike O'Brien, confessed as much, adding "[t]he case of David Cairns is clearly the reason for the Bill".

Mr Eric Forth (Conservative) said this was "completely and grotesquely unfair". Another Conservative, Mr Robert Key, slyly observed that the last MP on whose behalf a change in the law was specially engineered was Neil Hamilton, who promptly lost his seat. A third Conservative, Mr Gerald Howarth, pointed out that the Government spokesman had failed to disclose that Mr Cairns is employed by the House of Commons, and is moreover the paid researcher of a Labour MP. The Government spokesman found no difficulty in shrugging all that off.

Miss Anne Widdecombe MP spoke for the Conservatives. She has been a Roman Catholic convert for all of seven years, and spoke with the enthusiasm of a convert. "I do not believe", she said, "that being a Member of Parliament is compatible with the priestly vocation. Like the priesthood, it involves a huge commitment, both in this Chamber and outside. I do not believe that a Member of Parliament could represent constituents adequately while continuing to serve as a full-time priest, or that a priest could administer to his flock adequately while undertaking duties as a full-time Member of Parliament".

Then Miss Widdicombe touched on an interesting aspect. She suggested that in an earlier intervention Mr Eric Forth (Conservative) had hinted "that people of my persuasion are somehow dominated by some interesting European power, rather than by the monarch and Parliament". This was of course a reference to the Pope, who has for many centuries bedevilled religious affairs in England.

Mr David Winnick (Labour) here enquired whether Mr Forth was suggesting that Catholics are not loyal to the United Kingdom or have a wider loyalty to an outside force? Mr Forth said that was a matter for Catholics. Mr Winnick retorted that his questioning of Roman Catholic loyalty to this country "was surely unacceptable and, indeed, downright disgraceful".

In agreeing with Mr Winnick on this the Government spokesman overlooked one significant fact, which is this. Any religious devotee who rightly or wrongly believes that his or her faith possesses supreme truth in the higher realms of the universe must necessarily put all that above merely earthy secular values such as loyalty to a Monarch It stands to reason.

I leave the final word with a prominent Conservative Privy Councillor.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Although the Minister has not been prepared to tell the House the date by which he wants the legislation to pass, we have now discovered that it is a rush job and that the Government failed to think about the matter in good time. Now they suddenly have a problem and they are trying to rush the Bill through before the general election.

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