



An Inside Verdict

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Introduction: *Outside Verdict*

When Andrew McLellan challenged the Church of Scotland to expose its ways to an outside verdict, I think he meant us to learn new things about ourselves, things we had not thought or grasped before. When Harry Reid published the resulting book, we discovered instead things we hadn't dreamed of about the way the Church is regarded and the assumptions made about it. *Outside Verdict* is a mixture of ideas, some irresistibly sensible and some charmingly daft; but all of them well-meant and affectionate.

In this contribution I shall address only the least important issues in the book, about the central administration of the Church and the way we organise leadership and decision-making. I focus on these because of the advantageous perspective of my current brief spell as Acting Principal Clerk; but my comments are wholly personal and do not imply any policy or intent amongst Assembly officials, and I certainly do not intend to speak for the current Moderator (and regular Clerk), Finlay Macdonald.

For the more substantive issues, of preaching and inspiring and bringing the story of the Gospel to the community of Scotland and beyond, I look to my fellow-contributors, hoping that we do not duplicate each other's targets or, worse still, each other's opinions. And for those who rightly suspect that I would be more likely to look inside the Church for inspiration, I recommend our most significant piece of writing in recent years, *A Church without Walls*¹, and its accompanying workbook². Those publications are the real 'inside' verdict on future growth and change; and though they are not theological tomes or academically researched, they articulate the passion many feel for their duty to minister creatively as the Church to the world.

Yet it is a delight to be able to be one of those personal voices in this debate. The launch of the book at Assembly-tide this year made it difficult and inappropriate for the officers of that court to take part in the very public early stages of the resulting debate: difficult for simple reasons of pressure of time, and inappropriate because a point-by-point refutation of the bits we disliked would rather smack, if not of censorship, then at least of censorship! So the Principal Clerk's and Media Relations Offices took one of those damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't decisions to let the debate run first in the wider Church, and here now is a chance to bring a more inside perspective.

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Leadership and Distinctiveness

Harry Reid is right to worry that the Church of Scotland lacks the quality and depth of leadership, and the courage of distinctiveness, which must be the guarantee and mark of a spiritual organisation. For these we look first – rightly or wrongly – to the ordained ministry (including the diaconate) and the eldership. The former of these is over-stretched, and the latter badly utilised, and I'm glad to say the Church knows it and is tackling it.

The Ministry

Harry Reid has an encouraging sympathy for ministers and recognises the difficult demands upon them. Let me offer a complementary view to his own, but perhaps more that of an insider.

There are two kinds of professional jobs: the ones other people admire with awe and deference and the kind most people think they could do with no training. The first category includes medicine, dentistry, engineering and possibly law. The second includes teaching, social work and the ministry. Parents often think they are equipped to criticise the work of their children's teachers; the chattering classes think they know about the complexities of social work; and people in and beyond the Church have strong opinions about the work of ministers.

Recently in our Church, this has fused with a perfectly healthy desire by ministers and other leaders to equip and enable Church members

and elders to take a greater part in the formal activities of the Church, especially its public worship, not least in order to relieve the pressure on an overworked ordained ministry. The motivation is well-meant, and much of the reasoning is sound, but the Church is struggling to identify necessary areas of expertise that require professional training and is in danger of concluding that there are none. Until a few years ago it was generally accepted that some elements of the work of the ministry – including most preaching, all conduct of sacramental worship, leadership of all Church courts – should be reserved to those with the depth of training given to the ordained full-time ministry. Now there is a strong thread of opinion amongst policy-formers that none of these tasks should be sacrosanct, and that the unique contribution of the professional ministry is limited to theological thinking, congregational enabling and the full-time combining of those skills and tasks that are exercised by others in the Church only in their spare time.

The same Church that applauds the high standards of training demanded by the Board of Ministry of candidates for ordination, is beginning to take decisions that beg the question what difference that training makes. This is a huge shift for a Church with a tradition of a highly-trained ministry, and one that many of us are finding big to swallow. It may be an argument that has run ahead to its practical conclusions without waiting to be checked against proper arguments in theology (e.g. the real implications of the priesthood of all believers) and Church polity. It is certainly not universally welcome. I have not used the phrase ‘dumbing down’ because it is obviously pejorative, but it is a constant fear and worry of mine about the Church.

The Eldership

It is clear then that I prefer a model of ministry and eldership that is complementary, not entirely overlapping, and so little need be said that is not implied in the previous section. *Outside Verdict*³ yearns for an enhanced role for elders, though I would myself prefer the language of improvement rather than enhancement. The very ablest elders have lives stuffed full of the service of Christ, through demanding jobs, absorbing family lives and worthwhile community engagement; not



necessarily through the institutional Church. Most of them are not asking to do more: most of them are not, in fact, doing too little. But most of them are asked only to provide management and administration and the very vaguest of pastoral attention to Church members; and few of them are confident in Christian leadership, praying and encouraging others to pray, living distinctive lives of Christian virtue and inspiring others to emulate them, getting to grips with necessary change and working to remove the fear of change that others may use as an excuse. I cannot see how it will help elders to do their real task well, if we load onto them tasks that are beyond their equipping, the tasks that require theological depth and rigour and sophistication, the tasks that belong to a profession that simply is not theirs. They have enough of a challenge to be all they can be within our traditional expectations of them; they do not need another set of burdens.

Aunt Sally

The leadership of women in the Church⁴, through both eldership and ministry, is more than a generation old, but that is no time at all in the Church's long life. There are still lots of people in local churches who have to undergo the re-assuring experience of attending for the first time a Sunday service, a wedding, a sacrament or a funeral conducted by a woman, where they lose their uncertainty, their fear or their prejudice. There are still lots of courts in the Church that have to turn from over-masculine forms of debate and engagement towards gentler, more thoughtful ways of gathering views and talking things through. There are still lots of individuals, some of whom should certainly know better, who need to overcome a bashfulness around women that too often slips out in silly comments or silly attitudes.

Many people look to the Moderatorship of the General Assembly for the final validation and affirmation of those changes, and many are angry to find that no woman has yet been elected Moderator. I am not sure there has been an constitutional injustice or a statistical failure in this. The job is usually given to ministers of about 25 years' ordained experience, and the nominee is chosen from a field of hundreds of eligible individuals. The range of women (ministers and elders alike) who have the length and depth of experience the Church looks for is

tiny still – a randomly selected, equally small group of middle-aged men would be just as likely not to produce a Moderatorial nominee – and so I believe the experience we have had is quite a natural statistical outcome.

But women like me, in the earlier part of our ordained service, look up to the most able of our seniors and hope that one of them will be nominated soon, and not as a token, and not as an Aunt Sally. When she takes the chair, I hope most people will be quietly pleased, and not make a fuss that becomes a burden to her.

Two Red Herrings: Manses and Overseas Charges

Somebody should answer the alarming suggestions Harry has made about where exactly we should expect to find our ministers living, so it might as well be me.

He believes the case for selling all manses is self-evident. Of the many reasons it is not, three seem particularly clear: first, congregations and ministers have not had the financial and strategic arguments explained to them in detail and their informed opinion sought; second, the expert financial advice within the Church is that the liquidation of these heritable assets could not produce in interest the compensation in remuneration that ministers would need; and thirdly, the territorial ministry of the parish system cannot be well served by the vagaries of a housing market, partly because that affects the recruitment of ministers to certain charges at the extremes of the economic scale, and partly because many ministers will be seriously dislocated from the parishes they are meant to serve and hampered in their mobility through their careers. If and when this change comes, it will not be quick or simple, or a single-stroke change throughout the Church.

The other issue is the overseas charges.⁵ In the places where these congregations are financially self-supporting (more or less all of them) they are no drain on the resources of the Church, and cater for a mixture of exiled Scots and English-speaking Presbyterians who are delighted to adhere to the expression of faith that is our tradition. In the places



where ministers overseas are supported by the Church at home, they serve in places richly deserving our compassionate generosity. If overseas locations employ ministers envied by vacant charges at home, why begrudge them? There are many charges abroad whose native Scottish Presbyterian membership is far larger than that of lots of Scottish island charges that are supported increasingly by in-comers from England and elsewhere. My feeling is, leave them alone: Harry Reid has touched a raw nerve of reaction, which does not need to be further irritated.

T Decision-making in the Church

There is lots of talk about national decision-making in the Church, and *Outside Verdict* sums up much of the criticism we hear. It is always true in the Church (and parish ministers especially will recognise this) that the voices of the content are much quieter than those of the complaining; listening to both is a difficult skill and an important mandate, and so the people who know how to make an Assembly work need to be allowed to hear all the voices and distil all the ideas.

The General Assembly

Let me begin with some helpful distinctions in analysing the General Assembly. It has a shell (opening ceremony, presence of crown representative, reception of delegates, communion, satellite social events, closing ceremony) and it has substantive content (reports, debates, decisions, cases): one of these might be altered without the other necessarily being affected. It has routine business (noting the work of departments, approving administrative regulations, acknowledging tasks completed, disseminating necessary information) and Church-changing business (affirming beliefs, changing directions, adopting major policy, passing significant legislation): the best way of dealing with the first of these does not, I concede, necessarily form the best way of doing the second. There are some sorts of decisions that are best made by plebiscite (e.g. the calling of a minister) and there are sorts of decisions that are best made by a conventionally Presbyterian process, i.e. through the spiritual leadership of the Church

(e.g. matters of doctrine or improvements to procedures): each of these is democratic, but they are different.

This is where I fear that an undue flattening or confusion of categories could make the Assembly either ineffective or terribly dull. For instance I do not agree that the Assembly is harmed by considering complex legislation, because that is often where the big statements of policy and conviction lie (for example the recent consolidating Act on the Sacraments). I don't agree that legislating is a process beyond most commissioners to understand – it takes me about half an hour to teach candidates for the ministry the half-a-dozen Latin tags and the dozen or so specialist terms that will save them a lifetime of extensive and potentially ambiguous contemporary equivalents, and that's easy enough to do for other decision-makers.⁶ And I am not an enthusiast for conference sessions, which in my experience have the time and mechanisms to deal with only the broadest generalities or the tiniest amounts of detail.

But I have no doubt that we will be able to continue the organic change of recent years. Just as most judicial functions are these days diverted to other bodies, for sake of fairness and time-tabling, so I can imagine the Assembly being liberated in due course from some of its more routine business, and so becoming better able to attend to interesting and provocative debates and themes. That would make possible lots of good things: a reduction in the total length of the Assembly, for instance, and space for the kinds of conference sessions that may help more people to feel they have taken part in the event – though these can be no substitute for business, policy-making and accountability formally conducted in measured ways and with the rules of fairness that are rightly our standard.

Increasing the informal elements would, I am told, assist some commissioners who are daunted by the process, confused by the content and anxious to find fellowship. Our Youth Representatives, even the newest ones, can teach us how to change the bath-water without jettisoning the baby; they have got to grips with the Assembly as it is,



working as a team to become friends, think through the issues and challenge each other on policy. They look undaunted, and they always manage to have fun throughout their week. If they can do it, the rest of us can and, I'm sure, will.

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The Crown, and the Capital

And because familiarity with process and surroundings contribute so much to our getting the best out of people, I think the Assembly Hall is a great asset to our process. Lots of commentators, including Harry Reid, suggest a peripatetic Assembly⁷ without quite persuading me that there is any reason to do so. Visiting another Church's Assembly that had moved from state to state within Australia, I discovered an empty public gallery and no press. The Assembly was just another conference with delegates flown in, and only at the opening celebration were local parishioners drafted in to make a big show. The local arrangements committee, like every one of its predecessors, were extemporising madly, with daily crisis meetings throughout the week as unpredicted problems arose, and the permanent Assembly officials were undertaking a complex task in a strange town.

Our Assembly is such a big machine that not even our staff could identify all the benefits we have in the constancy of our annual routine. Our 200 stewards who know exactly what to do in corridors, cloakrooms, first-aid rooms, administrative tasks and support of officials; our World Mission and Ecumenical Relations staff welcoming, transporting, entertaining and looking after delegates; the people who run the bookstall, look after the Youth Reps, see to the catering; the printers who give us an extensive overnight service; and the technical experts from 121 who make the clever kit work, all these can run the Assembly in their sleep (and I fear some of them do when nerves are wracked). Perhaps it would be better, then, if other things became our road-show: Commissions of Assembly, or the other substantial bits I indicated above might safely splinter off from the main event, or the conference sessions that prepare people for the main debates that come later in the process.

Most of all, I would be disappointed if the Queen's representative were left to chase round the country after the General Assembly. In one way, *Outside Verdict* is right to suspect there is something out-of-date about the Lord High Commissioner's appointment⁸, because neither the Church nor the Crown believes any more in a right of royal scrutiny over our doings. But what grace and generosity there is in the courtesies so effortlessly exchanged between the gathering that represents the national Church and the suite that represents the nation's sovereignty; what affirmation that gives of the recognition we have as a body and not just as individual people or parishes; what a dignified way it is of reminding us to be a Church that goes beyond its own walls to engage with society at every level.

Doing things as we do them now seems to me to be the best stewardship of the resources our ancestors have left us. I find it sobering to begin to estimate the number of parish ministers currently employed with the sum of money we save by using our own space, our existing expertise and the local goodwill and human machinery. If the argument for travelling gains ground, it will be necessary to see a balance-sheet of advantages against costs – the advantages seem rather insubstantial and unproven in the debate so far.

121 George Street

The debate about moving out of George Street seems to me to be one of the most finely-balanced of them all.⁹ If I am selfish and ask what is most convenient for me, I rather like the idea of living in a cheaper town and driving to a reserved car-parking space. If I am unselfish and ask what is best for the mission of the Church, I see the sense of being near the seat of government and other national institutions and accessible to Church visitors coming to the capital city for their business and meetings.

What clouds the debate is the combination of arguments about location and size, and the size of the central administration is quite another issue. The Church of Scotland compares favourably with other



voluntary agencies in spending only about 5% of its Mission and Aid income on things like pensions administration, media relations work, legal advice, financial administration, with all the rest going into parish resourcing and national policy and engagement work.

Two kinds of reduction in size are suggested: the number of staff or the number of agencies. To do the former, critics would have to suggest which of my colleagues should be made redundant first, though to me they all seem to be doing work that is either absolutely necessary or at least highly desirable; those kind of decisions have to come from those close enough to be able to judge with clarity and knowledge. To do the latter and reduce the number of Boards, either remits have to be shrunk, or decision-makers have to expand the knowledge-base they bring to meetings. These things will happen, because they will have to, but I think there are human limits on what is possible to ask of those who have to make sure the basic work is covered.

At the heart of a good debate is people's understanding of what goes on in the national work of the Church, and Harry Reid joins in the calls for a single media spokesman. He rightly does not appear to question the role of the press office, which gives the background liaison between journalists and the spokespersons of Boards and committees; he seems rather to want to replace those departmental spokespersons with a single personality who can become known throughout the media. That would make life easier in some ways for the journalists who find it unattractive to get to know a succession of conveners of committees, so they would probably be happier (and lazier) as a result. But the risks are alarming, and there is no better illustration of that than the recent experience of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. When Cardinal Winning died, the press lost a figure always good for a quote, usually contentious and willing to deal with the media on all issues: suddenly the Catholic Church lost much of its positive publicity, because its eggs had been in one rather unusual basket. Another danger was illustrated by the Charlie Wheelan incident: the spokesperson should not become the story, cultivate the media and risk damaging the organisation. Both of these dangers are inappropriate developments

for a Presbyterian Church; we are careful not to confuse leadership with glamour. The Church's array of commentators, each expert in their department's field, provide at their best a harmonious choir that is richer and more secure than a tempting soloist can ever be.

Conclusion: A Sense of Belonging

As I read this intriguing book commissioned from a friendly outsider, I could not help but reflect on the contrast between Harry and those Church people who appoint themselves critics of the Church, who see themselves standing back from it far enough to be able to launch words of judgement towards it, and who are content to state the problems without trying to cure them. I am thinking of people who refer to the Church in the third person though they are members of it. They include the aggrieved who correspond with the Principal Clerk and Moderator over gripes and injustices perceived. They include former full-time servants who move to outside jobs that enable them to comment on the Church as if they were independent of it. They include current staff and committee members who try harder to make themselves look clever than to show the Church at its best. Their opinions are valid, but perhaps the hearing they are given is in proportion more to their volume than their integrity. The impressive people – I suppose in any denomination – are the ones who stay and struggle, who choose to be reformers not leavers, who love the Church enough to make it the best they can, and not just kick it in the shins when it's a little down. The impressive people in our Church are those who proudly keep the flag flying in difficult places and do not need to be told the life-expectancy of their work; and those who labour in the centre to make the ends meet; and those pastors who delight in each sheep recovered and not just in the size of their flock.

It was Andrew McLellan's master-stroke to ask this work of an outsider owing no loyalty. It was Harry's accomplishment to conduct himself – throughout the adventure of writing his book – as loyally, generously and open-heartedly as we hardly dare to expect even from some of our own. Harry Reid talks wisely of a loss of confidence¹⁰. I believe



its recovery lies in our finding again a spirit of loyalty, and a sense of belonging to a first-person-plural Church, not a third-person object that lies the length of criticism away.

- ¹ See 2001 Volume of *Reports to the General Assembly*
- ² Brown, S., *Church without Walls: Working it out Together*,
Edinburgh: C of S Board of Parish Education, 2001
- ³ p 144ff
- ⁴ *Outside Verdict*, ch. 7
- ⁵ *Outside Verdict*, p. 171
- ⁶ p. 190
- ⁷ p. 9
- ⁸ pp. 10-11
- ⁹ *Outside Verdict*, ch. 10
- ¹⁰ *Outside Verdict* pp. 207, 214-5