

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

First Delegated Legislation Committee

GENERAL SYNOD (REMOTE MEETINGS)
(TEMPORARY STANDING ORDERS) MEASURE

Monday 19 October 2020

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Friday 23 October 2020

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: JULIE ELLIOTT

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| † Afriyie, Adam (<i>Windsor</i>) (Con) | Johnson, Dame Diana (<i>Kingston upon Hull North</i>) (Lab) |
| Ali, Rushanara (<i>Bethnal Green and Bow</i>) (Lab) | † Morden, Jessica (<i>Newport East</i>) (Lab) |
| † Ali, Tahir (<i>Birmingham, Hall Green</i>) (Lab) | † Mullan, Dr Kieran (<i>Crewe and Nantwich</i>) (Con) |
| † Anderson, Stuart (<i>Wolverhampton South West</i>) (Con) | † Selous, Andrew (<i>Second Church Estates Commissioner</i>) |
| † Butler, Rob (<i>Aylesbury</i>) (Con) | † Tami, Mark (<i>Alyn and Deeside</i>) (Lab) |
| † Caulfield, Maria (<i>Lewes</i>) (Con) | † Webb, Suzanne (<i>Stourbridge</i>) (Con) |
| Creasy, Stella (<i>Walthamstow</i>) (Lab/Co-op) | |
| Cummins, Judith (<i>Bradford South</i>) (Lab) | Stuart Ramsay, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Davison, Dehenna (<i>Bishop Auckland</i>) (Con) | |
| † Drax, Richard (<i>South Dorset</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |
| † Griffiths, Kate (<i>Burton</i>) (Con) | |

First Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 19 October 2020

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

General Synod (Remote Meetings) (Temporary Standing Orders) Measure

4.30 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the General Synod (Remote Meetings) (Temporary Standing Orders) Measure (HC 879).

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I reassure Members that we should be able to dispose of this matter reasonably speedily. The Measure will enable the General Synod, which is the legislative body for the Church of England, to meet and conduct its business remotely. The current coronavirus restrictions mean that it is not practically possible for the Synod to meet in the usual way with 500 people from across England gathering in the same place, either over the road in Church House here in London, or in York. In this Parliament, as we are all aware, we have been able to make provision for remote participation in sittings using the orders of the House. However, as the General Synod was created by statute law, it does not have the same freedom, and legislation is required to enable it to meet remotely.

Members may recall that during proceedings on the Coronavirus Bill earlier this year, similar provision was made for local authority meetings. The General Synod is in the same position as those local authorities. Arrangements made under the Measure could allow for all the Synod's members to participate remotely, but it would also be possible for the Synod to adopt a hybrid approach with some members in the chamber and some joining online. We are, of course, familiar with those arrangements, which we are using here in this Parliament. The precise arrangements that are adopted will need to take account of the relevant regulations and Government guidance as they develop over the coming months.

There is some urgency to this legislation, because the General Synod needs to conduct certain business before the end of the year, including legislation that will give effect to the recommendations of a 2019 report from

the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. There are also statutory deadlines that need to be complied with, including approval of the Church of England's national budget for 2021. If the Measure is approved, the General Synod will meet remotely next month to deal with that other significant business.

Because of the practical issues arising from coronavirus restrictions, as I have mentioned, the Synod met in September to pass this Measure with only a quorum of members attending. Other members who were entitled to attend refrained from exercising their right to come. The Measure was passed by the Synod with no votes against in any of the three Houses—the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy and the House of Laity—and here in Parliament the Ecclesiastical Committee considered the Measure on 6 October and reported that it considered the Measure to be expedient. I hope that we will do similarly today.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I thought I would ask this question early, so that my hon. Friend has time to reflect on it if he needs to. Clause 1(5) describes what happens if an office referred to in subsection (2) is vacant. Is that merely an administrative exercise that does not bestow further powers or change how the Synod operates? It seems to me to be a very precise provision, rather than something that simply concerns the ability to have a virtual meeting.

Andrew Selous: I reassure my hon. Friend that this Measure is purely about enabling the Synod to conduct its business in a hybrid manner so that 500 people do not have to cram into a relatively small room in Church House, which would not be covid secure. This Measure has no impact on doctrine or on any particular Measure of the Church; it is purely about how the Church conducts its business. Elections for bishops and archbishops will take place in the usual way, and none of those things will be changed by the Measure.

4.34 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. Normally with Church Measures, I try to find at least one question to ask. However, I am afraid that on this occasion, having read the Measure through, I am stumped. The Opposition are perfectly happy to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

4.34 pm

Committee rose.