

A Journalist's view of Anglicanism

Andrew Brown, Writer and Journalist

My text today comes from the second book of Hunter S Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

"There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning...And that, I think, was the handle — that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply PREVAIL. There was no point in fighting — on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave...So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark — that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back."

You have asked me about the future of the Anglican Communion, so I should say at once that I am here under false pretences. I don't know it, and I don't care to spoil this innocence. Very early next week I will catch a flight across the North Sea, about thousand miles to Gothenburg; then I will travel another thousand miles or so by train until I am nestled up under the Arctic Circle beyond the reach of email or anything much else, and in that vast and healing silence I will wait until three weeks are up and it is safe to return to England.

I suppose it might be thought from this that I do know the future of the Anglican Communion and that I want no part of it. Perhaps that is true, but what I know I know is the past of it, and the way in which everything I watched at the first



Lambeth Conference I attended, in 1988, has slowly gone on happening. Just for the hell of it, I looked up, or tried to, the stories that I had written then but the CD-rom I have won't install at all on a modern system, while the online database only seems to go back as far as 1996, when I was already explaining to the readers of the Independent that when Christians say they love each other, it is important to distinguish between orientation and practice.

But I do remember vividly some of the arguments from that first Lambeth conference I attended – both the arguments inside the church, and the endless, and wonderfully instructive if whisky-fuelled arguments I would have with my friend and rival Clifford Longley, of the Times. Clifford was a Roman Catholic, and his problem with the Anglican Communion, as with the Church of England, was that it didn't make sense. I was not such a fool as to suppose that it did make sense, but – inspired by Robert Runcie – I would tell Clifford that it didn't matter. One didn't need a curia, a central authority or anything else, providing that there was goodwill and imagination.

I may even have been right. But what we got instead was ill will and imagination. Ill will – malevolence – coupled with imagination can destroy almost anything. Imaginative ill will is what I confidently expect in the future of the Anglican Communion.

We have to be honest here and admit that the imaginative malevolence towards the structures of the Anglican communion started with the liberals. It started with you guys. The people to diagnose it were conservatives, and in particular, Graham Leonard and Gary Bennett. I don't need to explain who they are, right: we're all liberals here, which means that we are all very old and can remember these people.

I never knew Bennett, and I never liked Graham Leonard, who is still, I believe, alive as a Roman Catholic priest in Oxfordshire. But in their struggles against women priests, they were the first people clearly to understand that the workings of the communion relied on a mutual assumption of good faith. This the Americans repeatedly violated. I am not arguing here that they were wrong to do so. I want to point out, as a matter of historical fact, that something overwhelming changed between 1945, when Li Tim Oi was ordained in Hong Kong, and 1989, when Barbara Harris was consecrated in Boston. Li Tim Oi, after her ordination, returned obediently to life as a lay person. The bishop who had ordained her did it no more. The wishes of the Lambeth Conference in this matter, unenforceable though they were, were respected.

That is precisely what didn't happen when American liberals ordained women priests thirty years later. The whole understanding of what constitutes obedience to God had shifted. The old, colonial church played by the rules. The new, independent one ignored them, pointed out that they didn't exist, they weren't binding and so on and so forth. You get an echo of this attitude in Martin Dud-

ley's defence of his blessing of two friends last month. Matteradamn whether he was right to do it, and whether it was contrary to some construals of the letter of the law, he was acting entirely against the spirit of the law, and rubbing everyone's nose in the fact that he could. This is not kind, and in the long run it is not an attitude that will be met with forbearance.

I am too young to remember the struggle to stop women from being priested which apparently dominated the 78 Lambeth Conference. The 88 one was consumed with efforts to stop women becoming bishops. If you are looking for the roots of the covenant proposal, that is where they come from. Bob Runcie and indeed the overwhelming majority of the conference bishops were trying to find a way to stop the Americans doing what they were perfectly well able to do and elect a woman bishop. They discovered there was no way to do this. In the end, the electors of Massachusetts decided that their own concerns were more important to them than those of the rest of the world and elected Barbara Harris, just as seventeen years later, or whenever it was, the electors of New Hampshire decided that they liked Gene and the rest could lump it.

Equally, one might say that the game of recruiting barbarian allies to help with your own civil war was not invented by the American conservatives in the mid Nineties, but by the liberals who used to bring women priests over here in the mid-Eighties.

Of course, the bad guys turned out to play the game much better. You don't need me to lecture you on the backlash, though I will say one thing. Almost all the people running the anti-gay operation at Lambeth in 1998 were veterans of the anti-women operations of 1988. They had digested the lessons of their defeat then. The liberals had utterly failed to reflect on their victories. They thought, I believe, that their energy would prevail,

though considering the farcical inanity and disunity of almost every liberal there except Jack Spong and Richard Holloway, “energy” is an odd concept to use of them.

I know I am looking backwards here, but it seems to me that we might learn something from history, if only a clear perception of the feelings that are operative here.

A momentary digression. At the 1988 Lambeth Conference, I had two experiences which led me to believe that I really ought to be a Christian. I left the 1998 one determined that I would do nothing in future to allow me to be mistaken for a Christian – i.e. for someone like those bishops were. The interesting point, at least to me, was that this was not a matter of doctrine, in either case. If the measurement is on “liberal” policies, Lambeth 1998 was much more liberal than the 1988. What had changed was the atmosphere and the quality of discussion. What had changed, I think, was that people had come to think of Christianity as something they could manipulate, and not as something that might manipulate them. This applied both to liberals and conservatives.

The Conference that is just about to start has been quite carefully organised so that it is impossible to manipulate. It will pretend to no decisions, and issue no statements. It will affect its constituent churches even less than the United Nations affects the policies of its constituent countries. And that, I suppose, answers the question of what the future of the Anglican Communion will be. It won't be a Communion, and it won't be very Anglican. In 1988, the argument was about whether it was still a Communion. In 1998, the argument was whether it could remain a Federation. It's clear now that the answer to both questions is “no”, and that the blame lies, at least partly, with your – my – side.

When there started to be organised attempts to control the structures of the

Lambeth Conference and to use them for the purposes of power politics – to force other Christians to do what they did not want – various things became apparent. The first was that there weren't really structures. There were conventions, and common understandings. When those were gone, there was nothing. Smart people understood this, and back then they thought it wasn't a real problem.

When – after the ordination of Barbara Harris – the conservatives wanted to throw their toys out of the pram, the response, in the form of the Eames Commission, was to deny that there was any pram to throw the toys from. That wasn't very clever, though I quite understand why it was done. So the conservatives went off and built their own prams, their battle prams, if you like, and now they are running them through the playgroup squashing everyone in sight.

The FOCAs are serious, disciplined and their leaders are dishonest even if many of the followers are decent. They have lied all the way through about what they are up to and told the truth to anyone who would listen about what they want. Now they have broadly speaking got it. They have their own bishops, their own money, their own theological colleges, and their own congregations. What more do they need? They even, for the moment, have a common enemy, for it's believable to those who don't know any better that organised liberalism remains a force in the Anglican Communion.

What's more, I would want to say from an English perspective that a kind of ruthless puritanism must be very attractive to people struggling with the dysfunctional structures of the Church of England. Theologically, Reform is profoundly unattractive, but financially it's a great offer: it says God wants you to stop subsidising the liberals in their half-empty church down the road. I think that is a message which will increasingly resonate.

What is to be done? Twenty or thirty years ago, a leader of the liberal party in

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Britain – the political party not the ecclesiastical one – was so excited by the unexpected success of one by-election that he closed his party conference by telling the delegates to “Go back to you constituencies and prepare for power”. Well, the message for Anglican liberals today is to go back to your parishes and prepare for powerlessness.

This doesn't mean despair. Twenty or thirty years ago everyone would have thought that the conservative evangelicals were a powerless and ludicrous

remnant. They might yet be reduced there again. But it would take at least as long, and how to do so would have to be a topic for another speech. For the moment, I can think of no more complete confession of moral and intellectual bankruptcy than that I seem to have argued myself into defending what

Rowan is trying to do. All I can say is that I defended what Runcie was trying to do, too, and a fat lot of good that did anyone. Thank you.