

The Vicar Who Claimed A Seat In The Commons

Posted on July 17, 2018 by jasonloch

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On November 30, 1965, a Church of England vicar named Christopher Wansey tried to enter the chamber of the House of Commons. Although he wasn't an MP,[1] he was a proctor for the Diocese of Chelmsford in the Convocation of Canterbury, and he argued that this entitled him to a seat in the lower house of Parliament as part of the 'Commons Spiritual.' But what's the story behind this curious incident?

Wansey's foray into Parliament was a very dignified affair. Dressed in his proctor's robes, he attempted to enter the Commons chamber from the Central Lobby, but he was immediately stopped by the policemen on duty. The vicar announced that he was "one of the reverend members for Chelmsford in Her Majesty's Convocation with authority to sit in the House of Commons," to which one of the policemen responded with a simple "no, sir.[2]" Wansey asked if he was being resisted, and when the policeman responded in the affirmative, the vicar turned around and left. As he departed, Wansey told onlookers that he had been "resisted in the pursuit of the Queen's business and a constitutional issue has been raised between Church and state.[3]" The whole episode lasted a mere twenty seconds.

Wansey came to Parliament to make a point. He was unhappy with the Prime Minister's role in the selection of Church of England bishops. In a letter to the Speaker, the vicar argued that, since Parliament was no longer a Christian body, there was nothing to prevent a non-Anglican (or even a non-Christian) from becoming Prime Minister. Because the Prime Minister advises the Sovereign on episcopal appointments, this raised the prospect of the Church's leaders being chosen by someone with no allegiance to the Church of England or even Christianity.[4]

Wansey's abortive attempt to enter the Commons exploited a grey area in the British constitution. Like the bishops, representatives of the lower clergy had been summoned to national assemblies throughout the thirteenth century, and when Edward I asked the common folk to send representatives to Parliament in 1295, he required the lower clergy to attend as well. He ordered bishops to bring their cathedral deans[5] and archdeacons with them to Parliament, while their cathedral chapters and diocesan clergy were to be represented by elected proctors (the chapter would send one proctor, while the diocesan clergy would send two). These directions were embodied in the praemunientes clause in the bishops' writs of summons.

The King expected the clergy to obey his summons to Parliament throughout the first four decades of the fourteenth century, but the praemunientes clause was no longer enforced after 1340.[6] There were several reasons for this. The representatives of the lower clergy could also grant money to the Crown through the Convocations of Canterbury and York, so their attendance at Parliament was not strictly necessary (Parliament was still primarily a tax-levying body at this point).[7] This was also the time when Parliament began to claim judicial powers, and it is possible that the clergy were reluctant to sit in a secular court.[8] In addition, the clergy from the Province of York may have preferred attending Convocation because it let them avoid the long journey to Westminster.

Although it was once assumed that the lower clergy weren't summoned to Parliament at all after 1340, recent research has shown otherwise. Documents from the National Archives reveal that the clergy continued to be summoned for a further two-hundred years (the Chapters of Wells and Lincoln elected proctors for Parliament as late as 1536),[9] though their attendance was strictly voluntary. Alas, gaps in the source material make it difficult to understand clerical proctors' day-to-day role in Parliament.[10] Interestingly, when Parliament was considering the Prayer Book Measure in 1927, the Speaker of the Commons was asked if clerical proctors from Convocation still had the right to sit alongside MPs. His only response was to say that the Commons Chamber was crowded enough as it was, so the addition of anyone else would require even more people to be excluded![11]

Despite the diminished role of the Commons Spiritual in Parliament after 1340, Parliament and the Convocations remained linked. In addition to the praemunientes clause mentioned earlier, constitutional convention dictated that the Convocations had to be summoned and dissolved alongside Parliament. By the twentieth century, this connection had become inconvenient to the

Church, as it meant the Convocations' work could be disrupted by a snap General Election (as with Parliament, a dissolution of Convocation caused all pending business to lapse). These links would be severed a few years after Wansey's protest. The Church of England Convocations Act 1966 allowed the Sovereign to summon and dissolve the Convocations independently of Parliament, while The Crown Office (Writs of Summons) Rules 1969 finally removed the *praemunientes* clause from the bishops' writs of summons.

NOTES

[1] Indeed, at that time, ministers of religion were specifically barred from becoming MPs. This prohibition was finally removed by the House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualification) Act 2001.

[2] "Claim to Seat in Commons Fails," *The Times* (London, England), December 1, 1965.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] "Commons Seat Claimed by Proctor," *The Times* (London, England), November 30, 1965. While a Prime Minister who is a Roman Catholic or a Jew is legally prohibited from advising the Sovereign on ecclesiastical matters (see section 18 of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829 and section 4 of the Jews Relief Act 1858), a Prime Minister who happens to be Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheist would be free to offer advice on ecclesiastical matters.

[5] Priors of monastic cathedrals were also expected to attend in person.

[6] Phil Bradford and Alison K. McHardy, eds., *Proctors for Parliament: Clergy, Community and Politics c. 1248-1539*, vol. 1 c. 1248-1377, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), XLV-XLVI.

[7] The clergy taxed themselves in Convocation until 1664 when the Archbishop of Canterbury waived that privilege through a gentleman's agreement with the Lord Chancellor.

[8] Bradford and McHardy, XLVII.

[9] Bradford and McHardy, L.

[10] For a brief discussion of these limitations, see Bradford and McHardy, L-LII.

[11] Arthur Smethurst, *Convocation of Canterbury: What It Is; What It Does; How It Works* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1949), 12. Unfortunately, Smethurst doesn't provide any context for this anecdote. I haven't found it in Hansard, but it's possible that the question was asked outside the Chamber (e.g., in private correspondence with the Speaker).