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## **Independent Scrutiny in the Church of England**

Philosophy is concerned with truth.

There is in the western tradition a strong distinction between 'true' and 'false', which finds expression in logic, and which is the basis of binary computing. It is a powerful piece of intellectual technology.

But ever since Plato there is also a strong distinction between truth and sophistry. This is the difference between persuading through good reasons and persuading by any means available, and is the basis for the art of public relations.

Roughly: in inquiry the aim is to find what is true, whereas in debate the aim is to control the narrative.

The Archbishop of York was on Radio 4 this morning to answer questions about the sacking of two (out of three) members of the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB). It was an interesting collision between inquiry (by the journalist William Crawley) and debate (by the archbishop Stephen Cottrell).

Crawley has a degree in philosophy, an MDiv in theology, and a PhD on Plantinga's epistemology. He was a lecturer in theology, ordained as a Presbyterian, then left the church, and became a journalist. Any bishop preparing to be interviewed by such a journalist is going to be a bit apprehensive (if they or their team do their homework).

Crawley summarised nicely in his opening question. This is a complete mess, isn't it?

The answer to this questions is, yes. And it would not cost anything to say it.

But the bishop had a script. In some ways it resembles Rishi Sunak's five key priorities: something that can be offered in answer to any question, and takes a while to chunter through, and so has the advantage and purpose of squeezing the time for the awkward business of attending to particulars.

The script was this. The Independent Safeguarding Board was set up as part of a two phase process. Phase 1 was not fully independent. Its purpose was to lay the foundation for Phase 2. Phase 2 would be fully independent. Phase 1 has not been successful, so it has been ended prematurely, under regrettable circumstances, but unavoidably, because of a breakdown in communication. But this will have the happy consequence that Phase 2, fully independent oversight, can be implemented earlier than planned.

This has the same structure as Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. Part 1: sin and death. Part 2: redemption and life. It has a certain evangelical (small e) flavour.

Crawley can spot a time-wasting script as soon as its chuntering gets underway. He was having none of it. He interrupted the script so that it could not execute, manically pressing Esc and Ctrl-Alt-Del, until the script stopped. The script executor was frustrated to have been rumbled so early. Crawley said mildly that if his interviewee tries this nonsense, he should expect lots of interruptions.

But the Archbishop had nothing. Again and again he tried to execute the script. And, true to his word, Crawley each time promptly pressed Ctrl-Alt-Del. This went on for five minutes.

It was a victory for inquiry over debate. Crawley asked truth-oriented questions. The most important was: the people you sacked say their work was being frustrated and compromised. What do you say to that? And slightly more technically: you installed a chair who already sat on another church safeguarding body, and did so without consulting the independent members. What do you say to that?

The first question was not touched. The script was obviously irrelevant to it. So attempting to execute it in response exposed the naked attempt to play for time. It was pretty shameful.

The second question was partially answered. Yes it's true that the new chair already sat on the National Safeguarding Panel (NSP), but the ISB was not going to review the work of the NSP, so there was no conflict of interest.

Now Meg Munn does indeed sit on the National Safeguarding Panel. But here Crawley had not been fully briefed. Munn chairs that panel. So the chair of one safeguarding panel was unilaterally installed as the chair of another safeguarding body. That is not defensible.

The bishop conceded four points while exposing himself as an interview time-waster. Those points were:

1. Yes the ISB was not fully independent.
2. We never envisaged its full independence.
3. Yes we unilaterally installed a new chair.
4. Yes she was already part of a C of E safeguarding body

Crawley did not make the obvious points.

1. The National Safeguarding Panel is a church body which offers advice and guidance to the National Safeguarding Team and the National Safeguarding Steering Group. Its line manager is the Archbishops' Council. It is chaired by Meg Munn.
2. The Independent Safeguarding Board was not independent, so it is effectively a second church body, looking at the church's response to safeguarding issues.
3. Having the same chair for the church's advice on safeguarding issues, and the church's scrutiny of the church's response to safeguarding issues is simply bizarre.

So what should the Archbishop of York have said? Would it have been so bad if he had told the truth? It might have looked like this.

'This is a complete mess isn't it?'

'Yes it is. We have a National Safeguarding Steering Group, appointed by the Archbishops. We have a National Safeguarding Team appointed by the Archbishops' Council. We have a National Safeguarding Panel, appointed by the Archbishops' Council. We have an Independent Safeguarding Board, appointed by the Archbishops' Council.

'The National Safeguarding Panel is called an independent panel, because it has representatives from the Methodist and Catholic churches, and from survivors' groups, and it is chaired by someone not employed by the church. It does include a paid member of the C of E clergy, and four bishops sit in attendance at its meetings. It's not really independent.

'The Independent Safeguarding Board is called independent because none of its members are employed by the church, and no bishops attend its meetings. But it's not really independent either. We admit that.

'But all of these bodies are created by the Archbishops or the Archbishops' Council. The membership of these bodies is determined by the Archbishops or the Archbishops' Council. And that has not worked. We take responsibility for that. We do not have the independent scrutiny that is required. The replacement for the ISB will be fully independent. And that means the following details...'

That still does not answer the specific accusation that ISB requests for documents (i.e. evidence) were frustrated. I do not know whether the bishop was in a position to answer it. I presume that the answer would have made the church look bad, so he didn't answer it. But really, at this stage, looking bad is kind of the default position. Admittedly, simply saying, 'we weren't prepared to hand over those documents' is a bad look.

It's not the ISB that needs to be sacked.

I would sack the comms team who produced the script that made the Archbishop of York look like an incompetent public relations spokesperson.