

## **Church of England officialdom determined to block proper safeguarding reform**

Gavin Drake 10 July 2023

In recent years I have seen the appalling treatment of a victim and the way in which she was ground down first by her diocese and then by the National Safeguarding Team and also by the operation of the Clergy Discipline Measure. I have spoken to many other victims and survivors. Sometimes in person, sometimes by email. And they all tell the same woeful story of their treatment at the hands of the Church.

The decision last month to suspend the Independent Safeguarding Board (set up improperly as many of us said at the time and since) has caused significant harm to the victims and survivors they were working with. As did the way in which it was done, with no notice or warning to those survivors the ISB were working with ahead of a public announcement.

One survivor said: “the Archbishops’ Council say that the ISB isn’t working. It may not be working for them, but it is working for us. It isn’t the ISB that isn’t working, it is the Archbishops’ Council that isn’t working.”

The debacle of the sacking of the ISB members – two people who many victims and survivors finally had felt that they had trust in from a Church perspective – was the subject of a report to the Synod by the Secretary General, William Nye, and a representative panel of Archbishops’ Council members.

Things were said at that presentation about the two ISB members, Jasvinder Sanghera and Steve Reeves, that were untrue and unfair. They should have the right of response. General Synod member Clive Billenness from the Diocese of Europe raised a point of order to ask the Chair to invite Jasvinder and Steve, who were in the public gallery, to speak. The Chair explained that Standing Orders didn’t give her such powers.

I raised another point of order – thinking on the hoof and without the actual standing order in front of me – to suspend Standing Orders. After taking legal advice (there is always a lawyer on hand to advise the chairs) she said that I must state which standing order I wanted to suspend. By that time I had found it but the lawyer said that I had already spoken and wasn’t allowed to speak again (despite the standing order about suspending standing orders entitling me to speak for two minutes).

The Synod spent more than half an hour trying to use standing order after standing order to force an invitation to Jasvinder and Steve to address the meeting. It was clear that Synod wanted to hear from them. It was also clear that the lawyers didn’t want this to happen.

In the end, the Chair suspended the sitting of Synod “for the good conduct of business”, during which Jasvinder and Steve were invited to address the Synod. I will post later about what they said, but you can watch their contributions here: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nYu3MDRecUY?feature=share&t=6023> (note how the Chair of the Business Committee stops the Synod from applauding Jasvinder and Steve at the start of this part of the meeting).

Before the Synod began, I tabled a Further Motion to the report and presentation. But this was ruled out of order on the basis that the presentation wasn't based on a report (so what is [this](#)?).

I appealed the decision on the basis that there clearly was a report. But I got no response. So I rejigged the motion to make it fit as a Further Motion to the Archbishop's Council's Annual Report. That was accepted.

BUT – that was timetabled this morning. The session started at 9 am with worship. There was timed business at 10 am which would have curtailed any debate and the Business Committee could have brought it back when they wanted – which would include at a later group of sessions when it would have been too late.

The debate on my following motion started at some point after 9.45 am. Just 15 minutes. I had prepared a colleague to move a procedural motion at 9.55 to adjourn the debate on my motion, and for it to return after the timed business. I suspect that this came a surprise to those manipulating the agenda and standing orders to stop this debate getting through. The Synod supported the adjournment.

What was the timed business? It was the annual vote of what dioceses should pay towards the costs of the national church. In other words, a debate on safeguarding was kiboshed so that the Archbishops' Council could get its money for next year. I tried to raise this with the Chair of the Business Committee last night. But he stopped me, saying that the Business Committee would be meeting this morning and that I should not say any more. So I was denied the opportunity to make representations.

To be fair to the legal advisors, one came to me during the timed business to warn me about a little known Standing Order – Standing Order 8.1, which says that “Where a member in his or her private capacity tables a motion arising out of business specified in the agenda, the motion is to be subject to the time allowed in the agenda for the consideration of that business.”

What that meant is that because my motion was timed on the agenda to finish at 10 am, and the adjournment took place with less than one minute to go before 10 am, the resumed debate would lapse after less than one minute and the motion would be lost.

So I prepared another Synod Colleague to move another procedural motion that Standing Order 8.1 be suspended until the debate on my motion was concluded. The Synod overwhelmingly supported that motion, with 175 voting in favour and 69 voting against. There were 17 abstentions.

So, with this overwhelming support you might imagine that the motion was debated. Wrong. Under the Synod standing orders a vote to suspend standing orders must be passed by at least 75 per cent of those voting.

So, despite the overwhelming majority of the Synod, present in the hall, wanting the debate to continue (and, presumably in favour of the motion – if you were against it you'd support halting the debate), we were blocked by doing so by the combination of Archbishops' Council and the Business Committee. Similar procedural shenanigans were used to curtail a safeguarding debate in February 2022.

What was the motion? What was it that so concerned those in the Church of England's corridors of power? It was simple: that an independent inquiry, led by a senior lawyer (a judge or a King's Counsel) should be undertaken into the Church of England's safeguarding bodies' structures, functions, policies and practice, with a report back to Synod within 12 months.

It is clear that independent oversight and scrutiny scares the powers that be – despite their words that they welcome it. The Archbishops' Council think that they can just power on and do the next safeguarding thing, whatever that “thing” is.

In the very brief debate, one Synod member suggested a truth and reconciliation commission. But who would set that up and who would engage with it? As it stands, the only people who can set that up are the Archbishops' Council and the National Safeguarding Team. But victims and survivors have made it abundantly clear that any remnant of trust that existed towards the Council and NST evaporated when the ISB was disbanded. Many speak of the NST and Archbishops' Council as the abusers – they were originally abused by their perpetrators and were re-abused by the Church's systems.

Enough is enough.

If the General Synod of the Church of England is unable to hold the Archbishops' Council and its National Safeguarding Team to account, if we are unable to bring about proper change, if we are going to be blocked from hearing from who we want to hear from, and stopped from debating what we want to debate, then what is it for?

As I said, I joined the Synod to make the Church of England of safer place. I have failed, because the central machinery of the Church of England will use all its power to block the Synod from doing what it exists to do.

I will not waste any more of my time in it. I was here to make a difference. If I can't make a difference, there is no point me being here. And so I am resigning from the General Synod with immediate effect (and unlike Nadine Dorris, I mean with immediate effect).

One final thing, over the weekend some victims and survivors established a “Loud Fence” – the placing of ribbons and laminated posters and words expressing their concerns and explaining their experiences. By lunchtime today it had gone. I spoke with a survivor who was part of the group who established the wall. He had been asked by members of the Archbishops' Council to take it down.

That's how much the Church wants to listen to survivors.

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