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Differ and be Brothers

B. J. COGGLE

I WOULD SUBMIT, without lack of charity, that it is wrong for Anglicans to exploit the ecumenical movement to force the historic episcopate upon the Methodists as the *sine qua non* of union. On the other hand it is only fair to the Anglicans that they should be told the *whole truth* about what Methodists believe. They have been given ample doses of the Methodist official view, but there is a large mass of rank and file Methodists who have never consented to the basis of union. In this matter the majority of the Methodist Conference is gravely out of step with the rank and file of the Methodist people.

This can be shown quite clearly on the evidence of voting:

Conference Voting

In 1965 78% voted for the scheme

In 1969 77.4% voted for the scheme

In 1970 79.64% voted for the scheme

But in each case the neutrals were not counted, thus the percentage shown in favour appears more rosy than in fact it was.

Synod Voting

	For	Against	Neutral
1965	5,090 (63.20%)	2,848 (35.5%)	117
1969	5,934 (67.20%)	2,897	88
1970	4,562 (70.26%)	1,870	61

(Some Synods in 1970 did not report voting, some did not count the neutrals and some did not vote at all.)

It should be noted that whereas in *Conference* 50% of the membership are ministers; at *Synods*, while all ministers are members, they are

out-numbered by laymen, but still form a considerable proportion of the members; but at the level of the *Quarterly Meetings* the lay members predominate.

Circuit Quarterly Meetings

	For	Against	Neutral
1965	26,440 (54.33%)	22,236	1,833
1969	38,652 (54.79%)	31,908	2,315

Note that the increased vote in favour at Q.Ms. was only 0.46% inspite of heavy official pressure for acceptance. The solid mass of just on 32,000 against with another 2,315 neutral is very significant. Note also that Conference did not allow a vote to be taken by Q.Ms. in 1970 and always refused to allow a vote at society meetings or anything like a referendum in spite of many local requests.

The great difference between the vote in favour at Conference as compared with Circuit Q.Ms. indicates the grave danger to Methodism. It was the famous Rev. Dr. Jabez Bunting who said, 'Methodism is as much opposed to democracy as to sin'. That very attitude of ministerial and Conferential despotism resulted in the great disasters to Methodism in the mid-nineteenth century, when no less than 100,000 members were lost to the Wesleyan Body (about one-third the total membership then). Many of those who left Wesleyanism formed more democratic churches, but many were lost altogether to church fellowship. Thus Methodist history gives a very ominous warning. It was Dr. Maldwyn Edwards, who today is one of the great advocates of the union scheme, who admitted in his book *After Wesley*, that, 'It is difficult to realise how bitter was the feeling against the despotic government of Methodism in the nineteenth century' (p. 47). And writing of the divisions he said, 'Such secessions were always in part a protest against the despotism of Conference. They led to the formation of smaller Methodist bodies which had a more democratic system of Government and which gave greater scope to the laity' (p. 53).

At the time of Methodist Union in 1932 a famous ex-Wesleyan Minister, Dr. A. W. Harrison, summed it up in the words, 'The main issue seems to be the authority of Conference. If ever Conference tends to over-ride the wishes of the societies, we must look for trouble' (*The Methodist Church, Its Origin, Divisions and Reunion*, p. 167).

It is very enlightening to compare the basis of Methodist Union in 1932 with the present dangerous situation.

Conference Voting 1931

	In Favour	Against
Wesleyan Representative Session	558	14
Wesleyan Pastoral Session	404	21
Wesleyan Legal Hundred	Unanimous in favour	
Primitive Methodist	284	4
United Methodist	310	4

Thus, today, we have a situation of extreme gravity for Methodism. There exists amongst us Methodists a well informed and theologically educated opposition, and it is supported at the local level by roughly half the membership. Will the Church of England at its new General Synod consider the *whole case* presented by this opposition and save Methodism from the most dangerous step in her history? Let us differ and be brothers; friends of all and enemies of none; but let us Methodists remain loyal to our deep convictions as evangelicals, Protestants and Free Churchmen.