



Cricket, Elephants, Armies and other Analogies: The Church of England after IICSA

*The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford,
Vice President of Modern Church*

‘The Church of England... [has] an understated ecclesiology coupled to a reserved English manner makes for a nation - or at least a national church - that is, well, just too polite, settled and civilised to get very enthusiastic about anything. As one commentator has recently noted, can it really be any accident that cricket is the preferred game of the clergy in the Church of England? An individual, yet collaborative game; full of manners, codes of conduct - ‘sporting’ sport; strenuous and restful by turns, combining subtlety and strength (speed is rarely valued); where all may have different gifts and functions, yet be equally valued; and where the side about to lose can gain an honourable or even heroic draw, either due to rain or bad light. Results really don’t matter; it’s how you play the game.’

**Martyn Percy, *Thirty-Nine New Articles: An Anglican Landscape of Faith*,
(Canterbury Press 2013 p. 157)**

In David Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination* (SCM Press 1981), he invites us to think of analogical and other ways of viewing the life of faith, rather than just through the lens of doctrine or tradition. So just for the moment, we are going to think of the current ecclesial crisis in the Church of England as something like a cricket Test Match. So please bear with me as I explain.

I have been watching something like a long game of cricket over the past three weeks. I refer to the Test Match that is IICSA - the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse - that has been looking into the Church of England’s record on safeguarding. IICSA works with case-studies, and the Church of England found itself fielding a side that mainly consisted of players drafted in from the Diocese of Chichester, with a smattering of others representing the National Safeguarding Team, the House of Bishops, and other bodies within the church.

This particular IICSA process has, after all, been something of a spectator sport. The inquiry has been live-streamed, and open to the public. The Church of England has batted and bowled. It has faced an arsenal of bowling: bouncers, googlies, daisy-cutters, and spin; medium and fast-paced bowlers. There have been, for bishops and officers of the church, lengthy stints at the crease, facing these bowlers. We have watched as the interrogators have batted too. Mostly, they have taken safe singles. There have been very few big sixes or grand fours. They take a few runs here, and a

few there. But over after over, the score has piled up. Like snowflakes on a flat roof, the weight has told.

The batting from the Church of England has been pretty awful. One bishop - out for a duck on virtually every ball he faced - blamed his team-mates, or his kit, or his secretary. Another bishop seemed to think he should not need to bat. Other officers and officials representing the church blamed their colleagues. Time after time, witnesses for the Church of England were caught, bowled out, leg-before-wicket, or just run out. Indeed, there was something of a running theme throughout the three weeks. The Church of England is not really a team at all. It is just a rather motley collection of individuals who are vaguely relating to one another. There was no joined-up strategy. There was no game plan. But no-one is prepared to accept responsibility for the fact that after three weeks, the Church of England had scored nothing. There were no points on the board.

In contrast, IICSA, simply by sticking to their game plan, amassed a massive total, and eventually declared. The Church of England, who had pinned its hopes on rain stopping play so it could claim a draw, went home utterly defeated. As a spectacle - and in terms of professionalism, accountability and integrity - I can only say it was like watching Australia taking on a scratch second eleven from a local pub that had met in the bar a few hours earlier. They had drunk a few pints, and fancied their chances. But you just felt embarrassed for the Church of England; for their hubris, folly and misplaced self-regard. This Test Match was a humiliation and annihilation for the church; excruciating viewing, frankly.

The media barely covered this debacle, I suspect, because the three weeks have amounted to something of a slow death for the Church of England as an operational public body. In effect, IICSA offered us a ringside seat to watch a whole elephant being eaten. Slowly, mouthful by mouthful. But that is what IICSA did. Not so much eating the Church of England for breakfast, as in fact consuming the body over the course of several weeks. As Peter Drucker said, 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. And, whatever defence strategy the Church of England might have had for engaging in the process of defending its practice and reputation in safeguarding, the legal culture that IICSA embodies just ate the Church of England up... bit by bit. In fact, so slow was this at times, I am not sure the officers defending the Church of England even saw or realised it was being consumed, so absorbed were their advocates in their own bubble of self-justifying rhetoric. At the risk of mixing metaphors, the IICSA cross-examiners were first-class. The Church of England, in contrast, revealed itself to be wholly amateur. Not even well-meaning amateurs, alas, as time and again the reputation of the Church of England was placed at a premium, and well above the needs or interests of those who had been abused.

To paraphrase and slightly twist the words of Winston Churchill: never, in the field of ecclesial conflict, has so much been owed, by so few, to so many. The Church of

England revealed itself to be a delinquent polity - a culture where minor oversights, dubious legal short-cuts, file-shredding or record burning, forgetfulness, errors, incompetence and culpability were routine, and added up to one thing. Here is a body you cannot trust. You should not even try to trust it. You should not make the mistake of placing your life and safety in the hands of people who would so lightly squander your interests, and who then go on to wash their hands of responsibility in public.

In their intriguing book *Mistakes were made - but not by me* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2017), Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explain how it is that the individuals and institutions which make catastrophic errors that cause damage and pain to others, or simply mistreat them, can live with themselves and justify their actions or inaction. The key to this, Tavris and Aronson argue, is that the individuals or institutions responsible for the neglect or abuse are able to calm their cognitive dissonance by creating fictions that absolve themselves of responsibility. Thus, the belief that we are clever, moral and right simply masks behaviours that are simply idiotic, immoral and wrong. This helps to explain why a bishop in the Diocese of Chichester can simply deal with the history of abuse in his patch - happening under his watch, and right under his nose - with little more than a shrug of the shoulders. It wasn't his fault. He was only obeying orders. Responsibility lies further up the chain of command. He's just the Bishop of an area in a Diocese.

It all feels a little bit like the cognitive dissonance of the neighbourly residents living close to those concentration camps in the Second World War. They had often been the direct beneficiaries of the cheap or free labour in their own gardens, factories or businesses, but they had never sought to ask about the turnover of labour:

'Where was that nice young hard-working Polish Jew who worked on the factory floor for us last week? He mopped the floor superbly: morning, noon and night... almost as though his life depended on it. Not available now, huh? Ah well, no matter - but you say there are a couple of new Hungarian Jews I can have, and who work just as hard? Thank you. I don't know where your camps get this free labour supply from, but it is impressive. The war must be going well for us. Oh, by the way, can you do something about the smell from those incinerators? It can be awful when the wind blows over the town, what with the smoke and the ashes. Yes, I know you are just burning old clothes and rubbish to keep the camps pristine and free from diseases. I do appreciate that. Well done. Keep up the good work.'

This may seem unfair to the Church of England at IICSA. But too many times, we heard church leaders utter phrases akin to 'I was just obeying orders', 'it was not my responsibility to report this', or 'I had no idea this was going on' - and more besides. Archbishops passed blame on to their bishops. The bishops passed the blame on to their staff. The National Safeguarding Team (NST) seems to have been blamed by everyone. But the NST seemed to respond to this by referring the blame back up the chain of command. Everyone passed the buck. Everyone knew a little, but no-one

chose to know enough. It seems that the cultures of abuse were ultimately no-one's fault. So no-one did anything. Everyone else was to blame.

Cognitive dissonance and wilful blindness plays a part in the institutional behaviour patterns we have seen in the Church of England, as disclosed by IICSA. But can the Church of England really see what has become of itself? I think it can't. As Lord Molson once remarked,

'I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come'.

And what is that opinion, exactly? The Church of England likes - perhaps loves - itself. It cannot understand why it is even at the batting crease, facing all these awkward balls from IICSA, over after over. It should just be allowed to get on with itself - immune from public inquiry and those tiresome worldly professional standards.

It was Iris Murdoch who said

'love... is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real'.

But if you only love yourself, the only real thing that matters is the real you. This helps explain why the National Safeguarding Team can't even manage some simple arithmetic. Because the people - the victims here - literally don't count. At General Synod in February 2018, when a Synod member asked the Bishop in charge of Church of England's Safeguarding how many open cases of safeguarding the Church was currently dealing with, he didn't know. The best he could do was to say that there had been 'around 3,300' safeguarding concerns or allegations last time they had looked, which was in 2016. This figure was subsequently adjusted, corrected, and further qualified.

The honest answer is that the Church of England seems not to really know. Numbers are rounded off to the nearest hundred. Victims, it seems, are like statistical casualties recorded in an epic battle of yore. They are numbers; not real people in their own here and now, trying to piece together their shattered lives. The tragedy - and indeed farce - of the Church of England's performance at IICSA, is that it came across, consistently, as quite clueless.

Like many loyal servants of the Church of England, I have watched IICSA over the past three weeks with a growing, troubling, deep sense of shame. This is a hard thing to admit. To know that you belong to a body where you can no longer believe or trust the account of the polity and practice that is being offered in defence of its behaviours by its own leaders. To know that the real victims in this tragic farce who are still waiting for basic, fundamental rights that should be givens for the church - recognition, remorse, repentance - are abused twice over. In the first instance, it is by their actual abuser. The second time, and far worse, is the subsequent abuse perpetrated by the church. For this is a church that is deaf, dumb and blind - and

seemingly wilfully indifferent to the suffering undergone by those abused - and then addresses this with little more than an incompetent veneer of safeguarding practice, which only further compounds the original act of abuse.

In all this, the Diocese of Chichester stands as the 'exemplar' of the Church of England. Herein, arguably, we catch a glimpse of the biggest risk that now faces the institution. So let us return, once again, to the analogical imagination. The Church of England is not like the Bank of England. The latter is a body, that when the Governor speaks and announces a rise or drop in interest rates, or some other fiscal policy or measure, that is what the Bank of England does. It has clear policies and practices. It speaks as a corporate and united entity; a single body.

The Church of England, in contrast, is nothing of the sort. But if the Church of England is not like the Bank of England, to what shall we compare it? It's more like the British Army, to be frank. Who runs the British Army? Well, they are Her Majesty's armed forces, but it has been some while since the crowned head of the nation spearheaded any actual attack on the enemy.

The Secretary of State for Defence is more usually found behind her or his desk than at the front of an assault on an enemy line. The generals might lead an attack - but from where is this led, exactly? They don't usually lead from the front, as they are more often in an 'operations room', sometimes not even in the same country as the military action.

When it comes to asking what the British Army is, well, it depends on whom you ask. Is it the Defence Contract Procurement Department who buy the bullets? Or is it the soldiers who shoot them? Is it the Army Medical Corps? Or is it the artillery? Or the Cavalry - and if by Cavalry, do you mean people in tanks, or trotting along on horses for the Trooping of the Colour? If you want to be defended, are the Marines the best? Or the Highland Regiment? Or the SAS?

Who speaks for the British Army? It could be a retired general. It could be a serving one. Or it could be Colonel Blimp next door, who last saw action in Aden, or had a father who fought against the 'fuzzy-wuzzy' insurgents. It could be almost anyone connected with the Army. Anyone.

The Church of England has the same kind of problem managing its identity and issues. Who speaks for the Church of England on women bishops, or on same-sex marriage? The bishops? Yes, to a point. But also clergy, laity, synod members, retired vicars and others. Lambeth Palace may field a 'spokesperson for the Church of England'. But they don't usually speak for me, I tend to find. Every time they do speak, of course, they send an implicit message - wholly unintended. Whisper it: 'We are small'. If someone can speak for all of us, we are the few, not the many. In becoming manageable, we become comprehensible, and in the course of that single move, the

Church of England becomes a different animal in public discourse: a subject that is easy to grasp, so can also be easily discarded and dismissed.

Of course, I do understand the motivations and desire to have all the bishops 'on message'. But getting them all 'on the same page' only pasteurises the plurality of the Church of England, and turns it into one homogenous gloop. The instinct of a corporate boss is to shape and control. But the trouble is that a leader good at corporate-speak and practice will reduce the size of body to something he or she can manage. Enforced 'corporate-speak' shrinks the Church; it reduces its breadth. It is just like someone speaking for the British Army - unconsciously, you know this should not really be possible. More deeply, you know that if it is possible, it must be a very small armed force.

So what has this got to do with IICSA? Everything and nothing, as it turns out. A few people - myself included - have been arguing that the Church of England is not a competent body to run its own safeguarding any more. It cannot investigate, police and repair the manifest malfunctions and injustices that occur within its safeguarding. To be candid, the Church of England *is* too small and poorly resourced to really manage this well. Moreover, it cannot begin to address the changes in culture it needs to face, adopt and implement, if it is to run a holistic framework of safeguarding.

This is because problems in safeguarding do not just stem from some poor professionalism and meagre managerialism. They are rooted in warped attitudes to gender and sexuality; cultures of obeisance that do not challenge or question the competence of clergy and bishops, instead putting them on a pedestal; failures to invest in training for seminarians and clergy in the basics of law, good practices, and relevant social and psychological theory; patronising attitudes towards laity; and lazy, naïve assumptions about human nature. These things will not be fixed by hiring a few more safeguarding officers. The problem runs far deeper, and extends far wider.

The Church of England has not even begun to reckon with the ecclesial ethos and traditions that offered the best petri-dishes for developing and growing cultures of abuse. For decades, it has been easy for the church to point the finger of blame at liberals for lax standards and moral lapses. But the cultures of sexual abuse grew most successfully in traditionalist strains of Anglo-Catholicism (e.g. Bishop Peter Ball) and Biblicist strains of Conservative Evangelicalism (e.g. John Smyth of Iwerne Camps). There are common denominators between these two ecclesial cultures. They deny women equality. They are squeamish about sexuality. They sacralise ambiguity. They put their leaders on unimpeachable pedestals. The worst abuses flourish in the cultures that are self-righteous.

The recent *Gibb Report* and the *Carlile Report* (dealing respectively with quite different controversies surrounding Bishop Peter Ball and Bishop George Bell) are both

damning of the practice of the Church of England's handling of safeguarding, the role of bishops in providing leadership and oversight, and the competence of the National Safeguarding Team. Both reports relay that the Church of England is simply not up to the job.

Perhaps there is no real shame in finally admitting this. Why should the Church of England be an omniscient body? The Church of England used to run orphanages, teacher training colleges, social and medical care centres, and more besides - including levying and collecting local taxes. But no longer. Moreover, the Church of England no longer even runs schools in the way that it used to, preserving its dwindling influence in education more indirectly through governance and the shaping of a more benign, implicit ethos. But direct responsibility for schooling - and with it the power and authority to educate - was ceded long ago. These changes were all part of a culture-shift and secularisation that began long ago in the nineteenth century.

The Church of England wants to remain as a religious, civic and unrestricted body that can serve the nation. But it simply lacks the resources to be a public utility in a way that is accountable and transparent. For this reason - among many others - the Church of England would position itself better in the public domain if it made itself subject to those norms that govern other aspects of public life - for example, signing up unequivocally, for equality legislation that addresses gender and sexuality, so ending its own 'opt out' clauses that permit it to discriminate in the name of theology, or offer protection to dissenting minority ecclesial traditions.

In the same way, the Church of England could do worse than place itself under a new form of safeguarding regulation, free and independent from paying homage to ecclesial patronage and deferring to episcopal authority. Such a regulator could firmly bind the Church to principles of law and justice first, be thoroughly forensic with its investigative powers, and have the authority to call the Church to account. This would be far better for the Churches, as they are, instead, (inevitably) always trying to read cases of sexual abuse, harassment and safeguarding in a bifurcating, binocular way, with one lens always firmly trained on reputational risk.

The experience of watching the Church of England at IICSA - represented by the Diocese of Chichester - has left many of us with a profound sense of despair, and even hopelessness. IICSA gave a platform to some slow, steady, measured cross-examination of witnesses for the institution of the church, which in turn revealed their gross incompetence, shoddy amateurism and some shady nepotism. Their testimony highlighted an ecclesial culture that sought to keep up appearances, keep the show on the road, and protect its reputation at all costs.

The victims, and any kind of deep and broad inquiries relating to and leading to truth, emerged as being of very minor importance to the Church of England. It is hard not

to feel ashamed of this - of being part of a body that has behaved with such callous and calculated indifference towards victims, whilst insisting on due deference to itself in public. Meanwhile, one can only admire the forensic cross-examination done by the women driving the inquiry, and their patient, point-by-point excavation of the deep culture of sexism and misogyny that clearly compacted with Chichester's paedophile problems.

A number of bishops and church leaders spoke openly last week about their sense of shame at the abuses, expressing sorrow and contrition. There were apologies. This, alas, is not enough. It won't be sufficient to change the culture that has produced and concealed the abuses. And there is no strategy in place to connect to the aspirations lightly sketched by some church leaders. The absence of strategy is telling. It is one thing to say 'we need to get this right in future', and quite another thing to face why it went wrong in the first place, then marshal resources to challenge prevailing cultures, and replace them with a more holistic range of policies and practices. I see little sign of this in the Church of England; few resources for it, and very little leadership that will take responsibility for the tasks that lie ahead.

This article has had little to say about the experiences and voices of victims. But in reflecting and writing, I have become aware that the abuses that victims suffer at the hands of the Church will go unheeded unless the church hands over its power and authority in safeguarding to a genuinely free and independent regulatory body. This is the only way that victims will be able to get the justice they deserve. It is the only way the churches can begin to rebuild public trust. Ultimately, this now an argument about a change of culture: one that many of us now believe is an urgent priority for churches. Without it, I fear for both victims and institution alike.

MWVP, March 2018