



EMMA THOMPSON

Justin Welby's successor needs to halve the 'upstairs church'

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In the film *Conclave*, Ralph Fiennes plays a cardinal trying to organise the election of a pope. The drama highlights the difficulties of choosing a religious leader with sufficiently broad appeal and no skeletons in the cupboard. Candidates struggle to achieve the necessary majority. A two-thirds majority of the 17 voters is needed to become Archbishop of Canterbury.

As in the film, the tortuous selection process could end in the appointment of a relative unknown, with the attendant risks. So it was with Justin Welby in 2013. He had spent little more than a year as a bishop (Durham). Now we know how his appointment turned out.

The Church of England cannot afford another damaging public shaming, particularly concerning safeguarding. Leaving aside whether the right people are involved in the nomination process — over nine months — they need to reach the right result. The Church's senior hierarchy, its policies, practices and culture are in a mess.

- [No swift return for Justin Welby after his final day as archbishop](#)

As [Justin Welby](#) leaves office on Monday on his 69th birthday, this is a critical opportunity for a reset. The overriding necessity is to appoint a godly, unifying, humble person with the leadership skills to get a grip on a top-heavy bureaucracy.

One difficulty is the small size of the field, if you limit it to the 42 diocesan bishops and rule out those approaching 70 (clergy retirement age). Historically, episcopal appointments used to alternate between different wings or factions, which avoided narrowing the Church's appeal and alienating potential supporters.

However, it is widely felt that Welby has “packed” the bench of bishops with others who share his managerial style of churchmanship. Many of the names bandied about as potential successors would be an unbalanced continuation from his wing of the Church.

- **Church's gay marriage opponents could get their own archbishop**

What we don't need is someone who loves playing amateur politics in the House of Lords, spending money on making churches carbon neutral when they can't afford to turn the heating on, or undermining the parish system. We need someone who wants to spend time loving and caring for the “downstairs church”. By this, I mean the local places where people actually participate in and fund the Church.

The “upstairs church” of bishops, bureaucracy and bluster has become inward-looking and detached from the parishes. It has grown on an indefensible scale. We need a parish-facing, pastoral archbishop, someone with the willingness and leadership ability to halve the “upstairs church”, scaling it back to a more appropriate and affordable level of overheads. There might then be some hope of reversing the decline that has been accelerated from within.