

The Poverty of Resolution 84

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There are many reasons why Resolution 84 was a poor decision that has led to an increasingly impoverished church. While it is clear that the most important and relevant reasons are related to doctrine and scripture, there are other matters of importance for a church with a polity of inter-related councils, a church founded in an ecumenical context, and one often appealing to the need for participation from local members and issues of justice. I include twelve more reasons to illustrate why a council of the church can err. ¹

1. The Assembly Standing Committee did not consider the report

The Standing Committee did not properly oversee the process for one of the most significant resolutions in the history of the church.

The background discussion paper to Resolution 84 was not considered by the March 2003 Assembly Standing Committee. For such an important matter to not have been first considered by the Standing Committee meeting before the Assembly, in order for preparations to be made for its consequences, and appropriate referral for legal advice and wider church opinion, is so incredible that one would find this fact simply beyond belief.

2. Too little time was allowed for preparation by members

The discussion paper on this matter was delivered far too late for adequate consideration and consultation. As a member of the Assembly I received the papers for this matter nine days before the meeting, well after other papers, and by then like most members, I had much to read, and I also had my own paid work to complete before the Assembly. There was little time to discuss with colleagues and my local church before leaving for the Assembly, and considerable time was needed to appreciate the very subtle underpinnings of this interesting document.

It is worth noting that the Standing Committee has introduced a cut off date for proposals for the 2006 Assembly - 31 December 2005, in order to allow for earlier distribution and consideration of material.

3. Resolution 84 was not passed by consensus at the Assembly

I still find it extremely worrying to meet people in the church who believe everyone at the Assembly voted in favour of Resolution 84. There was a clearly defined mechanism to force a move to formal voting. It was unfortunate that this was before a lunch break, and in order to finalise the matter and maintain momentum, the session time was extended for 15 minutes. This also gave the unfortunate impression that this was to help the media which was present in abundance, and give them the opportunity to wrap up the story. Again, Standing Committee has recognised this mistake and the recommendation to the Business Committee is that secular media not be permitted to record, either sounds or pictures, of business conducted during sessions of the 11th Assembly.

There was a day set for the passing of Resolution 84, and I knew it before hand. The media had already reported that proponents had the numbers, but I happened to be behind a certain Assembly member in the coffee queue when another member asked this person, what they were going to do to get the proposal through, and it was clearly outlined to this person that procedures were in place to move to formal procedures and wrap the matter up.

I believe the curtailment of discussion, which while technically correct under the manual for meetings, actually illustrates how the manual for meetings can be used to advantage by those with the majority at that time. The Uniting Church may publicly promote the notion of waiting on the spirit, but in the end, the same parliamentary style of decision making actually quenched the spirit and the ideal of a consensus. There should have been continued discussion, because there were many people ready and wanting to speak. They did not simply want to hold up a decision, they had genuine questions and comments that perhaps could have helped, but they were denied the opportunity.

It also has to be acknowledged that the decision was hasty because in actual fact, the official Resolution 84 which we are supposed to work from, is not actually the resolution of the 2003 Assembly, but a resolution modified by the Standing Committee. Never before has the Standing Committee had to clarify a decision to this extent, but for me this illustrated the level of confusion that was in reality operating at the Assembly. Clearly people did not know the implications of what they were voting for. I am aware that there have been other actions by Standing Committee in the past (for example - community ministry), but I believe the way this was done and the style of the change, including deletion of sections, and providing an apology, to be unique.

When I have mentioned this fact to officers of other denominations, it is this aspect that has astounded them in some ways more than the final decision. Our credibility as a denomination has been severely shaken by the confusing and damaging processes.

4. Resolution 84 was considered vital before being approved, and not vital after being approved.

During the debate to pass the resolution, several speakers highlighted how vital this proposal was for the church, but when it came to discussing whether the proposal was vital and should be referred to other councils of the church, the interest in its vitality ceased.

5. Resolution 84 was not referred for consideration

I believe much of the heat of the matter would have dissipated if Resolution 84 had been referred for concurrence according to the Basis of Union or at least Clause 39 of the Constitution.

Clause 39: On matters which, by a two-thirds majority vote, the Assembly deems to be vital to the life of the Church, the Assembly shall seek the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations as the Assembly may determine.

In a similar debate in 1997, a mechanism of provisional approval was formulated for any decisions on matters which were made by formal majority. Before the Assembly concluded, the Assembly had to determine which decisions (if any) were referred for concurrence, and by which councils as well.

Certainly this procedural mechanism would have been helpful in taking the heat out of the matter. There should also have been a debate in 2003 focussed on which councils were needed for concurrence because of the effect on the other councils of the church, especially the presbyteries, so I wish to now place myself on record as strongly disagreeing with the interpretation provided at the Assembly which effectively cut of the debate about whether concurrence should be sought with Synods/and Presbyteries and/or congregations before it even started, because the consideration of the clause was deemed to be limited to the matter of vitality, and the other part was thus effectively not considered.

6. Ecumenical matters were not considered before the passing of Resolution 84, and are still not being taken on board.

Because the matter had not even been to the Standing Committee, there had been no time to discuss with our dialogue partners issues related to any decision, and as a result damage has occurred to our primary dialogue relationships, and the development of ecumenical relationships has taken a sideshow position in a church called a Uniting Church.

7. Migrant-ethnic concerns were not and are still not adequately considered.

Having been secretary of a presbytery with 36 NESB congregations I can assure you that there is a high level of concern, and this has also been confirmed by resolutions at several of the annual National conferences of the migrant ethnic groups concerned, some of which are included in the Assembly booklet. There are issues of justice for the lay members of these congregations in particular, as in most cases they have not had the opportunity to present their voices and opinions in an open and 'safe' environment without domination from politically conscious Anglo ministers and members. There now seems to be an attempt within the Uniting Church to 'manage' the statements of migrant-ethnic conferences and overall opinions of individual members. I hope this campaign will not give the impression of implicit support for a position that our migrant-ethnic members would never support explicitly, particularly if they had been given the opportunity to respond before the Assembly made its decision.

8. Inadequate liaison with the UAICC

Similarly there was inadequate liaison with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress, and inadequate consideration of issues raised by the Congress, especially on the day after the passing of Resolution 84, where a group of people who had heard their concerns, tried to bring a rescission proposal. While this proposal received some sympathy, it was not really able to be properly considered, because by then Resolution 84 had achieved a life of its own and could not be taken back by the majority of members.

9. A destruction of the process of consultation

Consultation was a major feature of the Uniting Church as during the 1980s and 1990s reports were issued and responses sought from the councils of the church to issues of concern, doctrine and contemporary problems. The normal process for the Assembly was to prepare a report on responses and then listen to the responses of the church. While the councils of the church will listen to the voice of the members on most matters, when it comes to sexuality, there has always been a view, especially from some leaders that the voices are not worth listening to. Listening has become an abusive word in the Uniting Church.

10. Too much focus on Personal Experience

I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the focus on personal experience and decision making, often based on one view of scientific research. It is my understanding that there is no reliable statistical validity at the present time concerning research into the genetic basis of homosexuality, and in new research outlined in March 2005, the prime researcher of the 1993 'gay gene' theory, agreed that he was not able to support his previous research results.²

11. Continued Bias in Assembly process

The Assembly continues to demonstrate an orientation to one side in its presentation of matters related to Resolution 84. This is clearly demonstrated in the booklet *Sexuality and Leadership in the Uniting Church* (Assembly 2004), which in my opinion is still substantially better than previous documents. The main point in question for me is the article by Revd Margaret Blair, who is certainly entitled to an opinion, but why is this included? It cannot be argued it is a counter balance to the EMU article, because there is an article from Uniting Network. It is also termed 'Statement Five: An Assembly Member'. It is an interesting experiential reflection, but why is there no other view of an Assembly member. The brief introduction even says: *The following paper represents the views of just one member of the Uniting Church Assembly.*

Should this not be the 'view' of one member? Does this mean that there is only space for one Assembly member because every member would have agreed with the main orientation of this paper, or is it an acknowledgement that there is another viewpoint? For myself, I found the whole atmosphere of the Assembly markedly different from that suggested by Margaret Blair, but then having been an Assembly staff person for seven years, I am probably too deeply aware of the elements of real politics that cover these events.

12. Resolution 84 has critically damaged our polity

This resolution was inappropriate for a conciliar church because it changed our polity without discussion and approval by the relevant councils of the church, especially congregations and presbyteries, councils of the church where the issues are now confronted. Presbyteries have now moved to become mini-Assemblies. This means in effect that the Uniting Church is moving from being a national church to a federal church. This process will continue, as the orientation of our theology becomes more individualistic and congregational, but for this to be an unintended result, is in my opinion, an indication of what a very poor process can produce.

Conclusion

Can councils of the church err? I say Yes.

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¹ . This is a slightly revised and expanded version of the paper I presented to the July 2005 meeting of the Mid North Coast Presbytery. This meeting had been arranged to consider the Assembly booklet *Sexuality and Leadership in the Uniting Church*.

² . See the paper by Dr Neil Whitehead: 'Born that way?', presented to the Second National Conference of the Reforming Alliance 2005.