

Thinking the unthinkable – 5

The Central Council

The Central Council (CC) dates from the same era as most ringing societies, which I looked at in the last article, but it was by no means the inevitable next step that the reformers thought when they proposed a ‘national ringing society’. Initially there was little support for the idea, and only when Sir AP Heywood took up the cause, did anything happen. As a notable ringer and composer, and one of the landed gentry (see RW p 313) he used his influence and some clever tactics, to form the Council as a loose federation of the ringing societies.

The Council’s loose structure and procedures made it not very effective at first. It reflected Heywood’s main interest, which was to bring science and consistency to the technical aspects of ringing, though that was of little interest to most ringers. But from this beginning the Council evolved. Before the First War it produced the seminal book *Bell Towers and Bell Hanging: An Appeal to Architects*, which had a lasting influence on bell restoration. After the war, its procedures were progressively reformed to make it more effective, and as new needs arose, it set up new committees to deal with them. Some committees seem quaint in retrospect, like the one to negotiate discounted railway fares for ringers, but others had more lasting significance. For example, the Central Council Library currently holds more ringing-related books than the British Library and the Cambridge University Library combined.

Despite the Council’s significant achievements, many ringers still see it as a remote irrelevance. I am reminded of the Monty Python sketch where the natives were grumbling ‘What did the Romans ever do for us?’ And then they grudgingly admitted: ‘Well, apart from the aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, freshwater, and public health’.

The Council hasn’t been around as long as the Romans, but it has been around far longer than modern ringers can remember, and it was responsible for much of the fabric of modern ringing that we take for granted.

Criticisms

Despite the Council’s good work, it is heavily criticised, so there must be some things it is not doing well, especially as some of the criticisms come from ringers who have themselves made significant contributions to ringing. Let’s see what fire, if any, lies behind the smoke.

Just a jolly – The Council is portrayed as an elite group that spends a weekend a year having a good time and arguing about esoteric things like methods. That view is largely based on ignorance, since the annual meeting is just the tip of an iceberg. Most of the Council’s work is done year-round by its officers and fifteen working committees, most of which are not concerned with methods, but deal with almost every other aspect of ringing.

Undemocratic – Council members represent ringing societies (with more members for larger societies), and though most of them are probably ‘voted in’ at a society meeting, there are likely to be few members at the meeting, and if no one else is willing to stand, then there may be no choice anyway. In terms of participation,

that is even worse than the way we elect a government. Most ringers never vote for any Council members, let alone vote them onto a working committees, or form a view about their effectiveness in the job.

Self-perpetuating committees – Committees are elected by Council members, not by ordinary ringers. A few people have served on the same committee for many years, and some of these long servers propose each other when it comes to elections. In fact, many committees have significant turnover of members, but that doesn’t make headlines. A more serious criticism is that Council members voting for committees have inadequate information on which to base their vote. They often know little about what an existing committee member has achieved, or what a potential new member is capable of achieving, so there is a strong tendency to ‘vote for familiar faces’.

Honorary members – This changed at the 2010 Council meeting, but I will include it for completeness. About 10% of Council members were elected by the Council itself, and didn’t represent a ringing society. That seemed even more undemocratic – a way to thwart the will of member societies. In fact, since they were elected by secret ballot, and had to receive a majority vote to be elected, they probably had more people voting for them than the average Society representative does. The title ‘honorary’ was misleading too. They were elected because they had some particular experience or skill to contribute, usually to a specific working committee. Unsurprisingly, people selected in this way tended to be more active in Council than many other members, and many of them held offices, which also drew criticism.

In 2010, Council revised its rules to make a much clearer link between a smaller number of what are now called ‘additional members’ (a more accurate description) and the value that they will bring to the Council. In a nutshell, nominations must be made in advance, and accompanied by a statement about what the candidate can offer, and why they are needed.

Inactive members – Since most of the Council’s work is done by its committees, one might expect that most members would be on at least one committee. In fact nearly 60% of members serve on no committee at all. Many members do not contribute to debates either. Do these silent members lobby actively behind the scenes? What did those who elected them expect them to do? Currently there are fewer than 150 committee places (including stewards, officers, etc) while Council has over 200 members. Yet committee elections are often uncontested, and several committees have operated with vacancies in recent years.

Restrictive rules (peals and methods) – Strictly the Council has no ‘rules’ for what we can ring, just ‘decisions’ for what it includes in its records, so we can ring what we like. In practice most ringers like their performances to be included in the records, they expect agreement about what constitutes a peal (or quarter peal) and they want people to know what they mean when they use method names.

That seems simple enough, so why does the Council make a meal of it? And it is a meal – the decisions run to well over 5000 words.

Even so, the decisions can’t be ‘right’, because they cause heated argument every time someone tries to ring something innovative.

One reason is that it is quite hard to define things consistently and unambiguously, especially when trying to cater for well over 13,000 different methods rung so far, and to make names fit with things that people expect to be called the same thing on a different number of bells. Over the years, the CC’s experts have wrestled with the problem of providing universal definitions that we can all agree on, and to a large degree they have succeeded. But unsurprisingly they have failed to cover all possibilities. However much they tweak the definitions, people keep discovering new ways of ringing that don’t fit the old ways of describing things. Usually the definitions are patched up, but not without friction.

Many people advocate another way. Instead of only recognising peals in types of method that have already been defined, why not separate the two tasks of describing methods (so we all know what we mean when we talk about them) and stipulating the criteria for what makes a peal acceptable (regardless of whether the type of method used to ring it has yet been conceived). The criteria for acceptability could be relatively simple – minimum length, continuous ringing, the need for truth, and so on (though even that turns out to be less simple than you might think). Innovation would still require definitions to be extended to cater for them, but that would be a retrospective technical ‘tidying up’ task, removed from any controversy about whether peals containing the new methods were acceptable. This seems a superior approach, but so far no one has managed to produce a set of criteria that gain consensus – even among the critics – so the status quo remains.

Out of touch – The Council is accused of not being interested in ‘ordinary ringers’. Of course it depends what you mean by an ordinary ringer. The Council’s work serves the whole Exercise, so not all of its output will interest every ringer. For example, someone who doesn’t teach, doesn’t get involved in bell maintenance or restoration, rings few methods, never rings peals, has no interest in improved performance, and never rings outside the home tower might pass over much of it. But even such a ringer may benefit indirectly from the Council’s work on education, training, tower management or bell restoration.

Perhaps the real problem is that ordinary ringers are out of touch with the Council. That provides a different perspective, but it does not absolve the Council, since it reflects on its failure to engage with the majority of ringers, including its failure to engage with some of the accomplished and ambitious ringers who are among its sternest critics.

Incapable of change – The Council has thrown out several attempts to reform it. An organisation like the Central Council needs to provide long term stability, so it should not try to respond to passing fads. But it must also be able to change in order to keep pace with a changing world. Council has defied its critics by making some changes, but it has also resisted some others that showed prima facie merit. It seems that some of its members are a little too comfortable with the status quo.

Built on sand? – What the Council does is the result of what its members decide. Almost all of them are put there by the ringing societies, and as we saw, the process of selection and election is often a token one. And since the ringing societies themselves enjoy only token support from the mass of ringers, we could say that the Council, however noble its intent, is built on layers of sand.

We might thus conclude that all of the Council's achievements are not due to the institution itself, or to any democratic mandate, but merely due to the happy accident that enough of the ringers who found themselves on the Council had the necessary wisdom and ability to discern what was needed, and the drive and selfless dedication to get things done. From that perspective, ringers have had a very good deal, and shouldn't be surprised that some things aren't quite perfect.

Reform?

How could we improve things so that our ringing societies and the Central Council more fully meet the aspirations of their critics, and of ringers at large?

Let's start with a basic question – evolution or revolution? Should we reform what we've got, or should we start again? Town planners face similar dilemmas. They inherit buildings built to serve former generations, and they must decide whether to refurbish and adapt them to modern uses, or demolish them and build new ones from scratch. Adaptation involves compromises but preserves many good features of the old buildings, whereas rebuilding is wasteful, destroys the good with the bad, and causes much upheaval and disruption. Then if the grand new design turns out to have problems of its own, the fear of more disruption may prevent them being fixed, so the overall result might be 'out of the fat and into the fire'.

A national ringing society?

Given a blank sheet of paper, some people favour creating a national (or international) ringing society. It could perform many of the functions of the Central Council, but would be directly accountable to its members, the ringers. Let's think how it might work. Members would be kept up to date with regular newsletters (e-mail as well as paper) and website updates.

The society would need specialist committees to do its work, but they and its executive officers would be elected directly by the members, the same as other interest groups and professional bodies do. Members would receive information about candidates – what they have done and what they wish to do if elected – and then vote either by post or electronically.

The society would probably need a regional structure, like many other national bodies, but the regions would be an outreach of the main body, not separate bodies, and there would probably be fewer of them than the 50 or so current territorial ringing societies. The new national society might also sponsor special interest groups allowing ringers with particular interests to share ideas, and to be more involved with the work of the relevant specialist committees. Again, there are parallels with professional bodies.

Would people join? If the new society replaced the current setup (however the transition is achieved) then we would expect

bands to encourage their members to join, as they do with the current territorial societies, and as many firms encourage their staff to join the relevant professional body. We might expect additional encouragement if membership included benefits like insurance cover.

The idea of an overall ringing society has much to commend it, but it is unclear how we could make the change from what we have now. Setting up a new body in competition with the current structures might attract some ringers, but would not make a lot of sense unless it was a transition towards a replacement. How could we persuade the Central Council to make such a drastic change to its constitution, when its members are elected by societies whose role would be greatly diminished under the new order, if they even survived at all? It would require far more diplomacy and persuasion than Sir AP Heywood used to get the societies to agree to the Central Council in the first place.

Evolution

If revolution is too big a step, could we evolve our current structures to make them more effective? The Central Council is already (gradually) reforming itself, and we might reasonably hope to see more informed election procedures within the Council generally (as it has now done with additional members). The Council is already taking tentative steps to engage more actively with societies, and to encourage them to seek out and elect pro-active people with appropriate skills to be their representative members of Council. We might hope to see the Council engaging more with ordinary ringers. We might even see some sort of rapprochement with the dissenters over things like peal and method definitions.

Significant evolution of ringing societies seems more problematic. What they do, they seem to do moderately well, for the benefit of those who choose to engage with them, but they have negligible impact on most ringers. When the ringing societies were formed, they had a specific mission – to promote change ringing and to reform ringers – and they were very pro-active about achieving their goals, for example by hiring instructors to go round individual towers, teaching and assessing progress.

How could our modern societies become much more pro-active? Do they have the energy and the human resources to be able to do so? Should they work much more through ringing centres, some of which are are very pro-active? Are there better ways to organise ringing activities 'on the ground'?

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Reference: *The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers: A Centenary History*, William T Cook.