

Religious Dissenter: Peter Cameron and the Heresy Trial

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On the whole the status of heretic is not one that I would recommend.

There is a certain image conjured up by the word which is essentially negative: not only are you suspect theologically, but is almost as if you were unclean and should have a bell around your neck to people of your approach. And ancillary accusations abound such as being dishonest, or a servant of Satan. - Peter Cameron'

Peter Cameron was convicted of heresy by the Presbyterian Church of Australia in March 1993. At that stage he was the Principal of St Andrew's College at the University of Sydney. The charge arose out of a sermon the previous year in which Cameron had supported the ordination of women, criticised the church's hard line on homosexuality and questioned its fundamentalism. This unleashed a remarkable attack on Cameron, the temper of which he thus describes:

In all walks of life of which I had experience – in the legal profession, the universities, even the underworld in Dundee – I never came across such unpleasantness, and bitterness, and anger, and sheer nastiness, as I did in the church.

All this in reaction to his liberal theological ambition:

What I wanted to do was to liberate people from their slavery to the Bible and to give it a new status; I wanted to raise their own estimation of themselves and their capacity to respond to God. I wanted to open their eyes to the Humanity in the Bible and divinity in themselves.

Cameron has very ably told his story in three books he wrote after the trial. His experiences, however, need to be dealt with here because a heresy trial in Australia in 1993 unambiguously speaks of the rise of fundamentalism, a mortal enemy of dissent. The fundamentalism in focus here appears in our everyday experience as a loosely confederated movement of biblical literalism and patriarchy.

This powerful movement against dissent and whistle blowing needs to be constantly reappraised, for fundamentalism is to dissent as the mongoose is to the snake. There is no middle ground; no peace is possible, no mediated settlement can ever be brokered. This is no struggle between equally matched opponents. In its fight against fundamentalism, dissent usually has its back to the wall. In reflecting on Cameron's heresy trial, social commentator Hugh McKay reflected this view:

Peter Cameron was a victim of a set of circumstances which did not favour boat-rockers and whistleblowers. He came onto the scene at a time when many people were looking for some relief from uncertainty, rather than a new set of questions to face.

My re-telling of Cameron's story avoids the theological matters at issue, and instead focuses on the processes of vilification that were set in train against him. It also inquires into Cameron's own contribution to his downfall. The questions that settle over the Cameron case are the same ones that appear at the end of every whistleblower story: was it all worthwhile? And did anything

change? These questions stay with whistleblowers for years. The reader is invited to stay with them at least until the end of this book.

One important point to note at the outset concerns the way Cameron identified himself. He has referred to himself as a 'heretic', a cunning and courageous move. By adopting the negative label that his accusers would apply to him, he assumed a huge strategic advantage. Like black Americans who from time to time referred to themselves as 'niggers' in the context of their struggle for racial emancipation, Cameron has protected himself by a pre-emptive strategy. After all, what could be worse than accepting the full force of the accusation of being a modern heretic in the Presbyterian Church of Australia? While this is a reluctant move on Cameron's part, it also indicates that he is comfortable with his identity as a dissenter.

In dissenters' formative backgrounds there is often a subculture of familial reinforcement, powerful role-modelling and liberal conditioning that sustains outspokenness. As Cameron rightly says, 'One does not become a dissenter overnight.' Within these subcultures dissenters learn to see contradiction in all human existence and to value critical analyses honed by experience, where there are no icons above suspicion. Dissenters and whistleblowers are ethical over reachers, forever going beyond what the prevailing orthodoxy says are the central values. So Cameron the dissenter did not stop his critique at the pedestal on which the Presbyterian God sat. His questioning went through that concept, not to it.

When Cameron tells of his childhood experiences in his village church in Scotland, he displays an early leaning towards a contradiction-sensitive, dissenting personality. In *Heretic* he describes his Sunday school teacher in these terms:

In church (my teacher) wore a demure grey hat and a veneer of piety, but the vulgarity and viciousness which she displayed in the school bus were always near the surface...As a result I have always been conscious that the church resembles a fancy-dress party: people are rarely what they seem.

I could not surpass the gripping way Cameron tells of another formative experience;

We were being addressed by a visiting preacher of outstanding dreariness...The school had lapsed into its usual stupefaction ... I was fidgeting in my corner in the back row of the chair when I happened to find in my packet a whistle, with which I had been refereeing a Rugby match that afternoon. I was at once attacked by a terrible urge to raise it to my lips and blow: to blow the whistle on all this charade, this imposture ... I can't communicate the violence of that desire to raise the whistle, the tightness of my grip on it, the tension in my arm, as the visiting preacher above went on his weary way regardless.

His nerve failed him on that occasion. Years later in Australia it wouldn't.

After receiving qualifications in law and working for a time as a prosecutor, Cameron entered the ministry and was ordained into the Presbyterian Church of Scotland at the age of thirty-eight, still with his dissenting proclivities intact. He has said: 'I felt that instead of turning my back on the church, as all my instincts prompted me to do, my task was to debunk its pomposity and pharisaism from within. Perhaps Cameron's atheistic parents had something to do with his less-than-complete socialisation into Presbyterianism.

Cameron and his family moved to Sydney at the beginning of 1991, when he was appointed Principal of St Andrew's College, a place not unused to the whiff of heresy in its 128-year history. In the 1930s the college had been rocked by a series of complaints against Samuel Angus, its Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Theology, who was accused of deviating from Presbyterian theology by questioning the historical basis of the divinity of Christ and the virgin birth.

When Cameron took up his post, Presbyterians accounted for about 4.5 per cent of Australian Christians. Fourteen years earlier, three Australian Protestant churches had amalgamated to form the Uniting Church, but a sizeable proportion (thirty-six per cent) of Presbyterians decided not to amalgamate. These continuing Presbyterians tended to be theological conservatives, and included a much higher proportion of biblical fundamentalists than in the Scottish church. This formed the backdrop for the collision between Cameron the liberal church leader and the Sydney fundamentalist Presbyterians.

The first skirmish took place within three weeks of Cameron's arrival, when he was interviewed by two members of the Sydney Presbytery, ostensibly to gather material for a church magazine. Cameron, however, felt that their other purpose was to interrogate his theological position.

Seven months after Cameron's arrival, the General Assembly of Australia decided to reverse a seventeen-year-old policy of ordaining women. This was a major blow to those liberal Presbyterians left in the church after the schism. For Cameron, a strong supporter of female ordination, the church lights had just changed from green to orange. The question was: should he proceed with caution or drive straight through?

On 2 March 1992 Cameron preached a sermon called 'The Place of Women in the Church' to 300 members of a Presbyterian women's organisation. In the sermon Cameron raised objections to the slavish following of the writings of St Paul, a principal source of authority for those who reversed the policy of ordaining women and proclaimed the sinfulness of homosexuality. Cameron went on to observe that there were non-biblical reasons for the opposition to female ordination, and specifically mentioned male vanity and privilege among the elders of the church.

It should perhaps be clarified that the wrongdoing that Cameron disclosed in this and similar sermons was predominantly moral in nature. He was not on about church graft or bribery, he was concerned at the moral wrong, as he saw it, of a too literal translation of the Bible, and the patriarchal exclusion of women from leadership positions in his church.

Cameron's mostly female audience greeted his sermon with enthusiasm. Many women were pleased to find a new and charismatic spokesperson for church women seeking a greater pastoral role. Cameron was able to support women's ordination in the most effective way for a Bible-centred church. He showed the congregation how the Bible could be read to a conclusion favouring women's ordination. This unresolved theological conflict was the major context for Cameron's trial, and his leadership on the women's side accounts for why he was so severely dealt with.

At that time there were only five women ministers in the Presbyterian Church. One of them was present at Ashfield. She has said that she listened to his sermon with tears in her eyes because she foresaw what was going to happen to him.

Indeed, this critical speech was the defining moment for Cameron. In reaching down below the Bible into the mere mortal world of patriarchy for the source of opposition to female ordination, he made some very powerful enemies. From that moment in the pulpit at Ashfield, the conflict between Cameron and the fundamentalists in the church took on a dual identity. The conflict always looked like a battle about theology. It was, to an extent. But by dragging patriarchy into the debate Cameron gave the conflict a personal dimension. He would soon be attacked by the church patriarchs for who he was, as well as what he stood for.

There was also a secondary current in the campaign against Cameron, that of church nationalism. There is some evidence background and qualifications. He was from Scotland, the mother country of Presbyterianism, and had taught in one of Scotland's most prestigious theological faculties. A statement from Reverend Paul Cooper, a church spokesman at the time of the heresy trial, suggests that Cameron was targeted for his nationality as well as his views:

Though the views that Dr Cameron is spouting would be acceptable in Scotland, they are not acceptable in Australia. We are a different church ... an independent Church. Colonialism is dead. Dr Cameron wants the Presbyterian Church to be like the Church of Scotland ... but we make our own decisions and our decision is that we don't want to be that sort of church. We stand under the authority of the Bible.

Although Cameron's audience for his Ashfield sermon was predominantly women, at the front of the congregation taking notes was the Reverend Peter Hastie, minister of Ashfield Presbyterian Church, who would soon become a prime mover in Cameron's trial. Two weeks later, on 14 March, a complaint about Cameron's sermon was sent to the Clerk of the Sydney Presbytery. The complainant, a theology lecturer at the Sydney Mission Bible College, requested the Sydney Presbytery to:

Ascertain what are Dr Cameron's views ... and to take what other action it thinks appropriate to fulfil its responsibility to maintain defend the faith as understood in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Cameron's supporters would argue that the Westminster Confession of Faith is not an immutable doctrine. It can in fact be changed as a result of a 1901 theological agreement called the Basis of Union. Since then the Westminster Confession has been changed twice, and those promoting the changes were not subjected to heresy trials.

The distance between Cameron and his complainants was already wide, but the institution of formal proceedings put both parties into a lose-lose situation. Cameron felt the early attacks acutely. He ended his first formal defence of his Ashfield sermon by saying to Dr Keith, the convenor of the first investigatory committee.

If you subject to my views, I expect you to give a satisfactory answer to these questions. If on the other hand you do not subject to my views, then I expect some sort of apology from the Presbytery for all the unpleasantness and vilification I have been subjected to as a result of this process.

Two observations can be made at this point. First, according to Cameron, the reprisals started immediately. Secondly, from the outset both sides responded to what was essentially a conflict over faith with the inappropriate instruments of logic and rationality. An example of this from Cameron's side is found in his response to the conclusion of Dr Keith's committee:

Firstly, let me admit that I am slightly surprised at the Committee's conclusion, that 'Dr Cameron may not hold views which are entirely consistent with Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith' – surprised that is, because the logical entailment of that proposition is that Dr Cameron may hold views which are entirely consistent with Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith ... This report therefore is incompetent, illegal, and irrelevant, and I congratulate the Committee on achieving so much in the space of three sentences.

Cameron's strategy (possibly learnt in his days in law) was to give the church leaders a double dose of sarcasm and logic. The more logical he became, the more his chances of failure increased, for what was being contested here were matters of faith not fact. At the end of the day legal arguments and rational discourse, a sort of *lingua franca* of the heresy proceeding, would take second place to religious belief. But what else could Cameron have done? He understood the frailty of his strategies:

Applying sarcasm and ridicule certainly made me enjoy the whole exercise more but it didn't improve my prospects. I think that having begun to hit back, the best thing I could do was what I did: go on hitting back regardless of the consequences.

He also acknowledged that conflicts about fundamental issues bring out the worst in people:

The necessity to be always defending yourself, which can only be done successfully in this sort of context by attacking, makes you appear pugnacious and cantankerous; and in time you begin to think automatically in terms of confrontation.

Cameron has told us, in the most eloquent fashion, what it is like to walk in the shoes of a church whistleblower. He has spoken of the isolation, the risk-taking, the challenge to his relationship to his God, and the ostracism from people he once thought of as friends. These personal reactions speak of whistleblower vulnerability and organisational supremacy.

Cameron's sense of the fearful power of church discipline was corroborated by Stuart Clements, a Presbyterian minister and Cameron supporter:

It so happens that as a young minister thirty years ago, I took part in a Commission of Assembly at the appeal of the Rev. Mr Finch against his conviction for contumacy (stubborn resistance to authority). I went into proceedings as a commissioner and incidentally as a lawyer, thinking that it would be a matter of no great consequence compared with a conviction in a state court. I came out shaking (literally) at the appalling weight placed upon someone by a condemnation of the church.

What is the nature of the 'appalling weight'? Part of the answer is that dissent transforms the authority relationship from one of accord to one of discord. In the first phase the future whistleblower is more at one with her or his organisation. Workplaces do not consciously recruit dissenters. We can go further and generally state that the relationship can be one of indoctrination, in which the worker's personal values are refashioned (some would say

contorted) to conform to workplace requirements presented as 'values'. This is the period of accord. For many of us it lasts as long as we work, give or take the occasional grumble. Workplace accord provides emotional and material benefits. We experience a sense of belonging and purpose. To cap it off we are remunerated, and this gives us a comfortable, secure lifestyle. So powerful are the benefits of accord that few of us dare jeopardise them by challenging the organisation, at least not overtly.

Those who dissent have a really hard time when accord gives way to discord, because of terrible contradiction. They have been cast out of an organisation that they previously embraced so completely that they could no tell ethically where the person finished and the organisation started. Whistleblowers in the phase of discord must deal with the terrible effects of rejection. The expelling organisation, which by definition cannot feel, closes ranks and forgets the whistleblower the moment he or she is out the gate. Whistleblowers remember the rejection forever. This was Cameron's lot.

His original surprise that church leaders would take exception to his sermon, and his shock at the speed with which they reacted, soon gave way to an appreciation of the trouble he and the church were in. A note he sent to the church after it decided not to accept the Keith Committee Report as a mixture of peace offering and dire warning:

One of the reasons why I have made a point of challenging the irregularities which have so far arisen has been to give the Presbytery a chance to rethink and to back out ... If ... they (Sydney Presbytery) ... raise some sort of libel, it seems to me that this could do untold harm to the Presbyterian Church of Australia. I must admit I don't relish the prospect myself, but I am sure that it will damage the Church far more than it will damage me ... This case threatens to become as unpleasant and as farcical as the Angus case, and all it will achieve will be to bring home to people outside just how little theological progress the Presbyterian Church of Australia has made since (the 1930s).

To some the case did become as unpleasant and farcical as the Angus heresy trial. Opportunities for conciliation soon evaporated. Each side was moving into battle. The stakes were high – the interpretative control of the Bible. Both sides saw the righteousness of their positions with clear eyes. It became a case of 'praise the ammunition and pass the Lord'. One can argue that there is never a time for rapprochement between power and dissent; that the relationship can only be transacted through conflict. That is the way Cameron's matter worked itself out as neither side seemed burdened with Luther's worry that the other side might just be right.

By now, however, it was too late for rapprochement. The next stage was a Brotherly Conference. On 23 June 1992 Cameron faced fifty members of the Sydney Presbytery. The mood on both sides was one of determination and anger. Cameron was asked whether he still stood by the sermon he preached in March. He reasserted his theological position, and also defended the claim that homosexuality and Christianity were compatible.

Cameron left the Brotherly Conference optimistic that the conflict was coming to an end. Again he had misread the charts. On 4 August the Sydney Presbytery decided to hold a Preliminary Inquiry, the next stage in its complicated procedure for the examination of allegations of

heresy. Three weeks later, on 25 August, the Presbytery moved to the final stage, the Judicial Process, a heresy trial by another name.

Disagreements about the pending process occurred between the Church's most senior legal adviser, Garry Downs QC, and Cameron's prosecutor, Bruce Christian, a minister at Rose Bay and former Moderator of the church. On 17 November the Presbytery confirmed its intention to proceed to the trial.

One week later the story was out. The Sydney Morning Herald splashed 'Heretic? The Cleric Who Praised Women' across page one. Cameron received strong coverage in both print and electronic media, and a good deal of support from the Sydney Morning Herald in particular. Numerous letters of support followed, including two in different handwriting from the Archangel Michael, which Cameron found 'encouraging'.

Cameron was once a public prosecutor, and knew the adversary's role well. He knew how to fight as well as how to preach. He has said that going to the media was 'the best thing I could have done' but we must qualify this claim. The media are a powerful weapon for exposing clandestine activities and secret deliberations, particularly when journalists are well-informed and tenacious. This strategy can be so powerful that no government in Australia has been brave enough to protect whistleblowers who go to the media.

But, as Cameron soon discovered, the media's support can be a two-edged sword. The other edge of the media sword is felt every time the media kindergarten-ise complicated issues or gut the story of all but sensational bits. Media exposure reflects and amplifies social conflicts, which they call 'news', and therefore entrenches adversarial positions. This is a serious problem: stereotypical images and fighting words detract from the conflict's potential to effect change.

At one level, Cameron understood this. He has said that going public 'undoubtedly hardened the hearts of the opposition and made the eventual conviction (for heresy) more or less inevitable'. On the other hand, he took comfort from the public support he received.

In most cases whistleblowing is essentially a solo pursuit. Often whistleblowers have to endure long winters of despair with only their consciences for companions. One effect of this isolation is that dissenters can start to suspect that they are wrong, or even losing their minds. In this situation it was a great boost to Cameron to read the media-stimulated support letters, and hear the telephone ring with another comfort call. Reflecting on his new strength, he said: 'Now I could face the rest of the proceedings with the knowledge that most rational people, both inside and outside the church, were very much on my side. Note Cameron's continuing emphasis on the curative force of rationality.

Around this time Lindsay Moore, a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church and its former principal law agent, resigned in protest at its treatment of Cameron. Moore became Cameron's legal adviser for the trial. Moore said:

I realised that I could no longer be publicly identified with a particular religious mind-set which I found abhorrent, I felt a growing personal estrangement and cynicism, and this is not good for the soul.

Moore went on to say that he was disenchanted with the religious repression in the church. Cameron's matter was only one of several issues troubling the liberal Presbyterians. He mentioned the Presbytery of Dubbo's initiation of an inquisition against the church at Coonabarabran, and a decision by the minister at Wynnum (Brisbane) to rip out a stained-glass window of the Good Shepherd against the wishes of the congregation. He also deplored the action of the General Assembly of Queensland in directing teachers at its Fairholme College to teach creation 'science'. It seemed the Presbyterian Church was rocking on the precipice of yet another split.

Cameron's trial was set to start on 18 March 1993, and was the subject of intense media interest. The Sydney Morning Herald was continuing its coverage, and Sixty Minutes got exclusive TV rights from Cameron under a callous agreement that there would be no story unless the verdict went against him. When Cameron arrived at the Presbyterian Theological Centre in Burwood, Sydney, he was greeted by half-a-dozen TV cameras and sundry print and radio reporters. After the media were sent out and the doors closed, the pattern of allegation and defence went on until 11.30pm, when the elders voted by a majority of twenty-six to three to sustain the charge that Cameron had made heretical statements inconsistent with Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Strangely, the charge relating to his position on homosexuality was dismissed by an even bigger majority.

The church took a public-relations beating in the storm of protest and support that erupted. The next day the Council of St Andrew's College issued a statement in support of its principal. For a time, the secular press and the Presbyterian Review were inundated with letters of support for Cameron. A writer to the Sydney Morning Herald (25 March 1993) compared him to Socrates, who was forced to suicide for challenging establishment views. Another correspondent said:

It is appalling that the Presbyterian Church has ordered a fine man to be characterised as a heretic on the words of a man, a known misogynist (St Paul) who was not even around when Jesus Christ taught tolerance, love and kindness to one another.

Another quoted Jesus Christ's words after his own trial: 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.'

The question of sentence was deferred after Cameron said that he would appeal. His appeal was heard on 2 July before an Assembly of members of the church, which dismissed it by a majority of 123 to 65. Cameron's prosecutor, the Reverend Peter Hastie, said:

I am genuine when I say I am saddened for Dr Cameron. The decision would have wounded him, and I took no delight in seeing him, as it were, under the pressure of the Assembly as he was.

Cameron faced four possible punishments: rebuke, suspension, deposition (exclusion from the ministry) and excommunication (expulsion from the church). He thought that it was most likely to be one of the last two. To pre-empt this, he withdrew from his last appeal opportunity and resigned from the ministry on 1 August 1994. His tell-all book *Heretic* was published the next day. In reflecting on his traumatic experiences, Cameron said with pride:

I have a feeling of mission accomplished. At long last I have steeled myself to raise the whistle to my lips and blow. My nerve failed me on that occasion in the school chapel thirty years ago, and I regretted it ever since.

That was Cameron on a good day; that was Cameron the achiever. Soon the shine goes off this sense of achievement, as the following statement from Cameron shows:

It was said some years ago that God was dead. It might not be so absurd now to proclaim the death of the Church ... I entered the ministry as, in some sense an imposter – a double agent – hoping to change things from within. That is no longer possible for me. I have stopped preaching now because I think people come to hear me as they would the fat lady in the circus.

Cameron left Australia for good in January 1996 to return to his native Scotland. “He left the Presbyterian Church and was subsequently ordained into the Scottish Episcopal (Anglican) Church.

Cameron’s case raises a number of issues. One important question is whether there is a place for perpetual dissenter, or in Steiner’s words the ‘discourser without end’. Cameron left the church after a brief but intense engagement. Is there value to the organisation, and to the standards that it so assiduously promotes, in allowing whistleblowers to have a protected presence after they disclose? Or is their value in the short, sharp shock? The arguments appear compelling on both sides. Once the dissenter is expelled from the organisation, what happens to the torch of dissent? Is it picked up, or does the flame go out?

One thing that is clear from Cameron’s case is that whistleblowers move along in currents that are stronger than they are. As one Presbyterian commentator has said:

There was a surge of anger and disgust at the Cameron decision within the basic membership of the Church, (but) that was only from those who were involved or concerned enough to notice what was going on. Even then they had to be experienced enough to recognise it for what it was, a power struggle in which Cameron himself was only a pawn.