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Editorial

The 1995 Bishopsgate Conference, which is now sponsored by Reform, was intrigued to hear from Dr Peter Jensen, Principal of Moore College, Sydney, that the Church of England needs a theological college which will stand clearly in the tradition of conservative Evangelicalism – of the type endorsed by Reform itself. On the whole, this was welcome news to those present, which was hardly surprising – after all Dr Jensen was speaking to the converted, and many people look to Reform for precisely the kind of leadership which he was offering.

That an Australian was prepared to say what the Englishmen on the platform would do no more than hint at did not go unnoticed, particularly as it was already known to many of those present that one of Dr Jensen's employees, Dr David Peterson, had just been appointed Principal of Oak Hill College, in London. Coincidence? It would obviously be unfair to put Dr Jensen's words in the mouth of Dr Peterson, but it cannot be denied that there are many who expect that Oak Hill, if not some other evangelical college, will be urged to move in the direction which he outlined. In the current climate, it would have little to lose, and probably much to gain, since there is a growing body of people who want the kind of training which Moore College offers, but which is not readily available in England.

This is not to say that such a development would be unopposed. There are plenty of people in the Church of England, many of them professed Evangelicals, who do not like Reform or what it stands for, and who would do whatever they could to prevent such a thing happening. No-one is more chary of conservatives than those who were once of that number themselves, but who have since broadened into more liberal, or mainstream, paths, and traditional Evangelicals must expect some strong opposition from people of that kind. This is a great pity, since the essence of a truly liberal mind is a willingness to tolerate the opinions of others, and to promote diversity. Sadly, the one thing that ex-conservative Evangelicals seem to take with them into their new world of woolliness is the conviction that they and they alone are absolutely right!

A Reform-style theological college would certainly be accused of every kind of prejudice and narrowness, probably most unfairly. This always seems to be the fate of conservatives, as the Editorial Board of this journal knows only too well. We have been tarred with all sorts of unpleasant brushes, often by people who have found neither the time nor the energy to read what we publish. The Council of Reform has experienced a similar reaction from those who dislike it for one reason or another, and it would

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be extremely naïve to suppose that a revamped theological college would be any better off in that respect.

From the conservative point of view, it has to be admitted that there are people who embrace the positions adopted by *Churchman* and Reform for reasons which are less than edifying. This is unfortunate, and we must always be on our guard against mere prejudice on the part of would-be supporters. But conservatives hardly have a monopoly of the unworthy, and it is wrong to judge them by such examples. What is truly disturbing is not that there are a few bitter people who support Reform, but that so many otherwise moderate folk have been forced to organise themselves in this way because they feel that otherwise their voice – and the voice of the Gospel – will not be heard in the Church today.

Dr Jensen stressed that there is a need for a college which would strengthen the kind of theological position which supporters of this journal and of Reform wish to uphold, and that necessarily implies that at the moment no-one is doing this adequately. Other Evangelicals are bound to feel threatened by this, but rather than denounce Reform or suspect it of underhand motives, would it not be better to consider why such a movement has come into existence, and to ask whether there is not something they could be doing to meet the concerns which have thus been expressed? Snide remarks and private denunciations do not constitute argument, and they certainly do nothing to promote a constructive way forward.

Theological renewal among Evangelicals is long overdue, and to be effective it must reach out beyond the petty world of private or institutional jealousies. A much-needed reconstruction in one college should not be seen as an attack on others, but rather as a contribution to the outworking of a common task. In recent years the conservative voice has been stifled within evangelical ranks, as the debate over the ordination of women demonstrated all too clearly. It is time for this to be put right, not in a triumphalistic spirit, but with the truly liberal concern of searching for truth. Conservatives are not perfect, but neither are they all wrong. If their voice is not heard or respected, the Church as a whole will be the poorer for it. Let us pray that as we look to the future, we may be reminded of this, and be willing to allow the traditional evangelical voice a place in the debating chamber once again.

GERALD BRAY