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# “UNITY THAT SANCTIFIES DIVERSITY”. COTTESLOE REVISITED.<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The Cottesloe Consultation (1960) is an important milestone in the ecumenical struggle against apartheid and racism in general. This article tries to find out whether the theological arguments developed within the ecumenical movement are solid enough to withstand the threat of divisions on the basis of race, nation, tribe, and ethnicity that have the potential to tear apart the one church of Christ. In order to answer the questions the historical and textual background of the text of the Cottesloe Consultation is analyzed. It reveals that exactly at the place where the text tries to theologially justify the diversity of people within the unity of the church of humanity, the drafters could not rely on help from the theological commission of the World Council of Churches, and relied on an expressions coming from the defense of the then apartheid churches in South Africa, that is “unity sanctifies diversity”. It illustrates that next to a moral answer the theological argument still requires further development.

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The active participation of the World Council of Churches in the fight against the apartheid governments in South Africa mainly in the 1970ties and 80ties is well documented (Webb 1994 and Hermann 2006). Best known is the Program to Combat Racism.

For many Christians in Europe and North America much more was at stake than the condemnation of a foreign racist regime. It had a more personal touch. The evil was not just located in an outside political system, but it had infected the “family”. Indeed South Africa presented itself as a Christian nation and some of its churches actively defended apartheid policies and had structured themselves accordingly. Especially for Christian churches in Europe the active support of regimes that constructed identities on the basis of race categories was no longer acceptable since the destruction brought over Europe and the rest of the world in the first half of the 20th century in the name of nation and race. Many churches in North America struggling to get rid of the segregation heritage of the 19th century civil war were not inspired by the practices and the theological justifications of what happened in South Africa.

The 20th century ecumenical movement has not always looked back with satisfaction when it has evaluated its positions in relation to societal issues in the past. Just remember its difficulty to speak out against communist dictatorial regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. But in the case of the anti-apartheid struggle, one often senses a certain proud in the documents, expressing a feeling that in that case the Council has fought for a just cause that has been won. The battle against apartheid in South Africa and the theological justification by South African churches was much more than a fight against an evil in the world; it was for the participating churches a symbol and a ritual that they had overcome their racist past themselves.

The question central to this paper is whether the contribution of the ecumenical movement in the rejection of apartheid in South Africa as an anachronistic system of nation building by the branding of its practices as sin and its theological justification as heresy has been enough to cast out once and for all the demon of racism. Or to phrase it in a way that is appealing to theologians, whether the theological arguments developed within the ecumenical movement are solid enough to withstand the threat of divisions on the basis of race, nation, tribe, and ethnicity that have the potential to tear apart the one church of Christ.

In order to find an answer to this question, I will return after more than fifty years to the historical Cottesloe Consultation in 1960, and reread its statement in the context of the struggle of the WCC itself with socio-cultural identities. I will focus not so much on the reaction in South Africa, but on what the WCC contributed and on understanding the consultation in the context of the WCC's dealing with issues of race and ethnicity in the 1950ties. I will then put this

in the broader perspective of the struggle of the ecumenical movement with issues of socio-cultural identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lückhoff's historical study *Cottesloe* almost 20 years later, describing the motives for the consultation, the interaction during the conference, and what happened afterwards, still reads like a novel with many unexpected twists and turns.

## 1. THE COTTESLOE CONSULTATION

The Cottesloe Consultation has a special place in the history of the involvement of the WCC with South Africa. It was the first time that it engaged so directly on the race issue with its eight member churches in South Africa: *The Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa, the Church of the Province of South Africa, the Congregational Union of South Africa, the Methodist church of South Africa, de Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk van de Kaap Provincie, de Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid Afrika in Transvaal, de Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika and the Presbyterian Church of South Africa*. It was occasioned by the Sharpsville massacre of 21 March 1960 when the South African police opened fire on unarmed peaceful demonstrators against the pass laws, killing sixty-nine people and wounding more than three hundred protesters. The consultation convened from 7 to 14 December in the same year in the Cottesloe student accommodation at the University of Witwatersrand near Johannesburg. The eight member churches and the WCC all sent high-level delegations consisting of church leaders and academic theologians. All churches sent the maximum of ten representatives. All but two delegations were inter-racial; the non-white people comprised about 25 per cent of the consultation (Cottesloe Consultation 1960:89). The direct outcome of the meeting was more than could have been expected. A consensus was reached among the participants, with the exception of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* delegates.<sup>2</sup> At the end a statement was made public rejecting some of the most important applications of the apartheid principle. Signs of reconciliation between the English and Afrikaans speaking churches became visible. In the context of the overriding Afrikaner nationalism of the time, the theological courage and leadership shown by most of the participants were remarkable.

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2 The delegation of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk* asked for a statement to be added to the text of the Consultation. In it, they declared that they could not subscribe to the statement, especially in relation to the suggestion that integration would be a solution to the race problem. They explicitly expressed support for the government plans for separate development as the only just solution (*Cottesloe Consultation* 1960:79).

A backlash was to be expected and it did not take long to arrive. Soon afterwards, events took a turn for the worse. In South Africa, the Cottesloe Consultation caught the attention of the media, and reverberated far beyond internal church politics to become a national issue. A few weeks after the conference, the then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd referred to the statement of the Consultation in his New Years Message of 1961, dismissing it and downplaying its importance, stressing that the respective synods of these representatives had not yet spoken. Hermann Giliomee (2009:525-9) in his *The Afrikaners Biography* describes the episode under the subtitle "Verwoerd's clampdown on nationalist dissent", indicating how he used all his power with the support of the Broederbond to get the Afrikaner churches behind him in his radical segregation policy.

When the synods of the three Afrikaner Dutch Reformed churches – *de Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk van de Kaap Provincie, de Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid Afrika in Transvaal, de Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* – met during that year Afrikaner public opinion had already turned against the outcome of the consultation. The three synods rejected the Cottesloe Statement, and distanced themselves from those participants that did not retract their views, most famous among them Beyers Naudé. They decided to leave to the World Council of Churches and opted for an ecumenical isolation within South Africa and worldwide that would last for more than three decades and is still not completely uplifted.

## 2. THE COTTESLOE STATEMENT

But most important was the content of the Statement itself. What was in the text of some three pages that made it so explosive for the Afrikaner churches and the politicians in that era? The general theme of the seven days together has been the Christian attitude towards race relations. It left behind the anti-modern discourse that was so characteristic of many of the statements of Afrikaner leaders in that era (Kinghorn 1997:148-51). Instead justice became the hermeneutical key to evaluate apartheid policies. The final criterion of all social and political action is found in the principles of Scripture, that is the realization of a worthy life for every body in accordance with their God given vocation.

The second part of the Statement summarized some basic convictions. The first recognized that all racial groups are indigenous and are entitled to citizenship rights. As a consequence the segregation of racial groups carried through without effective consultation and involving discrimination leads to hardship (9). There are no Scriptural grounds for the prohibition of mixed marriages (10). The migrant labour has a disintegrating effect on family life

(11). The wages of most of the non-whites are far below the minimum standard for healthy living and the job reservation system is unjust (12 and 13). The living conditions in Bantu areas are not in accordance with human dignity (14). Everybody has the right to own land where he lives (15), and to participate in the government of his country. In relation to this a direct representation of coloured people in the Parliament is accepted. The Statement does not outrightly dismiss segregation, and it does not talk about representation for Africans in the Parliament, but the implications of the Statement were far-reaching, and offered the contours of a concrete social vision based on an alternative theological evaluation of the race relations in South Africa (Naudé 2010:71).

These Scriptural principles also influence the way the church functions. In contrast to the context of existing segregation, the church as the Body of Christ is characterized by unity, "and within this unity the natural diversity among men is not annulled but sanctified" (5). No believer in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of colour or race. The spiritual unity must find visible expression in acts of common worship and witness, an in fellowship and consultation (6). The missionary task requires a common strategy (8).

What was so worrying for the National Party politicians and for many Afrikaner church members was the realization that these senior church leaders and theologians of the two Dutch Reformed churches by subscribing to this statement had on the basis of biblical principles dismissed the official apartheid policy of the *National Party*. How could that have happened? Could this be explained as a case of weak leadership that under pressure from the other churches and the WCC representatives had given in and distanced themselves from the segregation policies they had defended until then as being in line with biblical teaching on socio-cultural identities? No, the drafting process revealed something else. Each delegations to the consultation had been asked to prepare a memorandum on five agreed topics: the factual situation in South Africa, the Christian understanding of the Gospel for relationships among races, an understanding of contemporary history, the current emergency situation, and the witness of the church with regard to justice, mission and co-operation. The memoranda were circulated to all representatives at the Consultation before they met. They were not published

... because what happened as we talked together made them out of date – some of the things said there we would not say now; and other things we would say differently because we have discussed them face to face.(Cottesloe Consultation 1960:i)

But this spiritual attitude of openness should not be understood as weakness. In reality, the memoranda of the two NG churches, especially the

Cape NG church, would become the basis for the discussions and the final Statement (Lückhoff 1978:58-63). This process showed that the NG church leaders and theologians had already serious doubts about the apartheid principles and rejected some of the major apartheid laws before they met at Cottesloe. And their doubt would have been reinforced during that meeting. So more than outside pressure it was internal doubts before the conference that would lead to the Cottesloe Statement. So not primarily the WCC, but the South African churches themselves have contributed to the content of the Statement.

Of course, also the WCC was pleased with the outcome. Its contribution had not been valued so much in terms of content, but in terms of the major role it played in the organization and the facilitation of the process. The WCC acted cautiously when in the immediate aftermath of the Sharpville and Langa uprisings, the then Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Cape Town, Joost de Blank, publicly called on the WCC to expel the Cape and Transvaal NG churches, if they did not reject apartheid. Instead of doing so, the Geneva office sent Robert Bilheimer on a mission of fellowship during the last weeks of April. During his separate meetings with the member churches the suggestion arose for the WCC to initiate a small conference in South Africa including white and non-white church leaders. The relationship of distrust between the English and Afrikaans speaking churches permanently threatened the successful organization of the conference in the months before the conference. During the seven days of face-to-face meetings and living together the tensions between the English and Afrikaans speaking churches receded. At the end of the meeting Archbishop de Blank apologized and asked for forgiveness (Cottesloe Consultation 1960:81-2):

... we confess with regret that in the heat of the moment we have at times spoken heatedly and, through ignorance [...], have cast doubt on the sincerity of those who did not accept the wisdom of such public action. Nevertheless the delegates of the NGK have met with us in the fullest fellowship and we have been deeply moved by this spirit of brotherly goodwill. Where, in the past, we have at any time unnecessarily wounded our brethren, we now ask their forgiveness in Christ.

The moderator of the Cape NG church, A.J. Van der Merwe, accepted the apologies. At that time, the Cottesloe consultation contributed to reconciliation between the leadership of the Anglican Church in South Africa and the NG churches.

## 2.1 Cottesloe and the WCC's dealing with racism in the 1950ties

The WCC was happy with the content of the Statement. They understood it to be in line with the report of one of the sections at their previous Second General Assembly convened in Evanston in the United States in 1954 with the title *The Churches amid Racial and Ethnic Tensions* (W.A. Visser 't Hooft 1955:151-60). The reason for the organization of a section around this topic is to be found in the post Second World War period and the beginning of the decolonization of that era. The blatant racism in church and society in the host country of the conference in the pre-Civil Rights Movement era will have contributed to the choice for this theme. The growing unease with the road taken by South Africa after the election of the National Party government in 1948 to legalize existing segregation and discrimination and to radically apply it also contributed to the selection of this theme.

The theme of the conference was *Christ – the Hope of the World*. The logic of the discourse in the report of this section on intergroup relations goes from soteriology to ecclesiology:

It is Jesus Christ, who revealed God as Father and who died for all men, reconciling them to God and to each other by His Cross. From every race and nation a new people of God is created, in which the power of the Spirit overcomes racial pride and fear (8).<sup>3</sup>

The calling of the church with regard to race is “to witness within itself to the Kingship of Christ and the unity of His people, in Him transcending all diversity” (10) and “to strive through social and political action to secure justice, freedom and peace for all” (11). But what does this mean for the nature of the churches?

The great majority of Christian churches affiliated with the WCC – be aware that they recognize that it does not apply to all of them and that they seem to suggest that it might be different for churches not affiliated with WCC – have declared that physical separation within the Church on the grounds of race is a denial of spiritual unity, and of the brotherhood of man (13).

But this theological principle is contradicted by a different practice: “Yet such separations persists with these very churches” (13). The excuses for this continuing practice, such as cultural differences, residential patterns, and the time is not ripe, are dismissed (14). The churches are called upon to repent

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3 The numbers between brackets refer to the paragraph number in the section report.

and to be obedient. But what with those churches who understand race as a biblical principle for segregation among churches? They are called upon

to search themselves continually whether their theology is not the child of fear, and meanwhile to test every application of segregation by the standard of Christian love (23).

Interracial marriage has been an issue that had caused a lot of uncertainty in the past. For example the 1937 Oxford conference of *Life and Work* expressed itself negatively on the issue (Oldham 1937:67-76). But at the Evanston conference of 1954 another opinion becomes prevalent:

While it can find in the Bible no clear justification or condemnation of intermarriage, but only a discussion of the duties of the faithful in marriage with partners of other religions, it cannot approve any law against racial or ethnic intermarriage, for Christian marriage involves primarily a union of two individuals before God which goes beyond the jurisdiction of the state or of the culture (28).

There is no evidence that the children of such marriages are inherently inferior, and any treatment of them as such should be condemned (29).

The first resolution adopted by the Assembly on Intergroup Relations states:

The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches declares its conviction that any form of segregation based on race, colour or ethnic origin is contrary to the gospel, and is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of man and with the nature of the Church of Christ. The Assembly urges the churches within its membership to renounce all forms of segregation or discrimination and to work for their own life and within society (W.A. Visser 't Hooft 1955:158).

The Assembly received the report and the resolutions of the section on intergroup relations without substantive debate (W.A. Visser 't Hooft 1955:151). The representatives of the two Afrikaner member churches present at the meeting – *de Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* and *de Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid Afrika in Transvaal* – immediately produced a statement that was incorporated in the Evanston Report (W.A. Visser 't Hooft 1955:328-9). They regretted that there was no opportunity for the discussion of this section report in the assembly.

But we feel constrained to say that, at this stage of our ecumenical discussions on these matters, it may have the opposite effect by so



prejudicing the issues at stake for some churches that fruitful action for them will be gravely jeopardized.

They promised that they would react after studying the report.

In 1957 the WCC published *Response to Evanston*, a survey of the comments and analyses sent by the member churches on the Report of the Second Assembly. The response of the two South African churches is the only response by member churches summarized and presented separately as a subsection.<sup>4</sup>

The first section of their response describes the existence of segregated churches as a consequence of practical, historical and contextual developments since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and not as a matter of principle. As a consequence the current system of segregated churches might change in the future once more, but currently the time is not yet ripe. In an addendum the theological position is clarified in the following way. The unity, which exists between Christians,

does not destroy the identity of nation or race ... The Church of Christ is therefore supra-national but not a-national. Therefore we accept the existence and the continued survival of independent nations and races within the Church of Christ and we do not confuse disruption with diversity. The natural diversity of nations and certain other groups is not abolished by the Christian faith, but rather sanctified (Response to Evanston 1957:47).

The analysis of the response of other member churches reveals the acceptance of the difference between the theology of being one in Christ and the practice of segregation within churches. An acknowledgement can be perceived that it is difficult to change this (Response to Evanston 1957:42 and 49).

Analyzing the *Evanston Report* and the *Response to Evanston*, it is obvious that the Afrikaner churches reacted strongly and extensively to the challenges of race and ethnicity. Their immediate reaction to the section report at the Evanston Assembly with a separate statement and then with their extensive report prepared by a special ad hoc commission of the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches as official response reveals that racial segregation had become a core identity of their existence and that they had

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4 Response to Evanston: A survey of the comments sent in by the member churches on the Report of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Evanston, Illinois, in August 1954, Geneva: WCC, 1957. The responses to section V – Intergroup Relations is to be found in pp. 41-50. The response from the Dutch Reformed Churches by an ad hoc commission for race relations appointed by the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa is published in pp. 45-49.

lost their soul to the apartheid policies of the then National Party government. But secondly, also many other churches felt addressed in the aftermath of the post Second World War period, as the dedication of one of the sections of the General Assembly to the problem of race and ethnicity reveals. It was an issue in various societies and a problem for churches how to express their unity in Christ if they were segregated along racial or ethnic lines. These churches admitted the problem in their country and their church, and they referred to historical circumstances and pleaded for understanding, as did the Afrikaner churches. But the difference was that they did not try to produce a theological justification as the Afrikaner churches pretended to provide. Thirdly, the Cottesloe Statement fits well with the call in the section report *The Churches amid Racial and Ethnic Tensions* at the Evanston Assembly to make more serious work of the unity of the church confronted with racial or ethnical segregation in society and in the church. Cottesloe offers a contextual application of the call for unity in apartheid South Africa. Cottesloe is in some way a child of the work of the ecumenical movement in the 1950s to challenge segregation in the churches.

### 3. COTTESLOE AND FAITH AND ORDER

But in order to evaluate Cottesloe more thoroughly, to see its strengths and vulnerabilities better, it is rewarding to put the document in the context of the way the ecumenical movement dealt with issue of race and ethnicity in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Evanston Report* illustrates well how this worked. The report on the Intergroup Relations *The Churches amid Racial and Ethnic Tensions* (section V), we have analyzed until now, has to be distinguished from the report of Faith and Order, the theological Commission of the WCC. Faith and Order was responsible for section I and they produced the report with the title *Our Oneness in Christ and our Disunity as Churches*. So what says Faith and Order about the race issue in relation to the disunity of the churches? The answer is remarkable. It says nothing about this problem. It deals with the traditional confessional differences between the churches in relation to the understanding of the unity of the church. The silence on the issue suggests that the challenge of churches among racial and ethnic tensions is a social issue, an ethical challenge for the unity of the church, but not a theological issue.

This interpretation is correct. In fact it follows from what happened less than twenty years before. In 1937 Life and Work organized a conference in Oxford that exposed nationalism as a major catalyst to international conflict. The meeting gathered under the threatening cloud of an imminent war that was due to nationalistic profiling, especially by the German Nazi state. Faith and Order organized a conference in the same year in Edinburgh, but it did

not deal with issues such as nation and race in relation to the unity of the church. The conference only briefly mentioned the national churches under the heading “non-theological factors that hinder church unity”. After examples of obstacles due to historical factors, we read about churches agreeing on doctrinal matters but having different cultural origins: “These Churches are not conscious of any obstacles to such union because of mutually exclusive doctrines. They are, however, kept apart by barriers of nationality, race, class, general culture, and, more particularly, by slothful self-content and self-sufficiency” (Hodgson 1938:258-9). It indicated that issues related to the division of people along racial or national lines were problems of the secular world, not of the church. The conference suggested that if such issues were a stumbling block on the way to church unity, they were of a practical, non-essential nature, and implied that it might be easy to resolve them once the essential theological differences were solved.

If we realize this, we can understand why twice the unity of the church was the theme of a section at the Evanston Assembly: section one with a Faith and Order perspective, focusing on disunity among the churches along traditional confessional lines, with the exclusion of issues of race and ethnicity, because considered to be non-theological; and section five with a Life and Work perspective, focusing on disunity as a social and ethical issue with a justice perspective. If we realize this it becomes clear that the Cottesloe Statement fits mainly in with the Life and Work perspective. The unity of the church is looked at from the perspective of justice and humanity. Segregation has to be rejected because it is unethical. The question how to relate theologically the socio-cultural identity, more specifically the so-called racial identity of people within South Africa, in relation to the unity of the church, is scarcely dealt with.

Only one phrase in the Cottesloe Statement tries a theological approach: the church as the Body of Christ is characterized by unity, “and within this unity the natural diversity among men is not annulled but sanctified” (5). Diversity sanctified by unity. Racial differentiation sanctified by unity? I am not fond of this way of theologically expressing the relation between socio-cultural identity and the unity of the church. Sanctification? No, I do not agree with this view. This gives much too much honour for socio-cultural identities within the church. I would have preferred an expression in the direction of “baptized, and thus relativized”.

This is remarkable. Cottesloe offers an approach of race in relation to the unity of the church following the lead of *Life and Work*. That makes it a strong statement. But when it tries to express this theologically, that is ecclesologically, the phrase becomes questionable. The drafters of the statement apparently felt the need to go beyond the social and ethical approach, I guess because they felt that they wanted to give their socio-cultural identity, at that age unhelpfully

expressed in terms of race, a theological place within the one church. This is courageous attempt, especially when they got no help from the theological section of the ecumenical movement. So where to go? Well they only had the questionable, to put it blunt, the heretical formulation of the response of the Afrikaner churches to Evanston to go by. "The natural diversity of nations and certain other groups is not abolished by the Christian faith, but rather sanctified." So the Cottesloe Statement leaves us with a challenge: How to arrive at a better formulation of the place of our socio-cultural identities within the unity of the church?

An indication that *Faith and Order* has not yet come to terms with the issue of socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church is to be found in its 2006 ecclesiological document *The Nature and the Mission of the Church*. Paragraph 59 reads:

There remains by virtue of creation a natural bond between human beings and between humanity and creation. 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). The new life of communion builds upon and transforms, but never wholly replaces, what was first given in creation; within history, it never completely overcomes the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin....

It remains unclear in what way the new life of the Christian community replaces what was first given in creation. Should it completely replace it or not? Is the creational part taken over fully contaminated by sin?

#### 4. A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

Apartheid is gone, and the ecumenical movement has contributed to the defeat of this unjust political system and its theological justification. But socio-cultural identities still threaten the expression of the unity of the church. In South Africa as in so many places all over the world, Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week. It is an issue in Amsterdam as it is in all European cities where new migrant congregations are established daily. Most Ghanaian Presbyterians in Amsterdam, for example, do not join Dutch Reformed congregations but start their own Ghanaian Presbyterian church. In my own denomination, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, an issue is how to help the French speaking members and the Dutch speaking members relate to one another in one united church. In Central and Eastern Europe, where mostly Orthodox churches consider themselves as guardians of the national identity of their nations, it is also an issue. It is an issue in American churches where the national American identity – symbolized by the American flag next to the cross at the front of the church – has become as important as their Christian identity. It is an issue all over Africa where churches tend to be

ethnically or tribally structured. All these examples reveal a similar ecclesial and ecclesiological problem. How to live together with differences is not only a social, political and cultural challenge, but also a fundamental ecclesial and ecclesiological problem.

Considering South African churches in this way opens up new perspectives. It not only gives urgency to these issues that linger on in many churches, but the South African example reminds us of the potential evil that can result from bad answers. More important, South African experiences in the past and present provide us with biblical and theological arguments, motives, strategies, and structures –many to be avoided and some others to be cherished – in the search for expressions of Christianity that give space to its local and its universal aspect. Cottesloe challenges us in an expected way. It tried to go beyond the inability of Faith and Order to find a theological-ecclesiological discourse for this element within the unity of the church. The Cottesloe drafters without help from Faith and Order could only find inspiration in formulations that would later be branded as heretical. And it seems fifty years later this ecclesiological problem is still not solved. Will South African theologians and theologians from the rest of the world hear the cry from the Cottesloe drafters to provide them with alternative formulations?

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