

THE DEMOCRACY OF THE CRAFT

AN AMERICAN ESSAYIST NAMED AGNES REPPLIER:

Democracy forever teases us with the contrast between its ideals and its realities, between its heroic possibilities and its sorry achievements.

ARISTOTLE:

If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.

NEWSPAPER COLUMNIST BILL VAUGHAN:

A citizen of America will cross the ocean to fight for democracy, but won't cross the street to vote in a national election.

BRITISH NOVELIST G. K. CHESTERTON:

The unconscious democracy of America is a very fine thing. It is a true and deep and instinctive assumption of the equality of citizens, which even voting and elections have not destroyed.

PHILOSOPHER/PLAYRIGHT/AUTHOR GEORGE BERNARD SHAW:

Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.

PLAYRIGHT JANE AUER:

Voting is one of the few things where boycotting in protest clearly makes the problem worse rather than better.

JOHN GARDNER:

The citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest. No one else can.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON:

Voting is the first duty of democracy.

FORMER DEAN OF YALE LAW SCHOOL ROBERT M. HUTCHINS:

The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.

RENOWNED JURIST WILLIAM HASTIE:

Democracy is not being, it is becoming. It is easily lost, but never finally won.

The ancient Athenians gave the gift of democracy to the Western World.

We did not adopt it immediately. We did not adopt it happily. We did not adopt it from a deep belief in the principles of equality. We adopted it kicking and screaming against it. Revolution forced it down our throats and only the fear that something worse would replace it keeps us from rejecting it even now.

Freemasonry is democratic in form and appearance. We elect certain officers of our Lodges (some Lodges elect every Officer and committee member!), we even elect Petitioners to our number. We have a Grand Lodge that works by a form of Representative Government, and those representatives elect our Grand Masters and our senior officers. We have Constitutions that protect our rights from erosion. Lodges have By-Laws to assist our duly elected representatives in acting fairly for the benefit of all.

And we stand in constant danger of losing all of those rights and benefits.

Not as a result of outside attack, Brethren.

From inside.

From apathy.

From our absolute certainties that "our votes don't really matter".

The membership of Grand Lodge is clearly defined in our Constitution. Every sitting Master is a representative of his Lodge, as are the two Wardens who assist him in the governing of the Lodge. Every Past Master is a member of Grand Lodge, a sort of "reward" for having served our Lodges in the past. Every Grand Officer is a member of Grand Lodge, even those occasional Brethren who are appointed to office without having served as Master of a Lodge, some of our recent Grand Chaplains come to mind, and my own first appointment to Grand Office (in the Cryptic Rite) came before I had passed the Chair in ANY branch of Masonry.

It has not always been so, Brethren.

The first Grand Lodge, of 1717, extended the membership in Grand Lodge to the serving Masters and the Wardens of the four Lodges in London which attended the first meeting. Past Masters were not members of Grand Lodge unless they had been appointed as Officers of Grand Lodge, and even then, they were only members WHILE they were in those Offices, ceasing to be members when their terms of Office expired. Later, the rule was changed to allow Past Grand Officers to remain members of Grand Lodge. Later, still, as the number of Lodges choosing to join in the "Grand Experiment" (as it was sometimes called) grew, and as Grand Lodge extended its influence outside the boundaries of the City of London, Lodges demanded more participation for their Past Masters, and Past Masters became permanent members of Grand Lodge.

In fact, the **ONLY** group whose membership in Grand Lodge has **NEVER** been questioned, suspended, revoked or denied, is the three serving Officers who sit as Master, Senior and Junior Wardens. They alone have **ALWAYS** been considered essential members of Grand Lodge. And they are not members of Grand Lodge because all Masters and Wardens are brilliant parliamentarians, or spellbinding speakers, or wise and compassionate dispensers of charity and justice. They are the sole essential members of Grand Lodge because Grand Lodge exists to serve the constituent Lodges, to express the voices and opinions of the Brethren back home on the benches and in the galleries. Past Masters vote for themselves, but the Masters and Wardens vote for us. It is for this reason that Lodges are asked to discuss *in Open Lodge* the various Motions scheduled to come before Grand Lodge for decision, so that **YOUR** voice can be heard, and your votes counted. There is a process available to the Lodge, to use whenever one or more of the three senior Officers of the Lodge are not able to be present. It's called "PROXY". It means "act on behalf of someone else". And when one or more of the three senior Officers of the Lodge are going to be absent from Grand Lodge, it is the responsibility of the Lodge, of all of you, to ensure that someone who IS going to Grand Lodge is given the proper form of Proxy, so that the opinions and voices of your Lodge will be heard.

Some few Grand Lodges extended membership in Grand Lodge to ALL members of Lodges, but this was usually found to be too cumbersome to manage, and these few returned to the previous membership definition. Some Grand Lodges to this day do not permit Master Masons to attend sessions of Grand Lodge. Some extend the privilege of attending not only to Master Masons but to Fellow Craft and Entered Apprentice Masons as well, and some go so far as to conduct all of their meetings in the First Degree, to ensure that any Brother who wishes to attend may do so. But most Grand Lodges, at least in North America, work in the Master Mason Degree, limit membership to the Masters and Wardens of the Lodges on their Registers and to the Past Masters of those Lodges.

Some will automatically allow Past Masters from recognised Grand Lodges who join their Lodges, to also be members of Grand Lodge, but this is not universal. Most of the North American Grand Lodges will admit Master Masons who are not Wardens only by motion, after Grand Lodge is formally opened, and this concept is also in place in most of the Concordant Bodies in Masonry. The principle is well established.

Why is this so? Simply put, because "Direct Democracy" is less efficient given the technology available for use today, and "Representative Democracy" has long been considered an acceptable substitute in nearly every democratically organised group in the modern world.

Why is "Direct Democracy" so inefficient? Well, in truth it may not be, but it can certainly be awkward to arrange and manage. We have between 6000 and 6500 Masons in the Lodges of the Grand Lodge of Nova Scotia, Brethren. Not a huge number, and surely we could find some arena or venue large enough to hold all of them.

So why don't we use "Direct Democracy"?

The answer is not as simple as you might think. It is partly "Tradition", the huge weight of "It's always been that way", even though we know that is not the case. And it is partly because we have long trusted "Representative Democracy" in so many other aspects of our lives. Parliament. The House of Assembly and the Provincial Legislature. City and County Councils, and the District Councils that are springing into renewed life in the post-Amalgamation world here in Nova Scotia. Elected Councils that manage professional societies such as the Bar Associations and the Medical Societies, the Chartered Accountants and Pharmacists and Better Business Bureaus and Charities, even in our largest corporations. Everywhere we look, we see examples of "Representative Democracy" in action, and we trust it.

Even when we shouldn't.

"Representative Democracy" does not work in a vacuum. It requires regular input and effort from everyone, or no one is well represented, no one is well served.

There is a tendency to believe that a single vote, a single opinion, doesn't matter. It's wrong, but the tendency fights hard to keep its believers. Most of you will have seen lists of occasions where single votes caused or prevented some serious events or actions.

Most of them are fallacies, but a few genuine situations arise every year. Supreme Courts often decide issues before them by 5 to 4 votes. Many Provincial Legislatures have recorded pieces of legislation passing or failing by single votes, and Governments have fallen, or survived, because of that one vote.

But the power of the single vote really lies in its ability to combine with other single votes to produce majorities, and even significant minorities, which impact our world every day.

Each "single vote" gains or loses by its participation with others, not by being a "magnificent oneness".

It is for these reasons that, around the world, as Lodges and Chapters and Councils and Preceptories and Conclaves and Assemblies and so on conduct their Ceremonies of Annual Installations of Officers, every Master is required, as part of his agreement to accept the responsibilities of his Office, to "... promise a regular attendance on the committees and communications of the Grand Lodge, on receiving proper notice, to pay attention to all the duties of Masonry, on convenient occasions". (If anyone is wondering, it is Number 12 of those "Ancient Charges and Regulations which point out the duty of a Master of a Lodge", page 4 of the Handbook of Ceremonies, Part I – Installation of the Officers of a Lodge (1996) as published by the Grand Lodge of Nova Scotia. It is also Number 12 in the list of Ancient Charges and Regulations to which incoming Masters must accede under the United Grand Lodge of England, under whose design this Lodge's Ritual was created.) The requirement is not in place to inconvenience the Brethren, to take away a beautiful summer's day by making us be inside at Grand Lodge. It's there to make sure that YOUR Lodge gets its full entitlement to vote on every issue, every change to the Constitution, every money vote, every ballot initiative, every new Warrant, every amalgamation or closure, every change.

The most fragile aspect of Western Civilisation is the ideal of the "government of the people by the people for the people". No other single principal in the long life of the world has been so frequently attacked, and so badly damaged.

The oddity of it is that it is not when it is under attack that democracy is fragile. Its supporters stream from every walk of life, every free nation, every free culture, to support it and ensure its survival. It is only when the wars are won, the dead are buried, the wounded are healed as far as they may heal, that democracy faces its greatest danger – being ignored. Being eaten away by lethargy. Being nibbled to death by small encroachment after small encroachment, hemming our hard-won freedoms in by barriers of silk and velvet.

The same fate awaits the Craft, Brethren. It's the responsibility of ALL of us to save it.