

Reversing the Decline.

I must begin with a disclaimer and make it clear the views expressed in this article are my own and not those of any other Freemason or Lodge. Indeed, I hope that others will have a different viewpoint from me in the light of their own experience and knowledge.

The paper, “Whither Directing Our Course”¹ by Lord Northampton the Pro Grand Master, is a landmark document, which should be read by all English Freemasons. The statistics contained in this paper illustrate the decline of English Freemasonry and the steps we should take to reduce or even reverse this decline.

Abridged statistics are:-

- *We continue to shrink [in numbers] at a rate of 2-3% per annum.*
- *In the past ten years alone, the number of men we initiate annually has fallen by 30% from just under 12,000 to 8,400”.*
- *A recent survey in Buckinghamshire showed that 30% of all Master Masons ceased attending lodges within three years after being raised”*

What follows are my condensed views on our problems and their solution based on “Whither Directing Our Course” but looking from the bottom up. If the current decline continues, within fifty years our numbers will have decreased to a level where the present Grand and Provincial Lodge systems will not be sustainable and will slide into oblivion!

The greatest danger is that we will do nothing at the Lodge level due to apathy, lethargy and a resistance to change from senior Lodge members. Brilliant schemes from Grand Lodge are useless unless implemented with enthusiasm at Lodge level.

Admissions.

The article on the admission procedure adopted in France² illustrates their rigorous selection methods. The potential candidate is investigated by brethren, unconnected with the applicant and their report submitted to the Master and brethren of the Lodge.

The applicant is left in no doubt that he has applied to join an important society open to worthy men of sound judgement, strict morals and a desire to render themselves more extensively serviceable to their fellow creatures. The potential candidate can have no doubt that he is NOT joining some run of the mill social club.

It is worth mentioning that Freemasonry in France is growing!

We, on the other hand, are generally more interested in numbers rather than quality. There is this overwhelming desire to obtain candidates so that the Lodge has ‘work’ to do at its meetings.

There is the potential for some filtering of applicants if the proposer and seconder discuss the applicant with the Master and other senior brethren before a formal petition is presented. However, in general, once that formal submission is made, the applicant is almost guaranteed to be accepted. A rejection would be too embarrassing for all concerned.

We need to ensure that the candidates' expectations are consistent with reality and he understands that we are not just a social and charitable club. In some jurisdictions, it can take up to a year before the applicant is accepted as a candidate. During this time he can and should, attend Masonic social events and get to know other members of the Lodge. Unfortunately, obsessed by numbers, we would rather grab the applicant in case any delay might cause him to change his mind or join another Lodge.

Our selection procedures should be more thorough and more formal to give the genuine impression that it is a privilege to be made a Freemason. Any selection procedure worthy of that name must reject some applicants. Not everyone is suitable to join Freemasonry and the figures for resignations indicate that this is true.

Masonic Education.

Grand Lodge is promoting a two-pronged attack on this problem. The Mentoring Project and the Orator Scheme.

Some "Knife and Fork" masons have found exactly what they wanted from Freemasonry: a safe retreat of peace and friendship, away from the cares of their everyday life, where they can meet friends for a few hours of relaxation. However, I have the greatest sympathy with those who become "Knife and Fork" masons because of our neglect. Many of them, during the early years of their membership, would like to have been told what it's all about. What is the meaning of the ceremonies? What do the words they are required to repeat like parrots, actually mean. The Mentoring and the Orator Scheme will go a long way in solving this problem.

In Texas, the candidate is required to be fully proficient in a degree before he is allowed to progress.³

The Mentoring Project⁴ is well documented with a 194- page report complete with teaching aids! I doubt many Masons will manage to read a document of that size but, maybe, a Guidance Note, of manageable proportions, will eventually be produced. Fortunately, there is an earlier document from the 'Rulers' Forum Mentoring Project' (Grand Lodge QC 12 March 2008) which is more readable and equally as useful.⁵

The essential and critical elements are:-.

- The Mentor must be an official appointment. (He may appoint assistants)
- He must be introduce the Lodge Mentor to the candidate immediately following his Initiation.
- Help the new member to integrate in the lodge by introducing him to members and making sure that he is given the opportunity to participate whenever possible in the Lodge and in its Social activities. It is usual to have small cliques of like-minded souls in all Lodges and the Mentor must introduce the new member to these groups.
- Accompany the candidate whenever it is necessary for him to leave the Lodge for a short time.
- Explain the Offices, their duties and structure of Freemasonry.

- Explain the ritual and the symbols he should be familiar with and ensure the candidate understands the short catechism he is required to learn before advancing to a superior degree.
- Be aware of any problems the young mason may have with the Lodge or its members and resolve those problems where possible.
- Etc.

Mentoring must extend to the whole of a candidates Masonic career not for just the first few years. A daunting but vital task.

Orator scheme. One definition of the word ‘Orator’ is any formal speech, as on a ceremonial occasion or delivered in similar high-flown or pompous manner. That is exactly what we do NOT want. Orations and talks should be educational and entertaining.

The Pro Grand Master has produced a framework document but it seems that this document is only available to those appointed Orators. The enabling proposal for the Grand Orator was included in the Quarterly Communication of Grand Lodge.(12/12/2007) It is understood that the office will have a collar and jewel and rank immediately before the Senior Grand Deacon.

Only brief details of the Orator scheme are available at present⁶. *“Pro Grand Master has launched an 'Orator Scheme' which has been piloted successfully in 3 Provinces. The scheme involves the delivery of a series of orations on Freemasonry devised by Michael Baigent. The final text of these orations will be made available to P.G.M.'s in June. In the meantime, the Pro Grand Master expects every Province to appoint a 'Provincial Orator' who will head a select team of brethren to deliver these orations in an interesting and informative manner.*

My understanding of the operation of the Orator Scheme is as follows.⁷

- The Orator Scheme is promoted by the Pro Grand Master.
- Each Province will have its own Provincial Grand Orator.
- The Provincial Grand Orator will appoint a team of Orators who are good speakers and who will visit lodges, on request, to deliver Orations. (The Lodge will need to reimburse the visiting Orator for his expenses.)
- Appointed Orators are encouraged to submit articles of roughly 10 minutes duration to a committee who will approve and, if necessary, edit these articles. Any brother may likewise, through his Provincial Grand Orator, submit an oration or orations.
- Sets of these 'approved' articles will be distributed, from time to time, to Orators to be used as and when required.
- It is envisaged that, after delivering their oration, the Provincial Grand Orator, or his appointed assistant, will lead a question and answer session and a discussion.

Lodges can of course continue to ask any brother to talk at their meeting on any subject and may r may not use the ‘officially approved’ orations, which would not in any case, be available to him. Many other short talks are available.

To make the Orator Scheme or any other programme of talks effective, Lodges have to plan for them as an important part of their programme. Too often, we regard the degree working as the 'work' of the Lodge. If that isn't possible then a 'rehearsal' is planned using, most likely, senior officers so that they can show everyone they can still do it. Talks and lectures are a last resort when they should be given the highest priority if we are to halt Masonic decline.

Resignations.

If the figures for Buckinghamshire, given in the paper "Whither Directing Our Course", are representative of all Provinces, then, making some allowances, there are some 2,000 resignations each year from brethren within three years of them becoming Master Masons. (Resignations in the Province of Essex exceed 300 per annum)

The reasons are defined in the book "The Lodge Secretary"⁸ and can broadly be split in three categories.

- Change in job or location, difficulty travelling to meetings and financial constraints.
- Problems concerning Lodge administration or with Lodge members.
- Failure of the Craft to meet a brother's expectations.

We can do nothing about the first category but we can address the second category.

There is an Exit Form, which should be completed by Lodge Secretaries when a brother resigns. Unfortunately, this form requires 'free form' answers which are almost impossible to categorise in any meaningful manner as any serious Market Researcher will tell you. These forms are not processed and the results are not added to any database which would help us analyse why brethren resign. The existing 'Exit Form' should be replaced with a properly designed Market Research type of form, which would provide usable and valuable data.

Better still; find out if brethren are unhappy about something before they think of resigning. The Lodge Mentor should be aware of any problems and try to resolve them and make sure the Master and senior brethren are aware of these problems.

The visiting Assistant Provincial Grand Masters could then play their part by interviewing brethren after a year or so of them becoming Master Masons by finding out if the brother has any problems. It would also give the brother the opportunity of meeting the APGM and thus being made aware that he is a valuable member of a large and important organisation.

Conclusions.

The senior Lodge members have the power to change the way we conduct the affairs of the Lodge and prevent the Craft sliding to oblivion.

The figures make it clear that we have to change if we are to reverse the decline and avoid extinction. I have outlined some of the changes I believe need to be made at the Lodge level.

- Become more selective in the way we accept potential candidates for the Craft. Quality, with the essential level of sustained commitment and realistic expectations should be as, if not more, important than quantity.

- Masonically educate those we do admit. Mentoring is a vital component and should last for the whole of a brother's Masonic career. Short informative and entertaining talks are essential, probably at every Lodge meeting. A 10 or 15 minute talk isn't too long or too difficult to accommodate.
- Genuine Market Research to discover what the problems are BEFORE brethren resign. Investigate why brethren leave the Craft. Personal interviews produce the best results.

Lethargy, complacency and a resistance to change are the real dangers to the Craft.

Alec Hall

¹ 'Wither Directing Our Course' by the Pro Grand Master, Lord Northampton and available on the Cornerstone Society web site under 'Articles'.

² "New Candidates in French Freemasonry" by W.Bro. Ronald NG and available on the Philbrick Lodge Web site.

³ "Just an Ol' White Apron, Thank you" by Bro. Michael S. McKlusky, Robert M. Sirkle Lodge #954 F&AM Lexington, Kentucky. Paper available on the Philbrick web site.

⁴ Mentoring Project <http://www.ugle.org.uk/mentoring/1c-master-mentoring.pdf>

⁵ Mentoring presentation document. <http://www.ugle.org.uk/news/mentoring-120308.htm>

⁶ Masonic Province of Bristol re Orators Scheme.

⁷ W. Bro. John Grange. Chairman of the committee reviewing Orations.

⁸ "The Lodge Secretary" by Charles J. Carter. published 1991. All references to the Book of Constitutions, 1989 impression