

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Thoughts on the Relevance of Freemasonry Today

by Bro Philip O'Rourke

Introduction

The idea for this paper, I've realised, has been in my head for a number of years, going back to 2004 when I prepared a paper for a Masonic Conference in Albury, NSW, entitled 'Why is Freemasonry declining and how can it be made more relevant and vital to its members'. (O'Rourke, 2004). As time passed, a number of events occurred, particularly in the last year or so, that had me thinking about this paper and the views expressed therein.

The event that really spurred me to reconsider my thoughts was the publication of a paper delivered in Greece in May 2009 by Bro Alexy Y Trubetskoy, Sovereign Grand Commander of the Supreme Council of Russia. (Trubetskoy, 9–12) Other factors were the debacle that occurred with the loss of the Canberra Masonic Centre, exposure to the new DGIW for District 103's Draft Strategic Plan 2011, and the Concordat between the UGLNSW&ACT and other Orders. However, these issues except for the Trubetskoy paper are outside the scope of this paper. However, I also believe that the Concordat has not had the impact it was supposed to have, but this will be addressed at another time.

The paper by the Russian Sovereign Grand Commander raises, not for the first time, something that is never referred to—Is Freemasonry still relevant today?—and examines the grass roots of our wonderful institution, reaching, in some ways, the same conclusions that I have arrived at.

The shameful Canberra Masonic Centre debacle has torn out the very heart of Freemasonry in that area; a temporary facility has recently been selected and, while there will be a place to call home for ACT Freemasons for the next two years and possibly a third, finding a new home will take years and at a substantial cost, and over this time we will see many of our members leave the institution. In my view, the ACT is spiritually dead where Freemasonry is concerned.

I hope that the ideas expressed in the paper get you thinking. There is no single answer to the problem we face in declining numbers but, hopefully, it might spur some of you to do something, so that we continue to exist and provide meaning and inspiration to our members. Perhaps if we go back to our roots, we might reduce our decline and become a force for the good of society, if we can agree that is what we want.

Relevance of Freemasonry Today

If I had had my doubts about the relevance of Freemasonry, I had placed them to the back of my mind, although I frequently came back to them. With the publication of Bro Trubetskoy's paper, (Trubetskoy, 9–12) in 2010, this was the first paper I had read that addressed a very plausible reason for the decline in Freemasonry. I have used his thoughts as a template for the situation in Australia, and this jurisdiction in particular.

He addresses the issue in a very forthright and confronting manner when he says (op cit, 10): 'What does Freemasonry offer to the modern man that differs from what it offered throughout the Masonic history? Today, are we really working on preserving our traditions through studying, implementing, and improving our rituals; are we really looking for the Lost Word and building the Inner Temple with the help of our esoteric practice.'

His answer is, I believe, spot on! 'Today, there is no mission, no service, and no creative search for the future.' (ibid) The author suggested that the answer lay in our past, when 'Even a quick glance at the past four hundred years of Western civilization makes it possible to realize how much this civilization owes to the World Brotherhood of Freemasons'. (ibid)

In his view, historic events over the past 400 years have shaped the world to what it is today. He describes these changes (op cit, 3–4) as:

- The seventeenth century, the birth of natural science;
- The eighteenth century, overcoming social group/estate-related differences;
- The nineteenth century, 'human rights';

- The twentieth century, aspiration for peace without wars; and finally
- The twenty-first century.

He suggests that Freemasonry has not really changed to reflect these societal changes.

I equate these changes with the movements known as The Enlightenment, Socialism, Conservatism and Materialism, and consider that these terms form effective substitutes for his. Thus I will use them, relying on the definitions in Wikipedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/>>:

The Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment (or simply the Enlightenment) is the era in Western philosophy and intellectual, scientific and cultural life. Centered upon the eighteenth century, in which reason was advocated as the primary source for legitimacy and authority. (August 2010)

Socialism

Socialism is an economic and political theory advocating public or common ownership and cooperative management of the means of production and allocation of resources. (August 2010)

Conservatism

Conservatism (Latin: *conservare*, 'to preserve') is a political and social philosophy that promotes the maintenance of traditional institutions and opposes rapid change in society. Some conservatives seek to preserve things as they are, emphasizing (sic) stability and continuity, while others oppose modernism and seek a return to 'the way things were'. (August 2010)

Materialistic, or Materialism

Materialistic describes a person who is markedly more concerned with material things (such as money and possessions) rather than spiritual, intellectual, or cultural values. Not to be confused with *materialism*. (June 2010)

Materialism: Marx and Engels used the term 'materialism' to refer to a theoretical perspective that holds the satisfaction of everyday economic needs is the primary reality in every epoch of history. Opposed to German idealist philosophy, materialism takes the position that society and reality originate from a set of simple economic acts which human beings carry out in order to provide the material necessities of food, shelter, and clothing. Materialism takes, as its starting point that before anything else, human beings must produce their everyday economic needs through their physical labor and practical productive activity. This single economic act, Marx believed, gives rise to a system of social relations which include political, legal and religious models. (June 2010)

Before proceeding it is worthwhile for me to present a definition of Freemasonry against which all arguments and comments can be directed. The simplest, but also I believe the most accurate, is that response to the question in the Second Degree examination when the Candidate is asked 'What is Freemasonry?' to which he responds '*A peculiar system of morality, based on allegory and illustrated by symbols*'. (Second Degree Question and Answer Card.) By anchoring the discussion to this definition, answers can be given to the question(s) that arise as to whether today's Freemasonry meets this definition.

The Enlightenment

Freemasonry, it is generally accepted (Hamill, 181) had its birth around 1700, just as the Enlightenment was also beginning. It is probably fair to say that it attracted to it the sort of members of society who were attracted to the blossoming of the new knowledge, new machinery and new ways of a society living, where all individuals were considered equal and should enjoy the spoils of the new time. Obviously these persons, mainly but not exclusively men, had the blessing of wealth and with that education and time to consider all the changes that were occurring. Is it any wonder that in establishing Freemasonry, the founders incorporated the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment?

In his paper 'Freemasonry in Society Today and Tomorrow – Some Personal Musings', Bro Michael Walker, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, said 'Freemasonry is therefore an intellectual and philosophic exercise designed and intended to make an individual's contribution to society, and extension of himself, greater than they might have otherwise been had he not had the opportunity of developing his capacities and capabilities through his membership of the Order.' (Walker, 1) In a paper delivered by Bro Ian Shanley to Discovery Lodge of Research in September 2010, the following point was made 'I want to point out that the esoteric way of thinking was part of the intellectual life of Europe at the time that

Freemasonry was developing its ritual.’ (Shanley, 5)

Trubetskoy suggests ‘The London Royal Society, established by our fellow Freemasons ... created a worldwide “Fraternity of Scientists”, a new intellectual environment providing for the only possible and decent way of regular communication between creative-minded people, people with a thirst for knowledge’. (Trubetskoy, 10) He then goes on to say ‘the free exchange and unbiased discussion of the new knowledge ... became possible only when the Masonic thought ... had destroyed the guild, faculty, and social group/estate-related rules that had been forcing the scientists and practitioners to keep their achievements only to themselves.’ (ibid)

It can surely come as no surprise that our ritual reflects all the thoughts and ideals of this period. During this time there were many changes/developments to the ritual until the final version was agreed and became the usage. ‘In England, having settled the basic ceremonies in 1816, the United Grand Lodge has chosen not to interfere in ritual matters unless basic principles are involved, believing that each lodge has the right to decide which working it will adopt and how it might vary it to suit itself.’ (Hamill, 75)

That Freemasonry is not based on esoteric thoughts, we have no further to look than the following extracts from the Retrospect Charge: ‘Your admission into Freemasonry, symbolically in a state of helplessness and indigence, was an emblematical representation of the entrance of all men upon this, their mortal state. ... Proceeding onward, and still guiding your steps by the principles of moral truth, you were led ... to contemplate the intellectual faculties, and to trace them, from their development, through ... even unto the Throne of God himself. ... To your mind, thus modelled by Virtue and Science, nature, however, presents one useful lesson more. She prepares you, ... for the closing hours of your existence; [and] ... she finally instructs you how to die.’ (Third Degree Text, 135–136)

Again, the language of all the degrees is focussed on thoughts and ideas, those things that were at the front of the thoughts of the first Freemasons, the thoughts then requiring practical implementation by each member and by default the individual’s intellectual ability to decipher the meanings behind the words. For example what are the lessons taught by the ritual? To my mind these lessons are quite straightforward and are, with my emphasis, as follows:

‘*First* to bend with humility and resignation to the will of ... (God) ... and to dedicate your heart, ... as well as to His glory as to the welfare of your fellow creatures.’ *Second* ‘you were led to contemplate the intellectual faculties, ... and you were taught to form a just estimate of those wondrous faculties wherewith the Creator has endowed the creature formed after his own image.’ *Third* ‘teaches you to feel that, to the just and upright man, death can have no terrors equal to the stain of falsehood and dishonour.’ (O’Rourke, 2004, 2).

The view held by Freemasons that we had our birth in the Age of Enlightenment is interestingly referred to in a recent study of Freemasonry in the United States of America. The study ‘Pragmatic Constructions of History among Contemporary Freemasons’ (Kenney, 2010, 159) by J Scott Kenney, an Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, by using sociological theory, explores how contemporary Freemasons pragmatically reconstruct the past in the present, in a variety of ways, for present ends. (ibid) His aims, although much higher and much more scientific than this paper, were ‘(to help) shed new light on a wide range of issues facing the Craft today, including membership, masonic constructions of self, loss of masonic built heritage, the influence of tradition, constructions of masonic origin, and the role of masonic mythologies today.’ (ibid)

Kenney says ‘The issue of the past – its events, activities, glories, symbolism, and implications – lies at the very heart of Freemasonry. Freemasons place a high premium on history, and not only glory in their own alleged role in historical events, but attempt to draw links between their institution and notable institutions, societies, and personages in the past (e.g., the Building of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem)’ and continues ‘as has been pointed out many times, much of this “historicizing” is spurious at best. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the significance of such flights of historical fancy for participants, nor their meaningful actions.’ (op cit, 160)

His research was based on unrestricted access to extensive video footage from a documentary film ‘Inside Freemasonry’ (Arcadia Entertainment/Vision TV 2004) that ‘consisted of 58 videotapes shot during the fall of 2003 containing detailed interviews and discussions with 27 individuals (21 Freemasons, three journalists, two spouses and one academic) in several countries.’ (op cit, 161) In addition to having been an active participant in the film, he ‘engaged in a lengthy roundtable discussion with three Freemasons and two journalists, in addition to providing a detailed interview to the producers regarding my own experiences in Freemasonry.’ (ibid) He followed this up in 2006 and December 2007 ‘with a series of interviews among

118 Freemasons in two Canadian provinces (71 in one and 47 in the other). With the exception of seven immigrants (including three ethnic minority members), and 25 men under the age of 50, this was, not surprisingly, a relatively homogenous group in terms of social background. They were largely white, middle class, Christian men in their 60s and 70s with a wide variety of occupational backgrounds, but with more of an emphasis on white-collar than blue-collar backgrounds.’ (op cit, 161–2)

From this research, he said, it became clear that the Masons in the study redefined the meaning of past events so that they had meaning in and utility for the present. Some emphasized Freemasonry as having had a role in social history, and referenced, for example, the American and French revolutions, thus drawing attention to the ‘advocacy of a liberal conception of civil society.’ (op cit, 162–3). To support this view, which echoes thoughts and ideas from the Enlightenment, he uses one of his study group’s thoughts on this ‘I like to think of Masonry as sort of an historical fire-ax. Like, “break glass in case of fire.” So, if you’re in some really hard times, like I believe the Western world was in the early 18th century, Masonry can come along and do some really good stuff. Just by talking about things like liberty, Equality, faith, hope, charity, fraternity. You know, these are some quality things when things are looking bleak ... In the 18th century the glass got broken and a lot of change got brought about through the influence of men who were also Freemasons.’ (op cit, 163)

Clearly there is a strongly held view by Freemasons, worldwide, that the organization had its birth in the Enlightenment and that the basic values from that time are still inculcated in today’s Freemasonry. These are very eloquently set out by Walker when he asks, and answers, the question of what the purpose of Freemasonry is: ‘The purpose of Masonry is “self-improvement” – not in the material sense, but in the intellectual, moral and philosophic sense of developing the whole persona and psyche so as, in the beautiful and emotive language of the ritual, “to fit ourselves to take our places, as living stones, in that great spiritual building, not made by hands, eternal in the Heavens”. Such a hypothetical whole, developed, complete person must, in his journey through life, and in his interaction with others, make a more extensive contribution to society in general, thus realizing and fulfilling his expressed wish on initiation, to become “more extensively useful amongst his fellow-men”. Such are the lofty, lawful and laudable aspirations of the Order.’ (Walker, 4)

Socialism, Conservatism and Materialism

It became clear that whilst these periods produced a great deal of social change, their impact on Freemasonry seems to have been confined to the ordinary Mason going about his life and living the ideals of Masonry his own way. It seems that only the Enlightenment brought about significant new ideas about how man should live his life; the next three ages had not such a great impact. Trubetskoy comments about these by saying that by the end of 19th century the countries belonging to the western civilization gained significant economic might, and ‘(Western civilization) Having contacted at earlier stages with countries and nations belonging to other cultures and civilizations, ... has brought them under its influence and eventually subjugated them, becoming the dominating civilization of humankind.’ (Trubetskoy, 10)

Indeed he goes on to say that it was in this period that Freemasonry had ‘become a community where the understanding of equal dignity of all people was born, ... (and) ... To convince Western society that it was inadmissible to treat human beings as things, Freemasonry had to impress on society that there are rights that are organically inherent to each and every human being.’ (op cit, 10, 11). Truly, from 1717 to 1899, was the golden age of Masonic thought and influence. The 20th and the 21st centuries have been very lean periods of Masonic development. Indeed, in his study, Kenney found the following ‘With regard to the current state of the craft, there was first the frequent claim that Freemasonry’s current “membership problem” has much to do with its change from a very public, community oriented organization before the persecutions of WWII to a very secretive, closed in one thereafter – a public relations stance that the craft kept until very recently to its detriment. This historical reconstruction pays little attention to the surge in membership after the war despite the secrecy, the fact that this pattern also occurred in countries not under the immediate threat of invasion, does not consider changes in social structure and societal patterns of leisure activity, nor attend to role of the ritual and oaths of secrecy. Nevertheless it tends to come up in relation to a claim – disputed by some traditionalists – that Freemasonry needs to be more open about its activities in the community and what it stands for in order to recruit members.’ (Kenney, 163).

He goes on to say, ‘In the words of one English Mason interviewed for the film: Freemasonry in England spent 40 years in the shadows. Really we shot ourselves in the foot after the end of the war. Freemasonry was very visible in the community up to the mid to late 30s. When the Freemasons here saw what was

happening to Freemasons in Hitler's Germany, they were frightened there was going to be an invasion, frightened the same thing would happen here, so they retreated underground. And of course there was always those whole things about the walls have ears. Everybody became very secretive at that time. And, in 1945 when the war ended, for some strange reason they didn't come out of the shadows. They stayed where they were.' (ibid)

By the end of the war, WWII, it is fair to say the Freemasonry was not seen or considered by society to be an organization that was able to provide the necessary intellectual rigour to provide society with a base for rebuilding itself in a way that understood and appreciated the values that Freemasonry had developed, espoused and practiced in the development of modern society.

And now we come to the 21st century.

Freemasonry Today

We have been hearing for some time the wailing, bemoaning words that our wonderful fraternity is in awful trouble; our numbers are going backwards, we cannot keep new candidates for any length of time, and all this is due to either not seeing any major public extolling of the virtues of the Craft, or that Freemasonry is out of step with today's society.

This is not confined to this jurisdiction, but extends to other Australian and overseas jurisdictions as well. Walker says, 'It is true to say, however, that within the Masonic Order world-wide to-day, numbers are falling. Reasons for this are not hard to find and are based largely on the superficiality of today's society, the many pressures on individuals and the multiplicity of opportunities, in the social scene, for disposing of leisure.' (Walker, 6). In an oration given at the 75th Anniversary and Cornerstone Ceremony at Atwater Larchmont Tila Pass Lodge in April 2000, Bro Ron Cooper, Grand Orator (California) said 'And yes, it's true that the number of Masons has declined in recent years. This can be traced primarily, not to the flaws in Masonry, but to the flaws in society itself. In the past few decades, there has been a shifting tide that has turned away from basic goodness – away from the value system that places duty and devotion above decadence and degradation.' (Cooper, 2)

The Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory had this to say in an article entitled *Brotherly Love, Relief, Truth Understanding in today's world*: 'In Freemasonry there have been many papers written on causes for the decline in membership. ... However, one significant result of studies is that Masonry needs to discover new ways of communicating the basic truths that masons have loved over the generations.' (Hely, 4) In furthering this view, he quotes social ethicist Hugh Mackay, who wrote in an article in the *Sun Herald* on 29 April 2007: 'When we lose our sense of connectedness, moral clarity is the first casualty. Our most urgent need is to reconnect – to get back in touch with each other.' (Hely, 4). Hely puts this statement in context when he goes on to say 'Here we have a direct challenge for Freemasonry to practice its moral teachings of Brotherly Love, relief and truth as a basis to reconnect both with the brethren within Freemasonry and with the wider community.' (ibid)

Kenney also came across this point: 'Among the Freemasons who provided data for this paper, the symbolically reconstructed past was undoubtedly the most commonly expressed of Mead's categories and thus requires the most discussion. Though it took various forms, the overwhelming majority of my data on the symbolically reconstructed past may be subdivided into respondents' views of the *current state of Freemasonry*, second, in relation to their own *personal lives*, and third, in relation to masonic *built heritage*. With regard to the current state of the craft, there was first the frequent claim that Freemasonry's current 'membership problem' has much to do with its change from a very public, community-oriented organization before the persecutions of WWII to a very secretive, closed in one thereafter – a public relations stance that the craft kept until very recently to its detriment. ... Nevertheless it tends to come up in relation to a claim – disputed by some traditionalists – that Freemasonry needs to be more open about its activities in the community and what it stands for in order to recruit members.' (Kenney, 163)

It would seem from these comments, that the question of the relevance of Freemasonry today is a matter of how Freemasonry is really going to react. Trubetskoy says, 'The Freemasonry of previous epochs, which was addressing and solving crucially and socially significant issues, was absorbing the best people – the most creative-minded, active, and concerned representatives of society. Inside the Brotherhood, therefore, an environment was being formed that contributed equally to maintaining and reproducing Royal Art's own spiritual content and, on the other hand, to the personal growth, self-improvement, and self-realization of the members of the Brotherhood. Today's Freemasonry, confined to few routine forms of social activity, is becoming less attractive to the better members of society, as they see broader opportunities for

implementing their own life goals and spiritual development plans outside the Brotherhood.’ (Trubetskoy, 12)

The reaction to this issue, namely declining numbers and relevance to society, seems to have been recognised and addressed in much the same way worldwide. And that way has been an attempt to ‘modernise’ or ‘update’ Freemasonry utilising all the tools of modern society: Marketing Plans, Strategic Plans, Websites, Open Days, etc. But all these efforts seem to have been in vain, with membership (and here I do not break down membership into active *vs* inactive membership components because I think that would be even more alarming) still declining. So what is wrong? Are the ‘modern’ ways of doing things not appropriate?

Not necessarily and, in particular, some commentators have focussed on the use of modern technology, specifically the computer and its myriad of uses. For example, on the Masonic Traveller website, Bro Fred Milliken offers the following insight: ‘I am observing many Masonic friends these days going through some deep soul searching as they try to reconcile Freemasonry with their own personal goals and the legacy for society that they would eventually like to leave behind. Many of these soul searchers are Masonic writers or ‘communicators’ of some kind, well versed in the meaning of Masonry. Yet some feel powerless against the rising tide of Masonic irrelevancy as they see it. Others have found some other organization, cause or path that more reflects what they want to do with their life. Still others who revel in the Craft still feel that their active involvement therein robs them of the time that could be spent in other worthwhile pursuits.’ (Milliken 1)

He goes on to say: ‘Along comes the Information Age which knocks Freemasonry for a loop. In its early stages Masonic leaders either ignored it or refused to accept it. When the inevitable came to pass most of official Freemasonry were ‘Johnnies come lately. ... Right about here readers will extrapolate that Internet Freemasonry lacks one crucial ingredient, namely that of personal relationship and bonding and also experiencing Freemasonry “in the flesh.” To that end the Craft keeps blossoming out Side bodies and degree upon degree upon degree to make sure all its members get to really “experience” the Craft. But then how many ways does it take to say the same thing over and over? In its desire to cement the Brotherhood into a membership of dedicated true believers, Freemasonry makes sure that members experience the Craft again, again and again ... and in the process is sowing the seeds of its own demise. (ibid)

He then goes on to make a point that I believe aptly describes what is occurring here in our jurisdiction: ‘Yet Freemasonry is being torn apart by competing methods of application. Again to make sure you got it, there is no problem with the message, it’s the messengers.

‘One faction is Freemasonry as the buddy bonding society. Candidates are whisked through the degrees at lightning speed. Lodge meetings consist of degrees or business but never esoteric lessons. The Craft is one big social arena where fish fries, banquets, bowling leagues and motorcycle clubs abound.

‘Another faction is Freemasonry as a charitable society heavily geared to the dispensation of massive Institutionalized Charity, so much so that there is minimal time for social activities and even less time for esoteric study.

‘The third faction is Freemasonry as a research and study society devoted to the pursuit of knowledge in the context of ethical application. This faction sees Freemasonry as a philosophy and spawns such applications as Research Lodges and esoteric study clubs.

‘The first three factions follow the tenets of Freemasonry – Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. The fourth does not.

‘The fourth faction is Freemasonry as a quasi military style society full of rank, privileges, ribbons and medals and the attainment thereof.’ (op cit, 2)

And like here: ‘Each faction is at war with the other offering the one and only true way for Freemasonry’s salvation. In some areas Freemasonry tries to incorporate all factions in a hybrid super model that not only requires a good amount of money but also an inordinate amount of time commitment. Depending on where you are in the country and what model your Grand Lodge has chosen to pursue decides what type of Freemasonry you are experiencing.’ (ibid)

Walker, in addressing this matter, says ‘Freemasonry is a fairly stable product in itself – very little can be done to alter the product without changing it entirely in both essence and appearance. Its principles and precepts have stood the test of time and are as valid today as ever.’ (Walker, 7)

Interestingly, Kenney observes, ‘[It] it goes without saying that in Freemasonry, as in other things, the past structures, conditions, and influences the experiences found in the present. Given the strong emphasis on tradition (e.g., “the Landmarks”) among Freemasons, and oaths against “innovation” – in ritual, in dress,

even in language – change often tends to be looked at with disdain. ... If ever there was an institution where current societal influences may be less important than traditional, structured ways of doing things, Freemasonry stands out. Perhaps the best example of such reasoning is a joking comment passed on by one respondent: “Our grand master told this joke the other day – and it just struck me. ‘How many Masons does it take to change a light bulb? And the response from Masons was: “*Change?*” ’ (Kenney, 176–7)

Here in NSW the Grand Lodge has responded by adopting the new business paradigm and this was set out in the Grand Master’s address to the March 2010 Communication, entitled ‘Redefining our image’, in which he states ‘I am mid-term in my agenda to drive this Jurisdiction forward, so that we can gain confidence in presenting an understood and relevant public face to the community over the next five years’ (Levenston, 7) and he iterated the ways in which that change would be implemented.

Cooper makes the following comment that I think not only supports the foregoing comments but also offers a solution to the problem, but only if you accept that the problem is one of quality and not quantity! ‘Does that mean that we, as Masons, should lower our own standards just to increase our numbers? Is it more important to ensure that Masonry simply survives and be damned with the consequences? Should we, like so many politicians in recent years, take a quick poll to find out just what people want in an organization? Should we listen to “spin doctors” and then change our beliefs, like a chameleon, simply desperate to blend in with the scenery around us? I don’t think that is the prescription to restoring Masonry’s health. Alexander Hamilton, wisely said, “Those who stand for nothing – fall for anything.” What Masonry needs, more than anything else . . . is a few good men. Fewer in numbers, perhaps, but mightier than most – because we have honor and truth as our constant guideposts. Is it simply the number of Masons who have made this fraternity so important? No. It is the measure of the individuals who live by their principles, and their dreams of making the world a better place, that continues to make me proud that I am a Mason.’ (Cooper, 3)

It could be argued that this focus is based on financial necessity, given the need to fund our Grand Lodges, mainly by capitation fees and other levies placed on lodges. In fact, I will be addressing this issue in a subsequent paper, tentatively titled ‘Has Freemasonry adopted the current management theories and practices of modern business i.e. corporatisation, and are these not relevant to the meaning and practice of Freemasonry?’

The only way to overcome the challenge of declining numbers is to reinvent Freemasonry to fit the present and future societies, despite the shape they may adopt. But there are warnings about changing who/what we are. Walker says, ‘Some Grand Lodges have set up programmes of very positive recruiting to the extent that Brethren who induct a certain number of recruits are rewarded. Such a campaign is fraught with dangers and cannot, I believe, be beneficial. We must, in my view, adopt the process of “taking the horse to water”. We can show it to him and indicate its availability but unless the horse is thirsty we cannot do more than encourage him to drink.’ (Walker, 9) He then goes on to quote the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge Alpina of Switzerland in his address to the meeting of the Grand Secretaries of Europe in 1994, who stated ‘It is essential to avoid any kind of proselytism – the main goal is not to seek new members but to improve others’ perception of our Order’, and Walker concludes the quote by observing ‘hopefully, from that, candidates will flow.’ (Walker, 9)

He also references the difficulties that the Churches have had in reacting to their declining numbers, and points out that in the hope to attract and keep more members, the Roman Catholic Church introduced Mass in the vernacular, whilst the Anglican Church reduced ‘to common-place prose the beautiful and uplifting language of the Book of Common Prayer and the St James Bible of the Anglican Communion.’ (Walker, 10) He then further commented ‘Neither of these changes has worked because they have not addressed the problems but simply changed the trappings, like someone putting on cheap casual clothes to go to Church instead of wearing a suit.’ (ibid)

Interestingly, this theme, the similar or simultaneous decline in Church numbers, was echoed by Hely (p4) and by a fellow Canberra Mason, following a meeting of a group of Masons who were considering the establishment of a new lodge that focussed on the esoteric in Freemasonry: ‘The Uniting Church (of which I am a member) keeps accommodating popular opinion, in much the same way we were saying the Masons should emulate. They adopted women ministers and accepted homosexuals with alacrity. Each time it makes a change, it loses some of its faithful members. The general population and the media applaud, but no new people join. The UC is the fastest declining institution in the Western world.’ (Driscoll, 2008).

As an aside, I believe unofficial advice was received from Grand Lodge that focussing on this subject, esoteric Freemasonry, was not the basis for the formation of a new lodge. Interestingly, however, in the

same edition as the Grand Master's address to the March 2010 Communication, was an article by Bro Allan Mason entitled 'How to introduce friends to Freemasonry', in which he suggests that 'Every mason must be ready at all times with a short and precise description of Freemasonry, an elevator statement that in 30 to 60 seconds describes Freemasonry and alludes to the benefits of becoming a Mason.' (Mason, 5) This covers the aspect of using modern practices, namely elevator statements, but he goes on further to emphasise a focus on the hidden (or to some extent the esoteric?) meaning of Freemasonry in proposing an answer to a rhetorical question he has asked: 'In my view, the answer lies in the allegory surrounding Freemasonry.' (ibid, 5) Perhaps, the Grand Lodge's position on this matter has changed a little, as evidenced by a proposal to warrant a new lodge that *has* espoused an interest in the esoteric, Lodge Constellation.

As regards the decline in numbers, in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory specifically, in his unpublished paper, 'As Told by Numbers: A Statistical Approach to a Consideration of the History of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales', RWBro Robert Linford examined membership in the Craft from 1891 to 1986 and compared this with total adult male population from 1911 to 1986, thereby being able to draw out particular trends. It is understood that this paper, prepared at the request of RWBro Harry Kellerman for inclusion in his 'History 1948–1988', was deleted at the direction of the then Board of General Purposes as being 'potentially alarmist'. (Oral advice from R J Linford, 1995)

The results of the study are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Freemasons in NSW. & ACT compared with Total Adult Male Population in each Census Year, 1911–1986.

Year	Actual Male Population NSW&ACT(a)	No. of Freemasons (Annual Average)	Freemasons per 1000 Adult Males
1891	327,932	8,081(b)	24.64
1901	382,644	7,846	20.50
1911	491,471	15,429	31.39
1921	622,422	35,396	56.87
1933	802,189	62,573	78.01
1947	975,183	89,610	91.89
1954	1,105,448	129,879	117.49
1961	1,225,250	129,022	105.30
1966	1,312,269	114,363	87.15
1971	1,429,445	97,679	66.92
1976	1,597,381	85,341	53.43
1981	1,704,229	73,730	43.26
1986		57,922	

(a) May be slightly understated, where persons of unspecified age not distributed to age groups. Sources: NSW Statistical Registers, Official Year Books, Census reports and Australian Bureau of Statistics.

(b) Year end.

'The figures show that from the late nineteenth century until about the late 1950s membership of the Craft, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the adult male population, increased rapidly. In the thirty to thirty-five years thereafter, again in absolute terms and as a proportion of the adult male population, it declined even more rapidly. At the peak of its popularity, the Craft had almost twelve per cent of adult males in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory as members. By 1986, in relative terms, the number of Masons compared with population was at about the same level as in 1911. If the decline apparent since the 1950s should continue beyond the present, it may be anticipated that the level of participation of adult males in Freemasonry in the jurisdiction will have descended to that of the late 1800s within ten to fifteen years, i.e. by the end of this century.' (Linford, 3)

I accept that there has been a decline in membership in Freemasonry in this jurisdiction. The real issue is how we react to this unfortunate fact of life—although it should be noted that if we consider that the membership patterns disclosed by Linford hold true, then we could believe that we are just in another trough, and thus if we become introspective this trend will change in the future. My only comment on this is that if we as an organization are dependent on wars and economic depression for a rise in membership, then we really do need to examine what Freemasonry is about. However, I believe the spikes in membership following the two World Wars should be considered an anomaly, as not reflecting population trends and, as such, were not sustainable. And that way ahead has been put succinctly by almost all of the references cited.

Trubetskoy says, 'In Freemasonry, the esoteric component of labor remains the most important one: ideas appear, and are generated in a dialog with the Supreme Being, and they are perceived as His revelations and His will.' (Trubetskoy, 11) This idea of esoteric influence is discussed by Shanley, but a particular comment resonates with the idea that we do not have to change anything about the Craft, just get a better, or complete,

understanding of its derivation, with regard to regular Freemasonry today: ‘By acknowledging that our current socialised framework is only a step in the evolution of the history of ideas, we can ask the question whether these important ideas were actually viewed differently at the time of the initial formation of the Craft ceremonies and subsequent development. By understanding the meaning of these ideas, as they were, rather than as they currently are, sheds light on—and highlights the influences on—our ceremonies. Esoteric thought is part of these older meanings and ... the ideas of Knowledge, God, etc, as expressed in the Craft ceremonies, are more accurately defined from the framework of esoteric thought.’ (Shanley, 8)

Cooper comments ‘However, when I look around this room today, I don’t see the faces of mourners weeping. I see the faces of good men working together to become better men. I see fraternity and Brotherhood working, hand in hand, for the relief of the downtrodden and the unfortunate in our society. I see the faces of men who have inherited the mantle of truth from our Brother Masons. Who for over 3 centuries, from every corner of this Earth, have struggled together to make their nations and local communities better places in which to live.’ (Cooper, 1) Kenney puts it another way when he comments ‘The fact is that despite the strong influence of the social structural past on current practices in Freemasonry, change is occurring, waters are being tested, but the hope remains that a fundamental and powerful core of traditions will remain. This is perhaps best expressed in the words of one man that “the essential philosophy doesn’t need to change, but things can change around it”.’ (Kenney, 179)

Bro Tim Arnold, an English Mason, had also been troubled with the future direction of Freemasonry, put his thoughts in an unpublished paper entitled ‘Communication and education – the key to Masonic survival.’ He had this to say on why members were leaving the Craft, sometimes very early and no doubt his scenario is played out in our jurisdiction: ‘In 2004, senior officers in Bucks conducted a survey about recruitment and retention. The research revealed that a third of all new recruits resigned or stopped attending their lodges within just four years of joining. (2) My own experience of my mother lodge bears this out. I got fed up with the thoughtless and rudeness of some of the senior brethren. So I resigned – before I had been made a master mason. (Arnold, 2007)

He goes on to provide solutions to the issues he raises, but they are too many to be dealt with in this paper. Suffice to say, towards the end of his paper he offers us the following thoughts: ‘I can imagine that this paper may be in danger of exciting a great deal of anger among colleagues, for drawing attention to certain things that some might believe would be better not said. But I ask the brethren not to kill the messenger. We have inherited a great tradition. It is our responsibility to make sure that we hand over the order to our successors in at least a good situation as in which we inherited it.’ (ibid)

Yet there is little chance of that happening in the future, according to another respected Masonic author, Robert Gilbert. He says there is real danger that the Craft will ‘vanish entirely, for it is still a rather rigid establishment, blind to the flaws, follies, and weaknesses of its institution. In addition, Freemasons tend to be socially conservative, very traditional, very provincial, and very parochial.’ (ibid)

But he ends on an optimistic note: ‘I actually believe that the tenets of Freemasonry are as relevant today as they have been at any time over the last 300 years – we just have to explain them in a modern way ... We should be confident enough to speak publicly about these aspects of the Craft. And proud, too. First, however, we have to get the internal communications right’. (ibid)

Conclusion

I would like to leave the final and appropriate words for the paper to RWBro Walker and Bro Milliken. The former so eloquently puts the position: ‘Now, Brethren, let me close on one final exhortation taken from the beautiful language of our ritual – “See that you conduct yourselves, out of Lodge as in Lodge, good men and Masons”, and remember those immortal words of Polonius given to his son Laertes as he departs from Denmark, on his return from France, in Shakespeare’s greatest play, ‘Hamlet’ – “This above all, to thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man”. Almost the whole Masonic ethos can be found in those few words – so easy to remember, so difficult to put into practice.’ (Walker, 12)

Bro Milliken puts it in a more earthly fashion: ‘If you want to be a Little League coach, man a soup kitchen, build a playground, visit the elderly in Nursing Homes, be a Boy Scout leader, then go do it. Recognize that it is Freemasonry that got you to the point of going to do such. But don’t castigate Freemasonry because it isn’t doing those very things. Freemasonry isn’t doing, it’s being. Freemasonry is what gave you the values to go do these things, nothing more, nothing less.

‘Trying to get Freemasonry to be the be all and end all of life is placing a burden upon it that is far too great. Right now Freemasonry is in meltdown because of unrealized expectations. If feelings of worth and usefulness are things most important to you, then don’t become a professional Masonic social climber, pulling rank and showing off all your medals. Keep Freemasonry in your life simple and focused on its calling. Then it won’t disappoint you but will serve your purpose well.’ (Milliken, 2)

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