

On the evening of Tuesday October 17, 2000, W. Bro. John Hamill addressed the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research. W. Bro. Hamill is the Director of Communications for the Grand Lodge of England. A transcript of his presentation to the VLE&R is not available. In its stead, the following paper has been reprinted from *Vox Lucis*, the official publication of Fiat Lux Lodge of Research No. 1980, GRA, to which W. Bro. Hamill gave a similar address on the same topic on Saturday, October 14, 2000.

The opinions expressed in the following paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.

The Current State of Freemasonry in Britain

by W. Bro John Hamill¹

In December of 1999, the Most Worshipful, the Program Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, Lord Farnham, was invited to reinstall the Grand Master of the National Grand Lodge of France. At the end of that ceremony, in giving his Annual Address, Most Worshipful Brother Charbonneau referred to some of the problems that were facing Freemasonry in the United Kingdom and said that he found it inconceivable that, in what was considered to be the cradle of democracy, a government should be attacking an organisation which promoted tolerance, which promoted brotherhood, which did a tremendous amount of charity within the community, and, above all, was one in which the members had obligated themselves to do their duties to God, to the law, and to their families and to the community in general.

That struck me as a very apposite comment to be made. As MWBro Juthner said, for the last 16 years, first as a sort of part-time job to running the Grand Lodge Library and Museum, I've been involved in dealing with what I call the "attacks of the insidious."

In 1984, something happened which I don't think any of us who were at that stage involved in Freemasonry in the United Kingdom would have expected to happen. We have a very long history of Freemasonry in those islands. But unlike continental Europe, its a history that's been untroubled by interference from government or politicians of any party. A great deal of public curiosity about our institution; the occasional parson who attacked us for being the servants of the devil rather than the servants of God; but an honorable society, recognized as such and without any political involvement itself or any political attack upon it.

What happened in 1984 was the publication of a book which for some nine months was at the top of the best selling non-fiction list. The then Grand Secretary and I used to always argue that it was the best fiction list, rather than non-fiction. It was a book entitled *The Brotherhood: The Secret World of the Freemasons* by a man, sadly now dead, of the name of Stephen Knight. For the first time, that book brought into one volume all the disparate strands of anti-Masonry that had been around for a few generations in a very quiet way. It caught the attention of the press. It caught the interest of the public, and has created a tremendous amount of work for the staff of the United Grand Lodge of England ever since.

Even at that stage, although there was a tremendous amount of myth and rumour going around, there really wasn't much interference. And then the political scene began to change in

Transcript of a talk presented at a meeting sponsored by King George Lodge No. 59, Jubilee Lodge No. 173 and Fiat Lux Lodge of Research No. 1980 on 13 October 2000 at King George Masonic Hall. The meeting was a joint regular meeting of King George and Jubilee Lodges with Fiat Lux participating in the Masonic education. Hamill's visit was part of a speaking tour that also took him to Kamloops, Victoria, Seattle and Vancouver.

England, and politicians found that they had something which would get them on the front pages of their local newspapers and get them to the attention of local voters. They had no particular interest in Freemasonry, but just simply saw it as a means of getting a front page story.

One in particular, a man by the name of Chris Mullins, saw it as a means of getting national interest in what he was doing. It was largely as a result of his work that we had the situation whereby our immediate Past Grand Secretary and I, on two occasions, were hauled before a very senior Committee of the House of Commons. On the first occasion, in a session lasting two hours, having put a lot of written evidence into them, we were grilled as to what Freemasonry was, what the public conceptions or preceptions of Freemasonry were, and we tried to destroy a lot of the myths that had grown up.

One of the reasons that we believe this happened was that we were very good at "hiding our light under a bushel." If you look at the history of Freemasonry in the United Kingdom up until the late 1930s, it was not only very much a part of local society, it was a very visible part of that society. There can scarcely have been a public procession for local or national celebrations that didn't include the local Lodges in their regalia, carrying their banners, proudly marching through the streets of their local town as part of those celebrations. A tremendous number of public buildings, monuments, churches: their foundation stones were laid, not by local civic or religious leaders, but by the local Freemasons; again usually with a church service beforehand, a public procession, all the brethren in their regalia with their banners, and the Masonic stonelaying ceremony being done with all the local people present and taking part in it. Two weekly newspapers on public sale in competition with each other for nearly a hundred years, reported on meetings at all levels and carried all sorts of informative articles about Freemasonry, what it stood for, what its history was.

Towards the end of the 1930s though, a lot of propaganda began to come out of Russia and Nazi Germany and we can begin to see Grand Lodge itself beginning to pull back a little bit. In 1938, the Grand Secretary published by means of letter in the *London Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* the aims and relationships of the Craft — so many stories were coming in from Europe as to what we were believed to be doing.

The war came along and like many other organisations we turned in on ourselves. There was a very strong public fear of infiltration by spies or invasion from Europe. There was control as to what could go into the press because newsprint was difficult to get hold of and only necessary war news was being reported. And so, Freemasonry, like so many other organisations, began to drop a little out of the public consciousness.

Unfortunately, when the war was over, we continued with that introversion and gradually took ourselves out of the public consciousness altogether. Allied to that was a very definite policy from the late 1950s of not speaking to the media and, perhaps more dangerously when journalists began to realize that that was the policy, not correcting the mythology that they began to develop about this wonderful secret society, quietly manipulating everything behind the scenes.

It was on that basis that politicians in the late 70s, and the 1980s, and the 1990s, were able to build so that you get the situation wherein local government — quite a number of county councils and local borough councils from the late 1980s as a result of priming by Chris Mullen, MP — began to put on their job application forms and tender forms — for those wishing to do business and gets contracts with the local authority — the question: "Are you or have you ever been a Freemason? We began to get local politicians asking why there were no public registers of those in public office or public employ who were Freemasons because, of course as everybody knows, "the Freemasons are secretive, and if they are secretive, they must be up to no good."

This culminated in the Home Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons summoning the Grand Secretary to explain what Freemasonry was and explain why we were not a secret society and why we were not as the politicians claimed and the public perceived us to be. That was something of a difficult exercise. A report was published and in 55 of its 56 paragraphs stated quite plainly that, although they had consulted the heads of all the various branches of the criminal justice system, of the legal system in general, none of those bodies had been able to provide any evidence to so that Freemasonry had any effect within their organisations or that Freemasonry as a group or individual Freemasons had tried to interfere in the operation of the justice system.

Despite the fact that they stated quite unequivocally that there was a paranoia in certain circles about Freemasonry, that when allegations were investigated, no evidence could be produced to sustain those allegations, despite that they came up in their 56th paragraph with a recommendation to Parliament that all members of the various branches of the criminal justice system should, indeed, not only register whether or not they were Freemasons, but that those registers should be publicly available so that if anyone wanted to check whether or not the police officer investigating them was a Freemason, or the prosecutor, or the defense (if they were on the prosecution side), or indeed the judge himself was a Freemason, they would be able to do so.

Our first question, of course, was: "Why should being a Freemason make a difference? Why should someone be interested if someone in that sort of position was a Freemason?"

And each time the government and the civil servants came back with: "Well, there is a public perception that that is what happens. You are a mutual self-advancement society. You obligate yourselves to help each other, regardless of the circumstances, and there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that this goes on at all levels."

We said: "Well, anecdotal evidence is not what stands up in court. Where is the sustainable evidence? We can give you the evidence that we are not a mutual self-advancement organisation. But, in fact, one of our principles is that you do not use your membership to advance your own or anyone else's interest. And our obligation in the Third Degree specifically excludes you from keeping a Brother's secret if it involves murder, treason, felony, or any other offenses contrary to the laws of God or the ordinance of the realm! So what is the problem that you have." That's a question we still haven't had an answer to.

In the same way, when we challenge their comment that, well, the public has this perception, we ask the question: "Who has tested that perception? What is the evidence that there is a perception?" — well-knowing that nobody ever has tested that perception, and that the government, by constantly reiterating that there is a public perception, is simply feeding the paranoia that was referred to in the Home Affairs Select Committee report.

We then began to discover that it wasn't just in the area of the criminal justice system that this sort of attitude was being taken. The Minister of Defense, again through Chris Mullen, MP, who had been written to by the wife of a non-commissioned officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps who as a result of an article in a Corps magazine reporting on the 75th anniversary of the Royal Army Medical Corps Lodge, wrote to Chris Mullen, anonymously, that she was the wife of an NCO, her marriage had broken down because her husband had not got the promotion that he should have had because, as the magazine showed, the Royal Army Medical Corps was stuffed with Freemasons and he wasn't a Freemason. Therefore he would not be promoted. Chris Mullen sent this letter out, a Parliamentary question, to the Ministry of Defense.

As a result of that, the Ministry of Defense issued a Defense Council Instruction [DCI] covering all three of the branches of the armed services banning Masonic meetings on

Ministry of Defense property — which was a hollow ban because not Lodges or Masonic units actually met on MOD property — but, more insidiously, barred serving personnel who were Freemasons from promoting or encouraging membership amongst their colleagues.

Now this struck us as a rather woolly, very ambiguous instruction to issue. So we wrote to the MOD and asked half a dozen very simple questions — none of which received an answer. A response came back saying that the Defense Council Instruction was clear enough to be self-explanatory, and they would make no further comment on the relationship between the armed forces and Freemasonry.

This somewhat annoyed us. So we thought, well, if they're not going to answer, we'll write to the Prime Minister.^ Lord Farnham wrote to the Prime Minister saying that he thought it outrageous that this DCI had been issued. What it was basically saying was that Freemasons are not to be trusted, and the subtext was that anyone in the armed forces who wanted a career should not be a Freemason. He referred to the fact that we'd asked questions relevant to the instruction and no answers had been received.

About two months later, we received a letter, again from the Ministry of Defense, saying that the Prime Minister had handed the letter to them as they were dealing with the subject and that in previous correspondence they had dealt with the matter and felt that there was nothing further to say.

Lord Farnham got slightly angry at this and wrote back to the Prime Minister again, copying the response and saying that he thought as there were 300,000 Freemasons under the United Grand Lodge of England, to say nothing of those under the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland, it seemed strange that a government department and the Prime Minister himself were not in a position to answer serious questions which had been asked on an instruction which materially affected members of Freemasonry.

A response came back again from the MOD, rather than the Prime Minister, again not providing answers, but saying: "But, of course, one of the problems was that there was a public perception that Freemasonry was a secret society." And, of course, it was the duty of not only the government but the armed forces to be seen to be above any sort of secretiveness — transparency and openness being big buzzwords in British politics these days. So we wrote back and said we were very well aware of that. But, surely, if the government was aiming for openness and transparency, if that was their policy, then under their policy they had a duty to answer the six questions that we had raised.

We got a letter back again from the MOD, which started off rather brittlely: "I have responded on three occasions to your enquiries about Freemasonry and the Ministry of Defense and feel that the consultation should be at an end."

That really annoyed us!

One of the things that the government had forgotten was that they had not only signed up on the European Convention on Human Rights, but in 1998 they had put through Parliament a Human Rights Law incorporating the European Convention into our legal system. But to allow the judges to absorb the Convention itself and bone up on what had been happening in the European Court in Strasbourg, they delayed it coming into force until the 2nd of October this year [2000]. So we got in touch with Grand Lodge's legal advisors and said we need some advice on this. As far as we can see, the DCI goes against three articles of the new Human Rights Act: the

British Prime Minister is Tony Blair, leader of the Labour Party.

right of lawful assembly; the right of freedom of thought; and the general right not to be discriminated against if you are a member of a particular group.

Our solicitors did, as London solicitors do, went to the firm that they use. They have what they call a "cab-rank" system — rather like if you hail a cab. If you go to barrister's chambers, whoever happens to be duty barrister that day will take your case. Luck was with us because the duty barrister on that day was a man called Michael Bellough, QC, who just happens to have been the QC who's been advising the judges for the last 18 years on the implementation of the Human Rights Act. In a fascinating hour and a half with him, he went through the Defense Council Instruction as it related to the Act and said "You've got a prima facie case. Problem is, you have a problem. The grey area that was left by Parliament was whether or not an organisation can bring a case or whether it has to be an aggrieved individual."

We said that's not a particular problem for us. We've got enough aggrieved individuals who are not only serving in the armed forces in all three branches, but are also fairly distinguished Freemasons and are more than happy to bring a case. So, ten days ago, a letter from our solicitors to the MOD and Treasury solicitor:

- pointing out what had not happened in regard to our questions;
- pointing out what our QC believed was the legal standing of the DO in relation to the Human Rights legislation;
- asking them whether they were going to remove the DCI on or after the 2nd of October; and
- ending up with a nice phrase to the effect that if they didn't, we reserved the right to protect the rights of our members and to launch legal proceedings without any further notice.

There's been a deafening hush ever since from the Ministry of Defense, but our solicitors said they had been talking to the Treasury solicitors, and the legal departments in both the MOD and the Treasury solicitor's office have been jumping like mad for the last ten days, trying to find out how they can get the MOD off the hook without it looking as though the Secretary of State is doing a u-turn.

That's the sort of thing that's been going on in public, and its been spreading across, in very quiet ways. The National Health Service — people are being asked whether or not they are Freemasons.

A very good friend of mine who happens to be a human resources consultant — what used to be called personnel when I first started working — was applying for a contract with the Foreign Office. It required her to have positive vetting, which she's had for a previous contract that she had there but that had run out and they were doing it again. She rang me up after she'd had it and she said, "I'll come and have a coffee with you. There's something you should know about."

They'd gone through the usual process of asking the same questions three different ways in three different sequences to make sure they'd got the same answers each time from her — asking her all sorts of details about her life, her career, her personal life, her family. She happens to have a long-term partner who, for the last three years, has been working in New York. As it was the Foreign Office, they got a bit interested in that. But the first question they ask was: "Is he a Freemason?"

And she, being a south London girl, said, "What's that got to do with the price of fish?"

They said, "Is he a Freemason?"

She said, "No. Why do you need to know?"

"Oh, that's a question we have to ask these days."

She said, "Well, you've obviously seen from my CV I did a consultancy exercise for the Grand Lodge of England a couple of years ago, so I know a little bit about it. I could, perhaps, understand, if I was a conspiracy theorist, you're asking me if I was a Freemason, but what on earth has it got to do with my security whether or not my partner who is in New York is a Freemason?"

"Well, we have to ask the question" was the only response that she got.

They tried it with the planning inspectors — the Department of the Environment, which controls the planning inspectors who lead or advise on building and construction projects. A freemason who is an architect applied to be a planning inspector. A form came back — Guidance Notes for Applicants — a list of people who are barred from applying to be planning inspectors. Not surprisingly, anybody involved with things like the National Trust, English Heritage, which looks after listed buildings, major construction companies which get the contracts for major public buildings, were barred from applying to be planning inspectors. Eminently sensible. At the bottom was a simple statement — Freemasons!

So I wrote to the head of the Department of Environment who happens to be the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and said could they explain why Freemasons were barred? Back came the answer — We have to be open and transparent in our appointments. There is a public perception Freemasons are... blah, blah, blah, blah... Therefore, we have decided to ban Freemasons from applying.

First time actual discrimination against Freemasons, and we learned two things from that. One, under English law you can quite happily be discriminated against for being a Freemason. Under our legal system, if there isn't a law protecting you, that means there is not a law banning you from being discriminated against. Therefore, you *can* be discriminated against.

The second thing we found out was that the Human Rights Acts stops that discrimination. For the first time, due to an injudicious answer in Parliament, a government department could be caught under the new Human Rights Action. I had a certain quiet glee in writing to the Deputy Prime Minister and saying, "Might I remind you that under the Human Rights Act (1998), this will be illegal."

There was a very quick Parliamentary question organised by one of the government supporters which enabled the Deputy Prime Minister to say in Parliament that the Planning Inspectorate had got it wrong, that he had ordered them to withdraw that statement that Freemasons could not apply. A few weeks later, a note appeared in the job adverts in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* in London advertising for a new head of the Planning Inspectorate. The Minister had had to eat humble pie in Parliament — the civil servant suffered.

The Human Rights Legislation is going to give us the strong arm that we need. We should not, in this sort of gathering, talk Politics, but politics with a small "p." We have a government with a tremendous majority — one of the largest there's ever been in British political history — which means it can virtually do what it wants and nobody can stop it. For the first time, it is going to be caught by its own legislation. We're beginning to see cracks in it.

Cambridgeshire County Council, in May, on the advice of its legal department, said that it no longer considered Freemasonry to be a secret society and was withdrawing all reference to Freemasonry from its recruitment literature, and was dropping the requirement for its employees to declare to their line manager whether or not they were Freemasons.

That's had a wonderful ripple throughout local government. We managed to get a copy of the legal advice that they'd been given and it cited the same three sections of the Human Rights Act that we'd been quoting to the government for the last two years.

The Councils are slowly toppling. The Home Secretary, knowing that he couldn't force those already in offices — police officers or civilian support for the police — to declare whether or not they were Freemasons, asked the Chief Constables to do a voluntary poll. This was carried out earlier this year [2000]. Thirty-two of the 43 county constabularies took part in it. They had a 36 per cent response. The Home Secretary was disappointed at the response and announced that he was issuing a discussion document to Chief Constables, police authorities, the Police Federation, the Superintendents' Association, the Association of Chief Police Officers, to find out if there was another way of having a voluntary poll to get a better result. And at the end of it tacked on, "Otherwise we will have to consider legislation."

Nine of the 32 Chief Constables have already reported back and said: "We did what you asked. You didn't get the answer you wanted. Sorry, we're not going to do it again. If you want it, you legislate. But remember, on the 2nd October, the Human Rights Legislation comes into force and our legal departments are telling us: a) we can't ask the question; and b) even if we could, we can't publish the information because it's invading the privacy of the police officers and civilian support staff. It's discriminating against them if you simply ask who Freemasons are rather than a general declaration of interests."

We're waiting to see what the Home Secretary will do. The one thing that we know is there is no way he wants to legislate because the libertarians in his own party, let alone the opposition parties, will shout that one down, to say nothing of the Human Rights Legislation itself.

So lots of little cracks beginning to appear. Where three or four years ago we were beginning to wonder if Freemasonry was going to have a future in the United Kingdom, we are beginning to see the light at the end of the cliched tunnel and things starting to come together again.

I was asked on one occasion what I thought of the late Stephen Knight and the furor that his book had caused. I said I have a feeling that in a hundred years time, Stephen Knight will be seen as the patron saint of English Freemasonry because what he did was to shock us out of complacency, we had withdrawn ourselves from society. We had become very strong, like most jurisdictions, in the 1950s and 1960s. We had a tremendous increase in membership after the horrors of the Second World War. We peaked somewhere in the 1970s. There's been a downward trend ever since. It brought us back into the community. Perhaps not in the way we would want to be, but:

- by countering what was going on;
- by pursuing a policy of openness, of, as our Grand Master said, better informing (rather than a recruitment drive) the outside world;
- by a lot of activity in local communities, simple things like opening the local Masonic hall as an open day so people can come in,
- allowing the local community to use Masonic halls for non-Masonic events so that they become community social centres;
- having information officers in each of our 47 Provinces in England and Wales who liaise with the local media and have been so successful in a number of areas that they are now being rung up by the local newspapers and saying we're short of information for next week's issue, got any Masonic stories that we can put in;
- reporting Freemasonry as interesting, local community activities rather than putting the spin on it that there used to be.

In 1985 we were given tremendous support by a man called Bernard Levin who was very well-known in the United Kingdom as a writer and broadcaster. He was at that stage doing a twice weekly column think piece in the *London Times* and on two occasions gave tremendous support for Freemasonry. We were intrigued because we knew he wasn't a Freemason. So we asked him to come in and have lunch, meet one or two senior Freemasons and have a look around Freemasons' Hall in London. We had a very entertaining lunch and at the end of it he said. "Is there any sort of advice I can give you?"

We said, "Yes there is, because we're very naive at this. We're learning the very hard way how difficult public relations is and how easy it is to be trapped by the less honourable in the media. Where should we target?"

He said, "It's quite simple. You've got a spectrum. At one end you've got your members who know what Freemasonry is about and what it's not. At the other end you've got your implacable enemies and it doesn't matter what you say, they "know" and they're not going to be convinced otherwise. You write to them once and tell them they're wrong, and then you ignore them. It's very hard to ignore them because they're vociferous, they tend to have avenues into the media and they will go on shouting. But don't waste your time and effort trying to convert them. They are not open-minded. You won't do it.

"In the middle you've got the great mass of the British public. They think about their families, their job and whatever is on the front page of their morning paper or the six o'clock news on television. That's where you've got to hit. It's the old cliché — fifty years to make a reputation, five minutes to lose it, sixty years to rebuild it."

One of the problems he saw that we had was the fact that, for a period of getting on for nearly fifty years, we had taken ourselves out of the public consciousness and one of the things the public doesn't like is not understanding something. If they don't know about an organisation, there is a tendency to be suspicious of it. "What you need to do," he said, "is to get information out on a regular basis to them." And that's what we've been doing.

In a lot of areas, the simple act of inviting the local community in to an open day at a Masonic centre they've walked past every day of their lives for 30, 40, 50 years but never been in, having people there answering their questions about Freemasonry, that put the worries into our Brethren in these Masonic centres. But they very quickly found out that the questions that they were asked weren't deep questions about the relationship between Freemasonry and religion, weren't detailed questions about our ritual and ceremonies, but were the simple things like: Why do you wear regalia? Why do you do your ceremonies? If they were in the lodgeroom, what were the particular furnitures? Who sat where? What did they do in the Lodge? This sort of general questions.

We found over a period of getting on for 14 years now that having those sort of information days and open days has taken a lot of steam out of the "perception" in the local community and has actually built up a corpus of knowledge in the local community so that when people are in the pub or at a social do and somebody says, "Oh, those be Freemasons again!" somebody else says, "Hang on a minute. I've actually met some of them. Have you met them? I've been to see them. I've seen an open day. I've talked to them. I've had my questions answered." It takes that steam out and people begin to realise, as with many other things, there's another side to what the media's been portraying.

Our best ambassadors are our Brethren and their wives. One of the most difficult things that we have is persuading our Brethren that openness, making public awareness possible, was a step that needed to be taken if we were to have a future. One of the things were began to find with all

the intense publicity in the mid-1980s was that in certain areas, not surprisingly those of public employment or those of public office, we were not getting candidates coming forward. We were not seen as a smart thing to join if you wanted to have a career in those areas. It began to have an effect on members coming in.

Talking to those groups — always challenging! If a newspaper gets it wrong, we always correct. Doesn't matter if it gets printed or not. Journalists are lazy, in the main, particularly on local newspapers. The editor says, "There's a story about Freemasonry, find out about it." They go to the library file. They pick up the last six cuttings and that's their knowledge of the subject. If in among those cuttings there's letters from a local Freemason correcting the errors, that's what they see.

We've been beginning to change. I think I had the best compliment I've had for a very long time as part of my new duties as Director of Communication. Every other week, I take out a journalist on one of the national newspapers for lunch, not to talk about anything but just to introduce them to Freemasonry. The comment I had back was, "Our problem is we can't write about you now. You've got your PR act together. We know that if we get it wrong, or if we put a piece in and the sub subedit it because something else has come in and they cut our space and he gets it wrong, you'll write to the editor and tell him. We'll be on the carpet the next morning."

We've gone from being the general whipping boy for the ills of society to now only appearing in the national media if there's a new story element to whatever it is — never good news, usually bad news. But again, there've been one or two rather nasty medical scandals in the National Health Service. Each time, somebody's tried to link Freemasonry to it. Well, of course, all doctors and all members of the general medical council are bound to be Freemasons — Freemasons are always middle-class, professional people.

Each time we challenge. Each time we don't let them get away with it, and sometimes you get a headache from continually banging your head. But in the end, it works! And in the last 18 months we have only appeared in a national newspaper if there has been a news story and some of them are actually starting to be positive news stories.

In general, I think English Freemasonry is in good heart. As I said, like most other jurisdictions, we had the massive influx and then we had a gradual decline. One of the things that we're discovering through the wonders of computers — we now have all our membership computerized — is that while up until two years ago we were losing something like five per cent of membership a year, in the last two years it's been a little over one per cent. The number coming in each year is stabilising at around about 10,000 each year. I have a feeling that the heavy fall was nature taking its course with those who had come in in the big bump in the 50s, 60s and early 70s.

As I said, Stephen Knight made us think. We've had radical reorganisations at the top. We had a Board of General Purposes of elected, appointed and ex-officio members numbering something like 53, which met eight times a year to decide on everything. That has now been reorganised into an Executive Board of General Purposes of ten who meet six times a year, spend a full day discussing and meeting, have a number of subcommittees on particular areas like public relations, external relations (which we call our relations with other Masonic bodies and other jurisdictions around the world), the general management of the Craft.

We have a Council which is made up of the residue of the old Board of General Purposes and representatives of various levels within the Craft which meets four times a year and is given specific projects to look at, to work as a sort of "think tank" on long-term policy for the United Grand Lodge of England.

We are gradually working things down to ordinary Lodge level. Our Grand Master, on three occasions in the last decade, has suggested, because we found two major weak links in membership interest. The first was the new member — all the excitement of going through the three degrees and being the centre of things and then suddenly nothing! In a lot of areas, Provinces are starting mentoring programs. A Past Master is asked to look after a group of new members so that when they come to a meeting after they become a Master Mason, there's a face there to greet them, there's somebody to talk to them, somebody to deal with their questions.

The other big problem was the Past Masters — again, the excitement of going up through the chairs, being the Master, being the IPM, then suddenly on the back benches because there was a long tradition of things like the Secretary, the Treasurer and the Director of Ceremonies staying in office for 20, 25, 30 years.

Our Grand Master suggested that five to eight years was a long enough time for anybody to be in office, that it was good for the Lodge if there was rotation of office because it gave more people an opportunity of gaining experience. It was bad for the Lodge if you had people sitting in particularly those three offices for more than about ten years because after 15 years, they think they are the Lodge. No one else gets a look in. And you have the unhappy situation we had in my Mother Lodge which was founded in 1946, and in 1977 the founding Secretary, Treasurer and DC were still in office. They all died within three months of each other and the Lodge virtually died with them because nobody knew how even to call a meeting. So those sort of ideas are being put through.

There is this wonderful shibboleth that Freemasonry never changes. As somebody who for 28 years made a daily advancement in the Grand Lodge library researching for myself, helping others with their researches, I know the greatest myth in Freemasonry is this one that nothing has ever changed.

Virtually everything has changed from even the time that Freemasonry organised itself centrally in 1717 with the foundation of the Grand Lodge of England. The thing that hasn't changed is our basis in those three great principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth and our insistence on no discussion on politics and religion.

I am firmly convinced that whatever trials we may be going through at this particular moment, be they external or internal, provided we can maintain that balance of keeping the essentials unchanged but allowing our outward forms, our customs to adapt to the period in which we are currently existing, and don't allow things to become tablets of stone, don't allow the organisation to ossify, as long as we can maintain that balance which has now been going on certainly in an organised way for nearly 300 years, then whatever the problems that we have at the moment, I'm firmly convinced we have a future and that future generations will get the enjoyment and the fulfillment out of Freemasonry, perhaps in a different way to the we do it today, but that same enjoyment and fulfillment that we and previous generations have.