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THE MISSING MASTER MASON

Installation Inaugural Address to Internet Lodge 9659

20th March 1999

by

WBro John L Belton

Worshipful Master

May I say that the views represented in this paper are mine alone and do not represent those of the Internet Lodge or any Masonic body or organisation.

The objectives of this paper are to:-

1. To offer quantitative numerical research on the issue of falling numbers
2. To demonstrate that there are two clear and distinct factors that affect trends in Masonic membership.
3. To demonstrate that these factors are global and not merely 'little local difficulties'.
4. To offer various pointers as to how freemasonry should progress in this difficult situation.

My interest in falling numbers started in my Mother Lodge (Mellor Lodge 3844 Derbyshire EC) when I installed as my successor a Past Master in the Lodge - something that had never been done before. An attempt to reverse this treadmill of recycling Past Masters prompted further research and in its turn this paper. In short, what had happened in Mellor Lodge was that it had raided its stock of Master Masons and they had eventually run out.

The summons for my Initiation in May 1989 listed ten Stewards in hindsight the fact that not one of them ever progressed to become Master of the Lodge made it clear that whatever the problem was it had been around for a while.

Casual enquiry as to the reasons for these falling numbers produced a variety of opinions; the economic recession, changing work practices, cost, fewer candidates, no younger candidates and 'today's youth is not what it used to be'. All these views were firmly held by the individuals, and indeed those holding them strongly tended to discount all other opinions and there was a widely held view that freemasonry had been through these problems before and in the fullness of time would be restored to its former glory. Curiously there was (and is) a virtual complete absence of any objective analysis - a lack of FACTS or FIGURES on which to base either a diagnosis or treatment! The hunt was on for some numerical data to try and test some of the commonly held opinions and assumptions.

A good starting point for quantitative data is the figures for the number of Grand Lodge Certificates issued by United Grand Lodge of England over the years, and these are published annually in the Quarterly Communications of Grand Lodge including the past ten years figures. In the 15-year period from 1982 to 1997, the number of GL Certificates issued fell from 15700 to 10200 - a decrease of 35%. Extrapolating this trend to 2010, the forecast number would fall to 5900 per year - a further 40% decrease!

Working on the assumption that these figures are applicable at the next lower level of the organisation it would mean that putting them, for example, in the context of the Province of East Lancashire; that in 1997 each Lodge actually initiated on average 0.9 masons that this would be forecast to fall to 0.5 in 2010. Clearly a matter for concern! This trend is of at least 15 years duration and would not be expected to reverse or stabilise in the medium term i.e. the next decade. Such an argument is supported by the fact that across the world the numbers in freemasonry have been falling since the early 1960's

The first key message is that the number of new members can be expected to fall by around 4% per year over the next decade; assuming the past trend continues - and that it is neither better nor worse.

Initial quantitative investigation started in **Mellor Lodge 3844** - my mother Lodge in the Province of Derbyshire. Clearly if one wants to examine any trend over time it is helpful to look at the behaviour of groups or cohorts doing the same thing over different periods of time and see what had changed between one group and the next. Such an approach is different from the normal published figures, which merely show the changes in a year and includes and ranks equally those who joined yesterday and 50 years ago. It must be noted that they are different generations and it would thus be reasonable to expect them to behave differently.

The analysis therefore takes groups of masons joining in successive five-year periods and to examine their Masonic careers and see what changes have taken place in certain measurable characteristics. The analysis only included candidates, excluded joiners and of course deaths (the latter not being considered an active reason by any member for ceasing Lodge membership)

Analysis of Mellor Lodge 3844 EC Membership Data

Period	No. of Candidates	No. of Joiners	Av. Age of Candidates	Av. Years ToWM	Av. Years to Resignation / Exclusion	% Resignation / Excluded
1945-49	4	0	39.5	10.5	23.0	100%
1950-54	13	0	41.1	11.8	25.6	54%
1955-59	10	0	42.8	11.0	16.6	70%
1960-64	10	3	41.5	9.6	17.2	80%
1965-69	6	2	37.2	10.0	16.0	50%
1970-74	10	3	42.7	8.3	13.4	60%
1975-79	1	12	33.4	11	12	11
1980-84	10	3	47.4	7.0	8.3	40%
1985-89	8	4	39.5	5.5	5.3	50%
1990-94	7	2	39.1	N/A	3.7	38%

Source: Membership Register of Mellor Lodge 3844 EC as at Jan 1999

Straight away it was clear that the 'Age at Initiation' has changed little over the last half century - there is no evidence here that there ever was, in earlier years a much younger group of men becoming masons - the figures show an average of 40 years plus or minus 5 over the

last half century! The period of 'Years to the Chair' had come down from around 10 to 5 (until we ran out of Master Masons that is).

The startling discovery was the rapidly decreasing period of time from Initiation to Resignation or Exclusion - deaths excluded - down from over 20 years in the SO's to around 10 years in the mid 1970's and then to 4-6 years in the 1980's or early 90's.

These findings, especially the reduction in duration of membership, did not find ready acceptance outside my Lodge and all sorts of reasons were given as to why Meilor 3844 was really just an exception to the 'real and normal situation'. This prompted analysis of the records of other Lodges elsewhere to see if there was any similarity in results.

The next set of data came from Weibeck Lodge in Nottinghamshire - where it still takes 14 years to become Master - but the underlying trend for duration of memberships was the same. The analysis was repeated for Lodges in Alberta and Ontario in Canada, Montana in the USA and in Queensland, Australia. This data is not easy to obtain on other than an individual Lodge basis because of the need to include all those who became members and that computerised records at a Provincial or Grand Lodge level are incomplete for that time period or could only be accessed by hard copy record cards which ceased to be updated after computerisation.

Average years to Resignation / Exclusion by period of Initiation

Period	Meilor #3844 England	Meilor #1774 England	Weibeck #2890 England	Concord #124 Alberta	Granite #446 Ontario	Cooroora #232 Q'sland	Lord Salton #98 Q'sland	Ashlar #19 Montana
1945-49	23.0	15.4	18.0	15.7	12.5	20.4	N/A	17.8
1950-54	25.6	20.2	26.2	17.4	14.7	16.8	26.3	18.8
1955-59	16.6	14.5	13.4	13.2	16.1	13.6	W&S	14.3
1960-64	16.1	17.6	10.0	12.6	14.4	16.2	17.0	14.5
1965-69	16.0	13.8	19.7	12.0	15.6	15.3	16.0	15.3
1970-74	13.8	10.6	13.3	10.8	14.2	N/A	12.8	11.7
1975-79	9.8	8.1	11.0	8.4	7.6	9.0	9.3	9.6
1980-84	8.3	8.2	10.7	6.5	8.8	4.8	8.3	6.5
1985-89	5.3	2.5	6.2	4.8	7.8	6.0	5.0	N/A
1990-94	3.7	3.8	4.5	N/A	4.0	4.3	4.0	N/A

Source: Lodge Membership Registers

Eerily the results were again almost identical in terms of duration of membership and seemingly independent of geographical situation.

For all the Lodges analysed the first experience of decrease in average duration of membership was during the period 1955-59 and this approximates to a date of birth of circa 1925 and reaching the age of 21, adulthood, around 1945 and becoming a mason between 1955 and 1959. These Brethren will now be aged on average in their mid - 70's. The fall in duration of membership has continued from that date without respite.

The validity of the above results could be queried on the basis that the duration of membership in recent groups is artificially lowered because there are members yet to resign and this is indeed correct. However it should be noted that the percentage of candidates who have already resigned in say the groups from 1980 onwards is not dissimilar to those prior to say 1970 and before. The figures are shown below:-

% Resignations / Exclusions by period of Initiation

Period	Mellor #3844 England	Mellor #1774 England	Welbsck #2890 England	Concord #124 Alberta	Granite #446 Ontario	Cooroora #232 Q'sland	Lord Salton #98 Q'sland	Ashlar #19 Montana
1945-49	100%	61%	33%	56%	31%	44%	N/A	39%
1950-54	54%	71%	25%	59%	28%	83%	25%	43%
1955-59	70%	73%	33%	64%	36%	89%	30%	51%
1960-64	80%	64%	8%	72%	31%	63%	73%	41%
1965-69	50%	50%	27%	40%	31%	50%	50%	43%
1970-74	60%	64%	25%	65%	18%	nil	70%	60%
1975-79	86%	89%	31%	62%	19%	100%	62%	47%
1980-84	40%	67%	36%	74%	47%	100%	40%	60%
1985-89	50%	29%	50%	28%	25%	100%	25%	N/A
1990-94	38%	75%	44%	N/A	23%	37%	43%	N/A

Source: Lodge Membership Registers

Of course, the data is from a limited number of Lodges in a limited number of places and has not been subjected to strict statistical analysis but nonetheless there is a remarkable degree of consistency between the figures from diverse parts of the English-speaking world. **One must conclude that there is a trend across the English speaking Masonic world and the trend is GLOBAL.**

This is the second key message: Those who do become masons stay as members of the Craft for a very significantly shorter period of time than they ever did in the past -about 20 - 30% of the time they did half a century ago!!

This might best be defined as the TRANSIENCE OF MEMBERSHIP. It has not been reported elsewhere within Freemasonry but the evidence for its existence is convincing. We need to take due account of BOTH the decreasing number of candidates AND the decreasing period of time they remain members whenever we consider the problem we face! (The concept of transience will be dealt with later in the paper).

The figures from the Province of East Lancashire show that of those resigning in any one year 50% had resigned within about 10 years. The basis of this figure is different from the Lodge analysis for it includes only those resigning in any one year and regardless when they became members of the Craft

The individual Lodge analyses indicate an average of 4-5 years and will not include any allowance for those who have not yet resigned in the more recent of the five year periods.

The real figure lies between the two, somewhere near 7 years.

Now we can understand the symptoms we see, in the form of Missing Master Masons, in many Lodges where they are; missing from the stewards benches, missing from floor offices, missing from rehearsals and missing from regular meetings. Partly this is a result of the smaller numbers becoming Masons but mainly it is that they stay a much shorter time as members.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR GRAND AND PROVINCIAL LODGES?

We have looked at what the effects of 'falling numbers' are on individual Lodges, the micro level, but it is also worth considering the effects on Provinces and Grand Lodges, that is at the macro level, for there undoubtedly must be significant potential problems arising. Here I am

grateful for permission to quote from my report of membership trends produced for the Province of East Lancashire.

Resignation or Mortality - which is more important?

Many Masons will probably have guessed already that resignation is the key factor in driving the numbers downwards - so lets have a look at the effects of mortality alone and resignations alone on the membership of the Province of East Lancashire. But first let me state that these figures are extrapolated from current trends and are limited to two years data and that they are only forecasts. It is likely that any other Province with a similar metropolitan / urban population mix would show a broadly similar trend, the Province of East Lancashire were the first to do the analysis

If we take a snapshot of numbers at the end of 1997 and use the current resignation trends and actuarial mortality tables to forecast the year 2008 - a period of 10 years hence, we find that :-

1. If one assumes that there is no mortality, then membership would fall from resignations alone by 43%.

RESIGNATIONS	1997 actual	1998 estimate	2002 estimate	2007 estimate	2010 estimate
No. of Masons	10529	9900	7800	6000	5100
Cumulative loss		6%	26%	43%	51%

2. If we assume that there are no resignations but only reduction resulting from mortality then membership falls by 24%. (The calculations were done using the mortality table "a(90)" of the (British) Institute of Actuaries).

MORTALITY	1997 actual	1998 estimate	2002 estimate	2007 estimate	2010 estimate
No. of Masons	10529	10300	9300	8000	7200
Cumulative loss		2%	12%	24%	32%

3. If we combine the both mortality and resignation then membership falls by 46% - a net annual decrease of between 4 and 5 % per annum.

MORTALITY & RESIGNATION	1997 actual	1998 estimate	2002 estimate	2007 estimate	2010 estimate
No. of Masons	10529	9689	7593	5727	4825
Cumulative loss		8%	28%	46%	54%

The key driving factor is clearly resignation - and especially resignation among 'new' masons. I hasten to point out that the figures for East Lancashire are not atypical - every Grand Lodge in the English-speaking world is shrinking, some more, some less. The only exceptions to shrinkage are the French speaking Obediences, and some Northern European Grand Lodges and Turkey.

This quantitative work should, indeed, be merely the start for it is clear that we do not yet fully understand what exactly is going on. There are many questions yet to be answered!

Q. Why should the Province of East Lancashire be shrinking by 4-5% per year while, those of Derbyshire and Essex appear to be contracting by only around 1.5% per year?

Q. Of those resigning in the first (say) 8 years how many had floor offices and what were they? - one might ask if there was a link between the pressure (internal and external) to learn the ritual and non attendance?

Q. What are the real reasons for resignation or exclusion? An exit interview with Lodge members or Proposer or Seconder is unlikely to guarantee to give an objective answer - after all none of us like to be gratuitously uncomplimentary to those we know.

Q. Why are some Lodges so much more successful than others are?

We need to know in order to be able to produce a strategy for renewal that stacks the odds in favour of the best-possible outcome! Even the definition of what the best possible achievable outcome is needs more clarity of thought. More work needs to be done on both numbers and attitudes - and undertaken by people with those professional skills - whether in **the Craft** or not.

MOVING ON

We must all accept that **Freemasonry IS part of society both as an organisation and as individual Lodges or individual masons**. There has been an internal tendency to consider that freemasonry is something separate and apart from mainstream society, even that it positively should not change at all and can escape the changes within society.

It is clear however that whether in employment, divorced, voluntarily retired, with teenage children; none of us can distance ourselves from the real world out there. Every individual and organisation has to accept that fact, adapt to it and live with it; a liking or not for what one sees is immaterial. Freemasonry is no exception and thus we have no option but to respond to the changes in society.

Is there evidence and publications out there that can shed some light on our problem? The answer is yes, and to disregard such evidence, either through unawareness or design will make any actions taken either less effective or totally ineffective! The exclusion of such published evidence because it 'not relevant to our organisation' or that it came from another country is at best unwise.

Robert Putnam, Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, in his paper "*The Strange Disappearance of Civic America* " looks at the decline of 'Civic and Social Capital' in America using published statistical data and notes that each successive cohort (a defined group of people within certain parameters, in this case time) are each successively less involved in any form of social or civic activity. He examines factors such as:-

- busyness and time pressure
- economic hard times
- residential mobility...
- suburbanisation. -'
- working women and two career families
- disruption of marriage and family ties
- changes in the structure of the American economy
- 'the sixties' including
 - o Vietnam, Watergate and disillusion with public life; and o the cultural revolt against authority (sex, drugs etc.)
- growth of the welfare state
- the civil rights revolution
- television, the electronic revolution and other technological changes

Putnam's analysis concludes that the following factors are:

vision! One might argue with his diagnosis but clearly the finger of suspicion points at

changes that have, and are continuing, to take place in Society. In sociological terms, Putnam is 'right wing' in that he is concerned at the loss of civic involvement as we know / knew it, by contrast, the 'left wing' view would be to let all past civic and social involvement decay or disappear in the (full) expectation that it would be replaced by something different.

also notes that the fall started around
World War II

Freemasonry must ask itself if it wishes to be concerned with 'civic values' and if it considers its values important to society or by default it will adopt an approach that Masonic values do not matter in the total context of society in the new millennium.

Dr Jonathan Sacks in his "Politics of Hope" notes the same effect but feels that it is due to increasing state involvement in our lives. He considers that until the mid century we had a 'liberal society' - one in which we all accepted that while we had freedoms, those freedoms had rights and responsibilities that went along with them. He notes the change to a 'liber society' where we accept and demand our rights but do not consider that we

owe anything to society in return. In effect, this marks a decline in willingness to make any contribution or commitment to society.

"Future Shock" a seminal work by Alvin Toffler published in 1970, and still in print today, examines the concept of 'Transience' in society. This transience he sees (even in 1970!) as being reflected in the increased divorce rate, decreasing marriage rates, increased single parentage, shorter duration of employment with one employer. All of this some thirty years ago!!

The results of this increased transience are visible around us and are recorded in the national press and in announcements from government. Thus one reads that; the government actuary expects that the new millennium will see more unmarried people than married ones, that almost all churches report declining attendances, that the British government is so concerned about falling civic involvement that they are planning to introduce the teaching of civic values at an early stage of education of our children.

These are therefore not just 'Changing Times' they are 'Radically Changing Times'- changes that might have taken a century are happening in decades - in a historical sense these changes are taking place at such a rate that they appear in the timeline as a discontinuity rather than a rate of change. In this sense **TODAY IS NOT LIKE YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW WILL NOT BE LIKE TODAY.**

When individuals have heard about the subject of my address, they have asked me to include some proposals for dealing with the issues. I decline! Why? Because being able to stand here to address you gives me power, it is however power without responsibility for implementation.

However, a few pointers are worth making by way of summary because they could well define the style of approach to the problem.

1. The decline in numbers has been going on for around 40 years and is not going to reverse itself as if by divine intervention. Thus, any extrapolation of existing trends over the next 10 years is going to happen whether we like it or not. We must plan accordingly!
2. That the changes in society are radical and deep seated, and that they will likewise require a radical approach by freemasonry (and many other organisations).
3. That the strongly 'top down' nature of Masonic management makes it difficult for the messages from the bottom to be heard at the top and that those with expert and professional

skills are often excluded from the process of change because they are not correctly placed in the hierarchy.

4. That we must have among our numbers **professional** marketers, market researchers, strategists, analysts, public relations and other skills that could be put to good use. The Grand Lodge of South Australia, under the leadership of M. W. Bro. John Stone, has been most proactive in these areas and initial results of their programs are encouraging -probably the most encouraging anywhere in the world!

It must be stressed that from Australasia to North America and all English-speaking countries in between, that the decrease has not bottomed out anywhere. Almost all the panaceas have been tried and repeated in various parts of the world, and the numbers have continued to decline. By and large, the lessons learnt by one Grand Lodge have not been taken to heart by others; the excuse that "we are different" has led to the setting of unrealistic objectives -which have then not been achieved. Where the trend has been bucked, it is in individual Lodges or in innovations that give Lodges very specific characteristics. In short it is that individuals in some Lodges have been able to exercise a degree of choice in how they choose to operate - that they are non-conformist to the extent that they have adapted to a style that suits the members rather than any standard style the organisations might promote - and that they have not allowed those things that started as 'Custom and Practice' and moved through being 'Traditions' to become 'Landmarks' to impede sensible adaptation.

We all need to remember that Freemasonry is a voluntary occupation (hobby), that it competes with work, family, partners, television, and all those other ways that leisure hours can now be spent, many of which have become more common during the last half century. If those who join do not find it to be "Value for **their** Time **and** Money" then they will leave. While things can be suggested and proposed, even forced into Lodges, ONLY a wholehearted acceptance by the Lodges members that they have SMART Objectives-(Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed) will produce any reasonable chance of commitment and success. This will require "**Internal** Openness" not only about the scale of the problem itself, but about what has been done and about what might be done. The whole matter of the severe shortage of internal openness by Masonic Authorities will require further attention. We all live in an age of communication, surrounded by it, bombarded by it - and the members of any organisation that does not communicate effectively to its members will find those members • assuming that there is in fact nothing to communicate. Not only must the communication flow out but also its receipt by individual members must be virtually guaranteed - messages that inadvertently stop at in-trays might as well not have been sent! The booklets recently sent by the United Grand Lodge of England to every Mason represent an ideal example of communications best practice.

It has been the practice of Masonic management in many parts of the world to seek to achieve a degree of uniformity across Lodges and by various means to enforce that. This leads to an unwillingness to speak up, unwillingness to experiment, even an unthinking compliance - in the years ahead that may lead to more pain and decay than is needed.

When considering the universality of decline it is useful to reflect upon the vast differences in Masonic practices across the English-speaking world. Let me elucidate a bit. Grand Lodges can be appointive or elective, Lodges may have memberships in the hundreds or thousands or a few tens, may meet from 4 to 20 times a year, the candidate may have anything from a few questions to many pages to learn, candidates may not become full Lodge members till they have completed their third degrees, there may or may not be any 'after proceedings', which

vary from a seated meal to stand up sandwiches, alcohol may be served or not - one could go on and on.

The fact that numbers are falling across the English speaking world, and with practices being so varied, indicates that there is no formula for Masonic meetings that protects against decline - quite simply because the base causes of that decline do not lie within Freemasonry!

Universal panaceas have therefore, not surprisingly, been proved ineffective in halting or reversing the downward trend - although they may have slowed it. I also refuse to believe that universally every Grand Lodge has handled things with such poor planning and commitment that they have all failed - that is beyond the bounds of credibility. It will therefore be important to try and find objectives that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed) and which gain broad acceptance (rather than imposition) among all members within particular Masonic administrative groups.

Those managing the Craft need to consider allowing appropriate experimentation, monitoring, and then permitting success to be copied. The exchange of 'best practice' around the world will be essential in trying to ensure that wheels (whether square, oval or round) are not reinvented endlessly - and in this the Internet can offer a powerful tool in enabling and facilitating the necessary exchanges.

Maybe Grand Lodges (and individual Masons too - for we all share some degree of responsibility) have to stop treating the symptoms and look rather more deeply at ourselves. We need to 'reinvent or rediscover' the values we have held for centuries so that we can share them among ourselves and make them known outside the Craft.

We must all consider with great care what is important to each of us as individual freemasons - is it "Content or Form". Content is the moral and spiritual lessons contained in our ritual and their practical application by all of us in our everyday lives. Or is it form? By form, I mean; that to be a 'real' freemason one must wear a black tie, that the absence of a full stop in a summons is a mortal sin, that the colour of a members apron transcends being a Brother pure and simple. These thoughts and others like them are difficult questions to address - but address them we must. For only by knowing what our core values are, by knowing what it is that real Masons value, what is relevant to the new Brother, may we really start to address the issue of how we go about our own renaissance.

Are we more concerned with a renaissance above all in numbers? Do we merely value the number of memberships? Or is it the renaissance in values that will bring with it a renewal in vitality, renewal in moral values and thus as a result an eventual halt to the decline - by placing a high value on the qualities of humanity[^], moi[^]ity and [^]fraternity. It may not be mere coincidence that many of those who are actively involved with these issues have agonised on 'what comes next' are more aware of the true inner message of Freemasonry!

You might all well ask what this Lodge, the Internet Lodge 9659 (United Grand Lodge of England) is going to do to make its contribution? It is clear to me that what is not happening is the effective sharing of experience and best practice around the world - the wheel is being reinvented time and again. I therefore am delighted to announce the start of an invitation only list called renaissance-list (details may be obtained from <jbelton@internet.lodge.org.uk> or <secretary@internet.lodge.org.uk>) for those around the world grappling with these issues so that ideas and experience can be shared. As a Lodge, we are about communication - let us use those skills and enthusiasm to enable others to hone their thoughts and ideas for the good of the Craft!

There are good and worthy younger men out there looking for a set of 'values for life' -something that Freemasonry should be able to offer, but that they will only join and stay when the total 'Masonic package' fits their needs.

We will need Brothers of vision to lead us, and we must allow Lodges and Brethren of vision to experiment with new styles. Permitting the enthusiasm of Brethren appropriate free rein will bring with it greater success and allow us all to feel more positive about the future of the Craft.

Acknowledgements

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