

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research
650 Fisgard Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1R6
March 2003
2003 - 3

**POLITICS IN FREEMASONRY or
SHOULD FREEMASONRY BE MORE DEMOCRATIC?**

by R W. Bro. Bill Ferguson, Deputy Grand Master
Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon

Regarding the topic, by "Politics in Freemasonry," we are not going to explore in this paper the forbidding of civic, provincial, or federal political discussions in our Lodges but we will discuss the growing demand for a more democratic system for selecting our officers and deciding our actions both at a Constituent Lodge level and at a Grand Lodge level. Next, the question is "What kind of leadership do we want in our Craft?" Do we want a more democratic institution where our leaders are elected and our actions are governed by the membership? We all realize that where we have democracy, we have politics! You can't escape it! Do we want it?

LEADERSHIP

Any organization requires an enlightened and dedicated leadership if it is to prosper and the Grand Lodges of Freemasonry are no exception. Our leadership is in the form of a hierarchy with power and authority descending from the top downward. Although, we do elect our principal officers, most of our Grand Lodge Officers are appointed. That may seem strange and undemocratic at first glance. We are used to a system of government in which we elect those who govern us and they are responsible to us. We can vote them out of office or return them to office. We are used to being courted by those who would govern but there are strong and powerful reasons why a hierarchy serves Freemasonry best. The idea of hierarchy is not, after all, foreign to us. The military is a hierarchy, as are many of the churches, most colleges and universities and virtually all business corporations.

First, the great weakness of a democratic form of government for a large organization is that those who would govern do have to court the electorate. That means that special interests can and do run rampant with different groups demanding concessions and privileges in return for their votes. We need only to look at our provincial elections to see how true that is and how much unwarranted power some special interest groups wield. Yet such interest groups, in an organization such as Freemasonry, are a contradiction in terms. We are taught to avoid such special interests and work for the common good of our Brethren and the Fraternity. For most of us, that is a very real ideal. A hierarchical form of government discourages special interests and encourages focus on the goals of the Fraternity.

Second, a hierarchy tends to produce better leadership. The great Masonic tradition, going back to the Middle Ages, is that the best qualified not the most popular should lead. Good leaders are not always popular. In the United States for example, President and Brother Harry Truman was not popular during his presidency but there is now almost universal agreement that he was a good leader and the right man for the job. When men are carefully selected for leadership positions on a basis of their ability rather than their crowd appeal, generally better leadership results.

Third, a hierarchy is more stable. It is both a strength and a weakness of democratic organizations that they are extremely flexible. That flexibility makes it easier to adapt to change but harder to stay the course for the long

run. A hierarchy can make changes deliberately and with forethought not as a result of social fads, popular whimsies or temporary enthusiasms.

15.

Fourth, a hierarchy is a more effective allocator of resources. No organization ever has enough money, enough volunteers or enough talent to accomplish all its goals. (If it does, it has too few goals.) Leaders at the top see the "Big Picture" almost by definition. From that vantage point, it is easier to see the best uses of the limited resources available.

And fifth, a hierarchy provides for a smoother transition of power from leader to leader as well as down the hierarchical chain. In a true hierarchy, such as Freemasonry, leaders see their followers not as resources to be exploited but as members to be served. The sincere hierarchic leader sees himself as the servant of servants not as a privileged character entitled to exploit others. The hierarical form has served Freemasonry well.

(The ideas listed above concerning leadership were taken with a few adjustments from an article by III. Bro. Jim Tresner, 33 °. It is about the best defense of the form of government found in most Masonic organizations that I am aware of. Originally it referred to the Scottish Rite but I have changed it to apply to our Craft organization.)

But the system of Craft Lodges in our jurisdiction is more democratic than the above hierarchical analyses indicates. Power is enshrined in our Book of Constitutions and rests in the Annual General Communications of Our Grand Lodges. It is there that decisions have been made, will be made and are also confirmed. All Master Masons can help guide their delegates (The Worshipful Master, the Wardens or their proxies) to this legislative body of our organization but that is rarely done. Sometimes the resolutions are discussed in Lodge -- too often not. Sometimes the Master Masons get the opportunity, without being intimidated, for input into the running of our organization -- too often not. Sometimes after a discussion in Lodge, the delegates are given a free hand to vote anyway they please. Finally, too often delegates come to Grand Lodge Communications completely unprepared with no idea of the issues involved.

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

What are the areas where change is being asked for, to make our organization more democratic? Let's examine three of these:

1. Elected District Deputy Grand Masters,
2. Elected Members of the Board of General Purposes, and
3. Enfranchising Master Masons in our Grand Lodge.

DISTRICT DEPUTY GRAND MASTERS

The push is on to have elected District Deputy Grand Masters. Some Lodges feel that they should elect their D.D.G.Ms. when it is their turn to provide one in the rotation system used in their district. Others feel that the members of their district should have the right to elect their D.D.G.Ms. from the members-at-large in the district. Does this not imply a misunderstanding of what is the role of a D.D.G.M.? He is the Grand Master's Deputy for that district. He doesn't represent the members of that district but he does represent the Grand Master. It only seems logical that he be chosen by the Grand Master. Still many Masons feel that he is leader of his district and as leader he should be subject to the electorate of that district. Perhaps we need another officer that represents the members' interests -- a "tribune" of sorts.

So if we are going to elect our District Deputy Grand Masters, are we going to allow the candidates to "poIitic" so that we can get to know them? Or are we going to restrict the candidates to the extent that we will have to ask the Mason sitting next to us how we should vote? In a situation like that it is nice

if the candidate has a name that starts at the beginning of the alphabet. We had a candidate for Junior Grand Warden that tried for five years to get elected. I think it took that long to read down the candidate list to where his name was amongst the "U's." Brethren, I am cynical about the method of forbidding "politics" in the election of our Junior Grand Warden -- the one true election that we have in the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon. Many constituent Lodges have this problem with the election of their Junior Wardens. Are we going to extend this same confused situation to other offices? What is playing politics and what isn't? We need to know our candidates. How can we pick the best if we do not know them.

16

BOARD OF GENERAL PURPOSES

If we are going to elect members for the Grand Board of General Purposes, we meet the following problems:

1. How do we divide our jurisdiction into areas for elected representatives? Are there geographical considerations or population imperatives? To adequately cover our jurisdiction, how many representatives do we need?

2. If our representatives are to be elected then the candidates for that office will need guidance on what is proper procedure to get elected. Are we ready for "baby kissing, false promises, back slapping, hand shaking, banner waving, flag flying, behind the scene deals and popularity contests" that will enable the Brethren to meet their candidates? Have we the time? Have we the money? Don't we already have enough problems electing our "line officers," especially our Junior Grand Warden? There alone is an unsolved political situation. Almost every year, a candidate is called on the carpet for "politicking" in his efforts to get elected. Traditionally we have been strongly opposed to "politicking" in Freemasonry.

3. When the representative is finally elected, he will travel to a number of meetings --some from far distances. Who will pay for this traveling and accommodation? As the importance of these meetings increases, so will the number and cost. No representative will attend as an observer for long unless he has the power to make things happen, he will stay home! The Board will be forced to change from an Advisory Board to a Legislative one. Historically, almost the first thing a legislative body does is provide an allowance for the expenses of its members. What about the growing size, increasing costs and the shift of power from one we could hold accountable, the Grand Master, to a faceless committee? Can we afford it while Freemasonry is shrinking?

WHERE IS DEMOCRATIC ACTION BEING THREATENED?

1. In constituent Lodges there is a trend to make decisions in a Board of General Purposes usually in the interest of saving time at regular meetings. The real issues are discussed, plans are presented and decisions are made by a select group of the Lodge membership. The result is that many members feel alienated and disenfranchised. Attendance at regular meetings drops.

2. The same can be said for the elected Board of General Purposes of Grand Lodge when it becomes a legislative body and not just an advisory group. That's where the action is! It reduces the Annual General Meeting of Grand Lodge to one that is ceremonial and boring. Attendance drops off as important issues that were critical to the membership are no longer dealt with -- with no debate, no chance to make a difference by their vote and nothing to arouse controversy and excitement, they are gone!

3. It is said that in very large institutions this approach is necessary because of time and the great number of issues involved. Perhaps the answer is to split up the Grand Lodge into smaller independent units and return to legislation made by the general membership.

GIVING THE MASTER MASON THE VOTE

Finally let us consider enfranchising the Master Mason as a voting member of Grand Lodge. This has been done in some of the Grand Lodge Jurisdictions of Canada. The fears expressed loudly by opponents to this action have not been realized. What are they?

1. The Master Mason is not as knowledgeable nor does he have such a personal interest in Freemasonry as a Past Master or Principal Lodge Officer.

2. There are too many Master Masons and they would swamp Grand Lodge Communications. The Master Masons would make the meetings too unwieldy to hold and they would control the vote by their numbers.

3. The Master Mason is already represented by the Worshipful Master and Wardens of his Lodge or by their proxies. Why change what works?

Basically, I am for Master Masons becoming voting members. I don't think they can do worse than our present situation. To me the problem is not "who" but "how" a member of Grand Lodge votes

A DEMOCRATIC FORM OF GOVERNMENT DEPENDS ON HAVING AN INFORMED VOTER

He must know what is involved and carefully vote intelligently for the best of Freemasonry. He

17.

has a profound responsibility and should ask himself:

1. Have I done my homework? Have I informed myself of the amendments or who I am voting for and other issues that will be coming before this Grand Lodge Communication? Have I taken the time to do

the necessary research? Asked others? Read informed sources? So that I am knowledgeable concerning who and what is involved?

2. If I do not know what is involved or do not understand the issue, do I know enough to abstain from voting and let those who do understand, do what is best for Freemasonry?

3. Am I voting rationally or am I responding to an emotional appeal which is not necessarily in the interest of the Craft?

Brethren, if we are to guide Freemasonry to future great heights, we have a deep responsibility to carefully prepare ourselves before every Grand Lodge Communication and then, once there, only vote rationally with no other motive than the good of our institution.

How does politics enter into this situation? Politics is the name of the game!

To get anything done, you are going to have those that will try to persuade or pressure the members to vote a certain way. How active should a Grand Master be?

Should he appoint commissions or committees to bring about change? Won't that commission become a pressure group to lead the Brethren and manipulate them towards certain ends? What about members who have special interests who get

together to pursue those aims by controlling elections and acceptance of certain legislation? Brethren, it's politics!
