

## **Warwickshire Installed Masters' Lodge No 4538**

### **Installation Meeting**

**29 September 2007**

### **Address by the Master**

#### **W Bro Rodney Pitham PSGD Assistant Provincial Grand Master**

#### **Openness—are we there yet?**

I believe that as Freemasons the majority of us continue to practise the principle of openness, although I know that we have Brethren who are not wholly supportive and some who are wholly opposed.

We let people know what we do and why we do it. We let them know who we are. We publish our achievements with our charitable giving. We open our Masonic Halls to the public, having done so earlier this month as part of the national Heritage Open Days. But have we changed perceptions? Have we changed minds? Why do we still have critics and detractors? Should we really be concerned? Does it matter?

Freemasonry has been the subject of adverse criticism and intense opposition over the centuries, from the exposures of the 18th Century, to the more recent exposures and allegations of Stephen Knight and Martin Short. Papal Bulls have forbidden Catholics to become Freemasons on pain of excommunication; the Vatican recently reminded Catholics who enrol in such associations that they are in a state of grave sin and may not receive communion.

The Grand Master decided in 1984 that enough was enough with the shroud of secrecy surrounding Freemasonry – openness had begun.

We read that Freemasonry is a secret society, a cult devoted to Satanism, a group of men conspiring to bring down governments, men giving each other planning permissions, men infiltrating areas of influence, men who are members of the Bildebergers, or men indulging in sex orgies. A lady in Atherstone related in a local newspaper that Freemasons indulged in satanic ceremonies, pranced around half-naked and examined each other's genitals. My wife's reaction was simply "Oh, is that why you all wear white gloves?" Our ever increasing readiness to talk to the media and the public appears to have reduced the regularity of criticism, innuendo or downright malice but when it happens it hurts and it causes anxiety for our partners and families. A learned professor at Portsmouth University has recently alleged that Freemasonry is a 'pernicious influence' in Universities; she produced no evidence. She clearly did not appreciate the views I expressed to her by email since she has never replied.

Why do we not read of similar attacks on and classifications of Rotarians, Round Tablers, Lions, Oddfellows, Catenians, the Women's Institute, the Mothers' Union, or Toc H? They all comprise people of high standards. We however have to fight and defend our corner. We are the ones discriminated against. Why? Because we are tainted with a secrecy which is of our own making and we must cast that off with more positive action.

There is some evidence that might indicate that we have made little or no impression with the Grand Master's initiative.

Much to the chagrin of Mr Mullin no evidence of wrongdoing by Freemasonry or Freemasons was discovered by his Committee in 1998, but that did not stop him from casting aspersions on the honesty and integrity of Freemasons. We had given him the openness he was looking for and then thanks to him and his cronies the government introduced so-called 'voluntary' registration of public servants. Registration is dead but if you wish to work for the government or become a magistrate for example you have to declare your membership – it is a condition of appointment.

In 1998 Michael Higham, the then Grand Secretary, wrote to Jack Straw MP saying that “whilst a man can gain the protection of the law because of prejudice on grounds of race, creed or colour, he is to be singled out because he pursues the membership of a lawful society in his free time.” Jack Straw took no notice. We all remember the contemptuous treatment of Michael Higham by Mr Mullin.

Although the then Lord Chancellor (he of the expensive wallpaper) in 1998 invited judges and magistrates to declare their Masonic status for the purposes of a public register, he did not believe that there was any truth in the suggestion that some members of the judiciary may have been wrongly influenced in hearing cases by virtue of their Masonic membership. He did assert, however: “It is undeniable that there is a level of public concern on this issue that could serve to undermine public confidence in our justice system.” He never produced any evidence for this assertion.

Mr Mullin’s Committee said it was aware that “there is a widespread belief that improper Masonic influence does play a part in public life.” It quotes no evidence for that assertion.

UNISON, the trade union, requires all applicants for membership to declare if they are Freemasons. The union proudly says that it pursues anti-discrimination strategies and policies of fair treatment for all. It cannot, or will not, however, justify its discrimination against Freemasons.

The First Minister of the Welsh Assembly vetoed the appointment of an eminent QC as the Assembly’s Counsel General since “he is a prominent Freemason, Freemasonry is the subject of public controversy, and he would not be able to give untrammelled advice to the Assembly”.

The Bishop of Ripon suspended the Dean of Ripon over allegations of unbecoming conduct. The Dean had conducted a Freemasons' service in the cathedral, which caused "particular resentment".

In an otherwise excellent article in The Times about Freemasons Hall in London, the author claimed that "A more recent expression of Masonic principles came in 1982, when Roberto Calvi, a member of the P2 Lodge, was found hanging from the symbolic Blackfriars Bridge with stones in his pockets". Corruption and murder are not "a more recent expression of Masonic principles". The P2 Lodge was a clandestine organisation whose existence was unknown to the Grand Orient of Italy, and had no connections or contact whatsoever with British Freemasonry. Blackfriars Bridge has no symbolic meaning for Freemasons, nor do stones in pockets.

Aubrey Tarbuck, elected as Deputy Mayor of Worcester for 2004/2005, told the Council that he is a Freemason. He became the Mayor in 2005. Leader of the opposition Labour Group on the Council, Adrian Gregson, said that Aubrey “has the opportunity to consider where his allegiances and priorities lie”, since Freemasonry “is a secret society and carries influence. They have connections and there are always questions about how much influence they have in public bodies and democratic organisations, which they shouldn't have.” Councillor Gregson had learned nothing from openness. Aubrey had proudly declared his membership in pursuance of openness and was then maligned for it.

An adviser on extremism to Tony Blair in 2005 blamed the war in Iraq on Jews and Freemasons. He had also alleged some ten years before that the holocaust was a big lie. A Swedish author claimed that

“Tony Blair is a Freemason. So is Sadaam Hussein, which suggests the Iraq war could be a sadistic charade.”

A Member of the Ukrainian Parliament sought to promote a Bill which would have rendered membership of our Order in the Ukraine a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment!

The Bishop of Rochester has pursued that worn out cliché of certain factions of the Church of England, especially the Archbishop of Canterbury, that Freemasonry and Christianity are incompatible and that that is the doctrine of the Church of England. Both statements are untrue. He has not been able to justify his assertions but many people believe him. The Bishop of Lichfield is on the same bandwagon.

The London Borough of Lambeth is concerned that an employee’s membership of the Freemasons is incompatible with the Council’s Equal Opportunity Policy. “Membership requirements tend to be discriminatory and to exclude women and black people. Any organisation which seeks to promote any kind of favouritism or special interest is inconsistent with council policy in relation to equality of opportunity and therefore, the council does not support such societies, nor does it approve of their aims and methods of operation. The council must be assured of an employee’s *honesty and integrity*. Therefore, where an employee belongs to such a society, they will be required to declare their membership.” So Freemasons have no integrity or honesty and we have questionable aims and methods of operation!

Let me concentrate on the successes. It is not all gloom and doom.

The Welsh Assembly has dropped its draconian discrimination against Freemasons; members have to declare membership of all associations now.

The Police Service for Northern Ireland had illegally required registration of Freemasons and abandoned the policy in 2004 after a successful challenge.

The MOD withdrew its policy of discrimination against at the door of the Court when faced with judicial review.

Coventry City Council removed all overt references to Freemasonry in the staff Code of Conduct. I was delighted with the outcome following the months of correspondence (and frustration) with the Council and letters to the local press. The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, who I had known since she was a young trainee, resolutely refused to see me. Common-sense and the human rights legislation prevailed. No local authority in the Province discriminates against Freemasons. If they do then they have me to deal with – the scourge of local government!

Rev Gordon Barker, the incumbent of a parish in the Isle of Man, made it clear that he did not want ministers and readers who were Freemasons to serve in his parish. Following discussions between the Provincial Grand Master and the Bishop the vicar withdrew his objections.

Two local authorities were roundly slapped on the wrist by the Ombudsman for their rank discrimination when they refused a grant of money and an application for planning permission when the applicants in both cases were Freemasons. One of the local authorities concerned had an active policy of discrimination against Freemasons.

The role of Masons in public life won the backing of a High Court judge in 2006 when he dismissed claims that ‘the order’s secretive ways made Freemasonry an unhealthy influence on officialdom’. He

concluded that Masons holding public positions did not need to remove themselves from decisions involving other Masons. Three cheers for the Judge.

And another three cheers for the ECHR who have just decreed that it contravenes the Convention on Human Rights to discriminate against Freemasons who apply for public office. I am waiting to see how and when Grand Lodge approaches the government as a result of this victory.

So what have we done so far?

Our Masonic Halls are open to the public on a regular basis.

Our books of constitutions and rituals are available to the general public as well as leaflets and videos.

We have Information Officers in every Province to deal with the media and the public in a positive way.

Grand Lodge, most Provincial Grand Lodges and many private Lodges have web sites.

Prominent Freemasons make themselves available for radio and television interviews.

Grand Lodge has employed some very expensive PR people. I really do not know what they have achieved though. They send me and other Information Officers pieces of paper with advice on speaking to the press (which I did professionally for more than thirty years) but they don't tell me how to deal with ignorant writers of letters to newspapers or local authorities who have a misguided view of Freemasonry. They did write a fortnight ago to tell me how to take journalists out to lunch!

We regularly hold Gentlemen's Evenings. The Provincial Grand Master, my colleagues and I stress that it is important that ladies are invited to these events.

But what more can we do?

A Lodge in Shropshire has this year become the sponsor of the newly launched web site for the Market Drayton Primary Care Centre in the town. Why not do the same?

Holy Well Lodge in this Province sponsors a prize at the local school. They get good publicity and the Master of the Lodge is invited to present the prize. There are a lot of schools in the Province who would welcome similar support. The cost is minimal but the benefits immeasurable.

Private Lodges must cultivate links with local journalists. Tell them about your Lodge, its activities and where and when it meets. Say who is going to be the Master and the Wardens, for example, in a brief press release. Advertise the dates, times and venues of your meetings in local papers. All the other organisations do, so why shouldn't we? Send photos of events to the papers on a regular basis. Persuade editors to let you have a column or two about your Lodge from time to time.

Let us think seriously about advertising for members. We can still go through the important vetting process to ensure the maintenance of high standards. We are recruiting, indirectly, already from the Provincial and Lodge web sites so why not take the next step. It is a bold one but one that I firmly believe we will have to take sooner rather than later.

Local opinion formers should be invited to informal gatherings of Lodges. Why not ask the Mayor or Chairman of your local Council to come to a Festive Board? Invite the local MP, the clergy, representatives of all the faiths, other councillors.

A Lodge in Tasmania opens up its premises to the media and the public on a Saturday *every month*.

Do not be afraid to tell the world about your charitable activities.

Raise the topic of Freemasonry in conversations with your friends – in the pub, the club, on the golf course, in your church. Write articles for your church magazine as I have done.

Leave leaflets and copies of Freemasonry Today, MQ and the Provincial Newsletter in the doctors' and dentists' surgeries and the local post office.

We must walk tall and proud. Never be afraid to use every opportunity to say that you are a Freemason. We are a force for good and should not make a secret of it. When the T-Shirts come out for sale be first in the queue for Harry Owen.

The most important step we must take to make openness work effectively is to relate Freemasonry's teachings and principles to modern knowledge, modern attitudes and the hopes and fears of modern man. I believe that we are good at repeating our ideals with zealous determination but do we relate them to modern thinking and modern conditions? Many young people today are encouraged to seek material wealth and luxury; it is exceptional to find them given concepts of higher or nobler purposes in life – our politicians fail them miserably in this respect and so do many of our religious leaders. Freemasonry has a vital message. It teaches us how to live our lives and to respect those of others. Freemasonry obligates men; it commits them to some fundamental moral attitudes and principles. That is the message for openness. That will allow us to succeed in our aims. We do care and it does matter. We have to change perceptions and challenge all claims of secrecy and ill-doing.

Doing nothing is not an option. Put an item on the summons for your next Lodge Meeting and determine what you and your Lodge can do to promote openness. The Provincial Grand Master, my colleagues and I will gladly help.

And so, my fellow Brethren: ask not what Freemasonry can do for you—ask what you can do for Freemasonry.