

THE FUTURE OF FREEMASONSRY

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THE COMMON
FACTOR IS
AND SHOULD
BE ABOUT
FUN AND
ENJOYMENT



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FOREWORD

As the tercentenary of the United Grand Lodge of England approaches, we felt it important to mark the occasion with a robust and open debate into what it means to be a Freemason in contemporary society, and what it will mean for future generations to come. As the oldest fraternal organisation in the world, Freemasonry is founded upon principles of kindness, honesty and fairness – timeless values that are as relevant to the world today as they were three hundred years ago when we were established. These ideals have remained unchanged throughout the history of Freemasonry and will, we hope, continue to do so as long as the organisation thrives. Yet it is important to note that while it maintains these central ideals, Freemasonry in the twenty-first century has become an amalgamation of the old and the new, of tradition and innovation, and therefore fits comfortably into the modern world.

Modern Freemasons are keen to dispel the myths and misconceptions that have long surrounded the organisation. In order to do this, it was clear we needed to enlist the help of an independent body to embark upon an impartial assessment. In doing so, we anticipated shaping a discussion that would not only offer an open and transparent account of Freemasonry to those outside the organisation, but also provide a fresh viewpoint to those within it.

It was with these goals in mind that we approached the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) to undertake this research. As well as offering the anthropological expertise that forms the backdrop of much of this report, they set about compiling the views and opinions of a cross-section of Freemasons and non-masons alike. As a result, *The Future of Freemasonry* provides an insightful and timely commentary, not just on the organisation it set out to examine, but also on the complex interactions, perceptions and values of modern society itself.

As we look to the next three hundred years, this report will form an intrinsic part of our discussions into how best Freemasonry can evolve whilst retaining the distinctive character and ideals that have attracted members for centuries, and will hopefully do so for centuries to come.

Nigel Brown

Grand Secretary

The United Grand Lodge of England

We have seen that Freemasonry has, at its root, moral precepts and modes of conduct that are far from being at odds with mainstream society. Few would question the organisation's emphasis on fellowship and affiliation and the desire of individual masons to be 'the best people they can be' – a desire which often manifests itself through the voluntary work that many undertake, supporting the less advantaged members of their communities. We have also seen that the ritual and ceremonial aspects of Freemasonry that distinguish it from organisations such as the Round Table are also not so detached from everyday life as they may at first appear. Routine social interactions, the way we address people, the manner in which we express deference and demeanour and present our personas are, in all human societies, highly ritualised. The masonic rituals are perhaps more elaborate than we experience in everyday social and family life. They take the form of one act plays – each of which allegorically relates moral precepts and ways of behaving in relation to others. They are, in a very real sense, akin to parables – largely fictitious stories that highlight important issues such as the need for forgiveness or using money wisely.

What then, is the future of Freemasonry and what else might it do to finally put to rest the myths that have persisted for so long, and to ensure that its relevance in contemporary society is more easily recognised and understood? We put these questions to the masons that we interviewed.

An area of consensus was evident that highlighted the organisation's new chapter of openness and transparency that was being championed at the very highest levels of the organisation. There was also strong evidence that this spirit of openness was filtering down to 'ordinary' masons across the country who are increasingly happy to declare their membership when they feel that it is relevant to do so. They also stressed that they were equally motivated to introduce local communities

to their lodges and to play a wider role in their neighbourhoods.

'Freemasonry needs to open itself to the wider community, to be more transparent about why we exist. We need to accept that there are certain things that some might regard as peculiar or different about Freemasons. The key is to make people aware that we bring good to society ... we need to highlight the things that are happening in Freemasonry today ... all the good things we do for society and all the help we offer the local communities. We have started to open up, but we have to do more and it has to be more present.'

Such sentiments were emphasised by other masons, but with reservations about changing too much too fast. This comment was very typical:

'I think that we should be slightly more open and try and get people to understand what we do and perhaps maybe encourage some to join. There are some good people out there ... some of them would make jolly good masons. That's something I think we could look [at] in the future. Apart from that I am reasonably happy with it the way it is.'

There was some concern expressed about losing Freemasonry's distinctive character as the organisation 'modernises' and in particular the need to preserve its unique rituals and traditions:

'It gives a feeling of timelessness to it. It is something that is a little more substantial than some of the fashions and the fads that you see around.'

'One of the strengths of Freemasonry is the maintenance of its traditions and the fact that it doesn't change too fast. That provides an order.'



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'I was enthralled by [lodge name], its history and its ritual. It has got an extremely rich history.'

'I would not like to change the ritual.'

'I think there is definite merit in retaining some of the mystique.'

There was a similarly strong consensus regarding the retention of the core tenets of Freemasonry in order to preserve its distinctiveness:

'Brotherly love, relief and truth is about honesty ... you can't compromise over the central tenets of Freemasonry. That's its strength.'

On the other hand, there was equal concern about the relevance and attractiveness of Freemasonry to today's younger generation of men:

'The only concern I have got ... is that some of the other lodges have got a lot of older members and they are not getting the new recruits.'

Some masons thought that the problem with time commitments could be overcome:

'A fellow member and I were having a discussion at our last meeting and I think he was talking about trying to get lodge meetings to [occur] at lunchtime to give the young people, particularly those who are working, the ability to attend – to give them more opportunities to turn up on a regular basis.'

To help overcome this particular issue, a nationwide mentoring scheme was introduced two years ago, a key part of what senior masons see as the organisation's 'quiet revolution' of modernisation, designed to encourage the progression and participation of new members.

In the scheme younger members are provided with continuing support and guidance from more experienced masons acting as dedicated mentors as they progress through the various degree stages. There was evidence of the success of the scheme from the reduction in new members leaving within the first two or three years. There was also evidence of the mentoring scheme's value coming from the members themselves.

As we consider the broader future of Freemasonry, it is perhaps useful to take a look back to the early eighteenth century, in which UGLE was formed. British society, of course, was very different. This was the Age of Reason – a time when the superstitions of the Middle Ages were being replaced by more rational forms of argument and debate and consideration of religious tenets. It was also a time of rapid progress in the natural sciences. The field of astrology, for example, was being gradually replaced by that of astronomy – a genuinely scientific approach to understanding the workings of the cosmos that went far beyond religious and secular dogmas. Isaac Newton, said by many to be a mason himself, was still alive and his influential *Principia Mathematica* was in wide circulation. The new spirit of scientific enquiry would shortly be evident in the works of leading scholars such as Henry Cavendish and Michael Faraday. Similar moves away from 'old school thinking' were evident in philosophy which became almost synonymous with 'scientific' thought in the Age of Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century. Central to this school were notions of freedom, democracy and, above all, *reason* that stood as challenges to literal biblical interpretations and notions such as the 'Divine Right of Kings'. Notions of true morality were now, perhaps for the first time, open to genuine debate.

Today, of course, we take science and rationalism for granted in a new age of unprecedented technological innovation

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and development. In the eighteenth century, however, the turmoil that accompanied the new order, following the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century, and at a time when the United Kingdom was barely a decade old, was more strongly felt. The 'modern' Freemasonry that was established by the UGLE, in which the 'Antients' who had initially rejected its authority were soon to be integrated, provided what some historians see as a 'safe haven' for free thinkers. For example, the Chilean/Israeli masonic historian Leon Zeldis concludes:

'The masonic lodge was a refuge of peace and tranquillity at a time of political uncertainty, when the memory of religious warfare was fresh in the memory of all men, when the first discoveries and inventions were transforming the economy, and opening new perspectives of progress, when the hope that rationality and humanism would banish from the hearts of men the evils of fanaticism and intolerance.'

These sentiments have clear – and perhaps even greater – resonance in the present day. Sadly, examples of 'fanaticism and intolerance' are all around us, in the form of extremist and sectarian acts of violence around the world, highlighted all too frequently by the international media. Events too throughout much of the Middle East remind us on a daily basis of the fragility of political orders based on dogma and elitism rather than notions of freedom, democracy and reason. Transformations in our own economic order – some positive, others quite disastrous – are even more directly felt. All of which may lead us back to the role and relevance of Freemasonry, in the modern context.

As we noted earlier the Grand Secretary, Nigel Brown, emphasises:

'The joy of Freemasonry is that members come from all races, religions, all social



economic levels of society. So actually you get a complete mix of people sitting next to each other in harmony and equality ... what other organisations can do that in a world that is full of conflict? The level of conflict in today's rapidly changing world is clear to see, and one can only hope the current turmoil will lead to a new, more stable and more peaceful world order.'

Such sentiments chime well with those of the Roosevelt Center for the study of Civil Society and Freemasonry in the United States:

'In the absence of noble public goals, respected leaders, and the respectful competition of ideas, there is concern of a fast eroding civil society or at least a civil society and public sphere changing in ways that need to be better understood.'

Looking at the past as a useful guide to explaining the present, the Center points out that:

'Freemasonry was there at the origins of modern civil society often as the only organization where there could be free discussion without fear of censorship and authoritarian control.'

The point is echoed by the UGLE Grand Secretary who argues that by avoiding discussion of politics, religion and business at lodge meetings, Freemasonry is a great leveller and can provide what he sees as being a valuable forum for open and honest discussion between friends, with no risk of recrimination. The Roosevelt Center goes further, suggesting Freemasonry can be a force for good in the context of societal development, insisting it can help lead discussion and debate – as well as listening – in participation with so many others around the world. It goes on to conclude:

'Freemasonry's traditional concern with comparative philosophy and thought,

tolerance of others, philanthropy and good will, have a contribution to make in what has become a global dialogue, just as it made important contributions in the eighteenth century. At the same time Freemasonry has much to learn in engaging wider civil society as it did so well in the age of Enlightenment; drawing in and advancing ideas concerning print culture and the free and open flow of information.'

The organisation's continuing commitment to openness and transparency, an area in which there is evidence of significant progress, is as much key to its continuing relevance and value in the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth.

As we have seen elsewhere in this report, at an individual level, Freemasonry meets the timeless needs of people for a sense of affiliation and belonging. Masons argue strongly that this in itself makes the organisation more relevant than ever before, as it provides a unique combination of friendship and structure in our currently competitive and fragmented society. Being akin to a 'hobby,' as the Grand Secretary describes it, rather than a vocation, it does not inhibit similarly strong bonds and a sense of belonging away from the lodges. And like any other membership organisation, its members are encouraged to place other needs – such as family, work and their community – above those of Freemasonry.

The relevance of Freemasonry's role – or rather that of the Freemasons themselves – in helping others through voluntary and charitable work, is equally strong. As the Grand Secretary points out:

'It is not Freemasonry itself that is doing good in the community, rather it is the individual "decent" members who are motivated to be concerned with the welfare of others, and who also happen to be masons.'

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It is, of course, possible that becoming a mason heightens awareness of those in need and encourages a more active role in the community, as many masons have reported. At a collective, rather than individual, level, Freemasonry makes very sizeable contributions to charity, with masons stressing that all the money raised comes straight from their own pockets rather than street collections or any other type of external fund-raising. Of the money raised by The Freemasons' Grand Charity, around half is donated to non-masonic causes at local, national and international levels.

The relevance and impact of such continuing benevolent activity needs to be viewed in the context of the current 'Big Society' initiative being pursued by the coalition government. Irrespective of one's political stance here, it is clear that this will result in a shrinking of the contribution of the state in many areas of people's lives, and a correspondingly increasing focus on the provision of services by third-sector organisations and through citizens being obliged to provide assistance to each other. This transformation is already being felt. An individual's sense of 'duty' or willingness to give time or money to help less advantaged people is not, however, something that can be socially engineered or achieved through political manipulation or legislation. It is something that emerges naturally through strong social or familial bonds with like-minded people who share common moral codes. It is in this sense that Freemasonry and its historical roots in humanistic benevolence and the rejection of intolerance arguably makes it more relevant in today's uncertain economic and social times, than it has ever been before.

What attracts masons to Freemasonry varies greatly, as we have seen earlier in this report. Some are attracted by the friendships they form and the sense of belonging it instils, others by the 'nudge' that Freemasonry provides towards living a more altruistic life. Others still will be attracted by the rituals of Freemasonry.

Much like the rituals themselves, however, Freemasonry may deserve a closer look in order to understand and appreciate it more fully, and its relevance and role today. If Freemasonry is able successfully to conclude its 'quiet revolution', while at the same time ensuring that its central features are retained to preserve the true 'spirit' of Freemasonry, then its future may well be assured – for the next century or two at least.

