

ADDRESS TO PROVINCIAL GRAND COMMITTEE: MAY 2017

Brethren, first of all may I thank all of you for attending here this evening. This is an important meeting in our Provincial calendar as it gives us the opportunity to present the progress we are making as a Province, outline some of the challenges we face, and discuss – and I use that word advisedly brethren – a few issues of concern which we might address in the coming year. Every lodge should be represented here today and I trust you will take back to your brethren all of the matters we talk about today, though I have to say that has not always been the case in the past. I have often raised an issue with a Worshipful Master during the year – getting away from early starts for Installations is a good case in point – only to find that he has had no knowledge of what I have said at a Provincial committee meeting and that it has not been brought to the attention of the lodge or its committee, even though the address appears online and is printed in full in the Provincial yearbook. Please make sure your lodge members have an opportunity to discuss and debate issues that are covered today.

Brethren, a huge thank you must go to my Executive and the Provincial team for all their support and contributions this year. And I want to express my and my Executive's grateful thanks for the warm welcome and hospitality we have enjoyed on all of our visits to your lodges. As well as Installations, we have attended domestic meetings and a number of special celebratory occasions since we last met and the Provincial teams have always come away from those meetings with happy hearts and a warm feeling about the fraternal bond which makes our Craft so important to us all.

I also want to thank those brethren who have contributed so much to the efforts we are making to ensure our future success. V W Bro Sir Paul Williams and his Festival committee continue to make enormous efforts to help us achieve our objectives with regard to the 2021 Festival. Please help them and your Charity Stewards as much as you can in the coming years brethren; while we are making great strides towards our target, we still have around half of the lodges in the Province still to achieve their bronze award. Nevertheless, I have been heartened to see more and more brethren proudly wearing their Festival jewels and this augers well for our efforts towards the overall target.

In this, our tercentenary year, I have been delighted with the excellent work done by W Bros Roger Richmond and Paul Haley to increase the amount of good quality communications, improve our engagement with the media and – as a result – improve our image internally and externally. And of course, the Sky TV programme - Inside Freemasonry – continues to make more transparent and open our fraternity and shows the world the positive force we are for our communities and society as a whole. Look out for next Monday's programme brethren when South Wales will feature very strongly.

Of course, our tercentenary year is much more than an opportunity to be open. It is a chance to celebrate and I was delighted to hear the Grand Master say in his recent speech that he had decided to confer additional Grand Ranks this year – and we now know that we are to receive 2 appointments and 1 promotion which will be conferred in the March Quarterly Communication meeting next year. More locally, we have our Church service to look forward to on 20 May when we will be on parade in full regalia for the first time in living memory and our Gala dinner on 24 June, which I understand is nearly sold out, though a small number of tables remain available, so see W Bro Akram Baig if you have not yet booked in but wish to join in our major celebration of 300 years of our wonderful Craft. I know that a

number of lodges and centres also have their own celebrations organized; I wish them all well in their efforts.

Our masonic centres have long been a matter of concern. I have often said that we will not attract young men and their families if we provide poor accommodation, sub standard facilities and third rate food. I am pleased to say that we are, however, making progress in a number of centres and very soon we will have comprehensive advice and guidance available online for all those with responsibility for our halls. W Bro David Weston, our ProvG Supt Wks, W Bro Alan Gardener and I will then be convening a meeting of all Masonic Hall management teams to launch the guidance and enjoy a day when we can exchange ideas and spread best practice. I hope all Masonic centres will send representatives to that meeting; we have to work better together brethren to help each other to improve our facilities and make them financially sustainable and venues to which we can be proud to invite prospective members, guests and – crucially – our ladies.

I also want to thank V W Bro Andrew Gretton and his Masonic Benevolent Fund Committee. I'm sure you all know by now that the Fund has agreed in this tercentenary year to donate the magnificent and appropriate sum of £300,000 towards the building of a new dementia unit and day care facility at the RMBI's Albert Edward Prince of Wales Court. The unit will be formally opened on 24 June by the Most Worshipful Past Pro Grand Master, MW Bro the Marquis of Northampton.

Let me now turn to a few small but important issues regarding our administration and ceremonies.

A couple of points regarding finance issues brethren: I have noticed that, of late, the practice of brethren introducing sponsorship forms and collecting for other charitable purposes at festive boards has become more common. These are usually in addition to the standard raffle which takes place too. Brethren, I wonder whether we are sometimes putting too much pressure on our members to give to this and that which they might find it difficult to afford. Might it be better, if the cause is a good one, for the Worshipful Master to agree that some or all of the raffle proceeds could go to the charity in question? I leave it to you to consider brethren, but we must make sure we do not alienate our members by putting too much of a strain on their pockets.

While I'm on the subject of charity brethren, after over 33 years I still await that elusive meeting where the charitable collection in the temple is greater than the raffle at the festive board. In addition, I would like to see lodge Treasurers waiting until after the meetings to count their blessings. There is little more off-putting than to try to listen to the risings or even a piece of ritual while the Treasurer empties the pouches or plates and clinks his way through the creation of piles of pound coins.

I have already mentioned – again – the fact that I think too many lodges start their ceremonies too early, making it difficult for some members to attend. This is matter which some lodges have clearly not addressed or at least considered. At a time when we are encouraging younger men to join us and I am trying to appoint younger brethren to Provincial office, very early starts make it impossible for some to attend and difficult for younger Provincial officers in particular to undertake their duties. For I think the third year running, please take this issue back to your lodges brethren. I would like to hear that it has at the very least been discussed the next time I visit your lodge and I will be asking Grand Officers to take a lead in ensuring that is done.

We are making great progress in terms of our membership, though we have a long way to go to achieve real success. One of the issues which contributes towards retention in the Craft is, of course, membership of the Royal Arch. I have been a little disappointed to see that in some lodges very few of the members – and sometimes even the Master and his officers – have not been wearing the Royal Arch jewel. It is the culmination of freemasonry and all members must be encouraged to join. Research has shown us that one of the most important things we can do to encourage membership is to have a good quality Royal Arch representative system, with reps doing a good job to talk about the Royal Arch and encourage brethren, when the time is right for them, to reach the pinnacle of their freemasonry by joining the Royal Arch. The Grand Superintendent and I have therefore agreed that from the start of our next masonic year, all RA reps will be asked to wear a lapel pin so that they can be easily identified in every lodge. I would like to see these presented at Installation meetings and the Executive attending will be asked to make a point of ensuring that this is done on every occasion.

Finally brethren, we have heard today from W Bro Neil Evans about the importance of membership officers for recruitment and mentors for retention. I continue to have some concerns about lodges' understanding of the role of their mentors; indeed some mentors I have spoken to still seem to think that their role is to personally mentor all new members. As a result, W Bros Neil Evans and his deputy Rob Payne will be embarking on a series of workshops and meetings to explain and discuss how mentoring should work and to give opportunities to learn from each other, so that we can do all that is necessary to improve still further the way we look after our members, increase their enjoyment and keep them as members for as long as possible.

Brethren, my last sentence included the word 'enjoyment'. Surely that must be the watchword for all that we do. Yes, we have charitable aims; yes, we want to develop ourselves as men to be better contributors to society; but if we don't enjoy what we do, we won't stay as members for very long. Please go back to your lodges and take with you this thought and other issues discussed today.

Thank you again for attending; I wish you and your brethren well for all that you do. I now conclude by saying that I would as always be happy to invite comments and questions on these or any other points you wish to raise.