

INNOVATION AND CHANGE

"YOU ADMIT THAT IT IS NOT IN THE POWER OF ANY MAN OR BODY OF MEN TO MAKE INNOVATIONS IN THE BODY OF MASONRY."

The Regulation just quoted will be familiar to all who have attended an Installation Ceremony. It is one of the Ancient Charges and Regulations to which the Worshipful Master elect is called upon to give his assent before he ascends to the Chair of his Lodge.

In its origins, the Regulation stems from the early days of the Grand Lodge of England when, at a Meeting held on 24th June 1723, the Grand Lodge resolved:

"That it is not in the power of any person, or body of men, to make any alterations, or innovation in the body of Masonry without the consent first obtained in the Annual Grand Lodge."

Subsequently, in 1738, this resolution was incorporated into the Book of Constitutions as one of the new Regulations and it has since been accepted as one of the basic rules of the Craft, with the modification that the words *"without the consent first obtained in the Annual Grand Lodge"* have been dropped.

Because it is one of the Regulations of the Craft and is therefore important to its conduct and because there is sometimes misunderstanding as to its implications, particularly in so far as it bears on Freemasonry's capacity for change, we should study the Regulations carefully.

There are two words in the Regulation which call for special attention - one is *"Innovation"* and the other one is *"Body"*. Amongst a number of other interpretations, the shorter Oxford English Dictionary has two definitions of the word *"Innovation"* (1) *"The introduction of novelties"* and (2) *"The alteration of what is established"*. It defines *"Body"* as *"The main, central or principal part"*. We can, therefore, interpret the Regulation as *proscribing either the introduction of novelties into, or the alteration of the established principles or central tenets of Freemasonry.*

In a sense, however, this interpretation begs the question, What should be regarded as *"novelties"*? Even more fundamentally, what should be regarded as the *"established principles"* or the *"central tenets"* of Freemasonry?

The second of these questions is given at least a partial answer in the address to the Brethren delivered at the close of the Installation Ceremony. Commencing :

"Such is the nature of our institution that, as some must rule and teach, so others must, of course, submit and Learn" and concluding "...such are the genuine tenets and principles of our order. Pure and unsullied may they be transmitted through this and through every Lodge from generation to generation."

The address emphasises the beneficial consequences of Membership of the Craft upon the attitudes and conduct of the Brethren. But undoubtedly it requires supplementation for the Ritual contains may references to other principles, which are of high importance to the Freemason.

This same question leads us into the vexed, and related, problem of definition of the terms "*Landmarks*" and "*Established Usages and Customs*", for these are, from time to time, used to describe in a short-hand sort of way principles and practices to which Freemasons are expected to adhere. A fellowcraft, upon being advanced, is told that, as a Craftsman, he will be permitted to offer opinion upon such subjects as may be regularly introduced into the Lodge under the superintendence of an experienced Master, "*who will guard our Landmarks from Encroachment*", and the Master, at the time of his Installation, is called upon to obligate himself that he will not either during his Mastership or at any time the Lodge is under his direction "*Permit or suffer any deviation from the established and Ancient Landmarks or the Order.*" Yet nowhere is there any indication of what should be comprehended as falling within the meaning of the term "*Landmarks*". Similarly, the phrase "*established usages and customs*" is used but again there is no definition given in the Ritual at any stage. This is not the place for a detailed discussion on Landmarks. A Research Lodge would be better, but there are many eminent Masonic Scholars who believe the matter should be left alone - *just accepted*.

The word "Landmarks" has had a place in Masonic Literature from the time it was first Mentioned in the 1723 Book of Constitutions, Regulation XXXIX of which ran (in part) -

"Every Annual Grand Lodge has an inherent power and authority to make New Regulations, or to alter these, for the real Benefit of this Ancient Fraternity: Provided always that the old Landmarks be carefully preserved..."

There have been many attempts by writers on the Craft to define it. They have sought a definition which would have general acceptability and there is now a considerable measure of agreement on the concept, if not on the precise words. Two such definitions which have been given a great deal of support amongst our Scholars are:-

- "(Landmarks) are certain immovable and unchallengeable principles and doctrines which go right behind law and regulations, and which no law or regulation can alter or modify." (Lawrence: Masonic Jurisprudence)

And

- "We assume those principles of action to be landmarks which have existed from time immemorial, whether in the written or unwritten law: which are identified with the form and essence of the Society: which, the great majority agree, cannot be changed, and which every Mason is bound to maintain intact under the most solemn and inviolable sanctions." (Simons: The Principles of Masonic Jurisprudence)

It seems at first sight that we can probably agree that these definitions are not very wide of the mark. However, there is real difficulty when we try to translate the generalisation into the particular. The American Writer, Mackey, in 1858, produced a list of twenty-five features of Masonic Teachings and Practices which he regarded as Landmarks. Yet another distinguished Masonic Student, Roscoe Pound, some sixty years later, listed only seven. There have been other similar attempts, but as yet there is no list, which has received general acceptance. It may not, in fact, be possible to produce such a list, for, while there are certain Principles which would be unanimously accepted as Constituting Landmarks and by way of illustration, mention might be made of a belief in a Supreme Deity, Brotherly Love, Relief, Truth and Charity. There are others which, important though they may be, would not be regarded by all as of sufficient importance to justify their being referred to as Landmarks.

However, definitions of the type previously quoted are useful in that they allow a measure of distinction to be drawn between what should be considered landmarks and what the established usages and customs, for clearly the former are more fundamental to the Craft than the latter. Taking the matter still further, the established usages and customs may be changed without affecting the essential character of Freemasonry but a change of principle, such as would disturb the Landmarks, and hence its character, could not be tolerated and hence should be resisted.

A change of principle may be illustrated by reference to the History of the Grand Orient of France.

When, in 1876, the Grand Orient banished the Volume of the Sacred Law from its Lodges and deleted all references to the Great Architect of the Universe from its ceremonies, it was disowned by the United Grand Lodge of England and eventually by all other regular Grand Lodges. The result was that Freemasonry, in a regular form, was unknown in France from 1877 until the National Grand Lodge of France was founded in 1913.

Yet, in contrast to this type of reaction, there have been few serious objections to changes in the Ritual where the fundamental teachings of the Craft have remained unaffected. In our own Jurisdiction, for instance, the Ritual Committee of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales has approved some Ritual alterations, which have been readily accepted by the Private Lodges. Indeed our original Ritual, as approved at the time of the formation of the United Grand Lodge, was not the Ritual of all the parties signatory to the 1888 articles of Union, but, since its adoption involved no departure from fundamentals, it could be accepted by them.

Nevertheless, changes in our Ritual have not been in any sense substantial. It is probably fair to say that the Masonic Community is conservative as regards Ritual changes. This is almost certainly a reflection of our desire to ensure that, wittingly or unwittingly, we do not depart materially from the principles and practices, as detailed in the Ritual, that have provided stability of thought and organisation since the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in the early years of last Century.

There are some who regard any change in the Ritual as an innovation and resist it. For this reason glaring errors in grammar have been allowed to remain although they convey a meaning quite contrary to what is intended. Clearly this kind of change should not be considered as the type to be proscribed.

Commendable as this may be, it has its dangers. An Organisation that sets itself against change of any kind and does not vary its thinking and its procedures to take into account the changing environment in which it operates faces the prospect that it may lose its attraction and wither away. If we as Freemasons do not wish to vary either our basic principles or our Ritual and in relation to the latter, there is much to be said for this, if for no other reason that the language used is so very appropriate to its purpose, then we must look to other means of adapting to new circumstances. The question arises; *In what areas should change be permitted, or even encouraged?*

Here the answer probably lies in our relations with each other or in our relations with the community at large, or both. It is important that, in our relations within the Craft, we recognise that there are new pressures, new distractions, constantly arising; that interests change; that maintenance of that cohesiveness amongst its Members which has been a distinctive feature of the Order calls for positive action to adjust our programmes within and without the Lodge room to fit new sets of circumstances. It is here that new ideas can, and should, be introduced without prejudicing our basic philosophies. Similarly, there must be recognition that the Craft is but a unit in a total community and that it cannot be unconscious of the World about it. The principles of Freemasonry do not have application only within the Organisation itself; they have a universality which makes them capable of being adapted to many common situations. In our modern society, for instance, problems of the poor and (often associated with poverty) the aged and the lonely are frequently to be met and our principles are especially appropriate in providing the basic take-off points for action to help reach solutions for these. There is some evidence of greater involvement of Freemasons in, for example, community projects and for the housing of the aged. Fields such as this are fruitful areas for ensuring that Freemasonry moves with the times while, at the same time, maintains its essential principles and even its essential customs and practices.

Bibliography:

Lawrence: "Masonic Jurisprudence"

Simons: The Principles of Masonic Jurisprudence

Bernard Jones: Freemasons' Guide and Compendium