

EVOLUTION AND CHANGE VS TRADITION

W Bro. Tony Harvey, PJGD
FLPI, Chartered FCIPD, FCMI, FRSA

Anybody who knows me will recognise that I am passionate about change. I want to see a better world. I want to see people able to live happier, healthier, more principled and successful lives. Much of my work, whether as a coach / speaker or as a volunteer, has been to bring about purposeful change.

And yet, I also love tradition. I was born into Scouting and enjoy – among many other things – its customs, traditions and heritage. I am also a Freeman of the City of London and as an adult I have joined organisations with a rich and long history, including Freemasonry, a City Livery Company and the College of St George at Windsor Castle – where, each year, I witness the pomp and ceremony at the annual Garter Day. I am also a founder and trustee of a Scouting heritage charity, helping to conserve iconic Scouting artefacts for future generations.

How do I resolve these apparent contradictions? Indeed, is evolution and change incompatible with tradition? Must one always be threatened by the other? Or, can they co-exist?

As a volunteer in both Scouting and Freemasonry, I have become involved in the development of these organisations. I have researched their histories and examined how they have evolved. I have found that the way they have evolved and changed over the years has been critical to their survival. Indeed, other organisations have died precisely because they did not evolve.

The Founder of Scouting, Robert Baden-Powell, always said that Scouting was a Movement and he warned his Commissioners that if it ever became just an organisation it would die. In my fifty years in membership I have seen many changes in Scouting. Not all of them were comfortable at the time but today Scouting still follows the Baden-Powell's dream and ideals and is now growing faster than it has done at any time since the 1930's.

Freemasonry might be thought of as a bastion of the establishment, deeply conservative (with a small "c") and traditional. Yet, it emerged as a key part of the enlightenment, uniquely able to bring together people of different religious and political views based on the shared values of tolerance and respect that united them. Over the course of the last three-hundred years Freemasonry has been through many changes and is going through a new buoyant stage in its evolution as Freemasons, once again, feel comfortable talking about their membership.

We should be clear that Freemasonry has a long history of evolution and change, in both its ritual and its organisation. The early Freemasons swore their obligations on an ancient charge, later on the Holy Bible and only from the 19th century on the Volume of the Sacred Law. The Craft's original patron saints were the "Four Crowned Martyrs", the Quatuor Coronati. Only later did they give way to St John the Baptist and St John the Apostle. Today, in English Freemasonry at least, we barely mention them. The Third Degree and all subsequent degrees were created after the foundation of the premier Grand Lodge in 1717. In the 19th century most ritual was in the form of catechisms and only took its current form, heavily influenced by William Preston's introduction of Aristotelian philosophy including the seven liberal arts and sciences, after the Union of 1813. Since then, there has been a growth in different versions of the ritual, called workings, and there have been occasional small changes in the ritual itself.

However, in the last two hundred years, most changes in Freemasonry are in the way the organisation itself works or functions at various levels, not in things that directly impact the purpose or ethos of the organisation.

Such changes are permitted, despite claims by many that, “it is not in the power of any man to make any change in the body of Masonry.” What the eleventh charge in the summary read to every Master Elect prior to his installation actually says is:

11. You admit that it is not in the power of any Man or Body of Men to make any Alteration or Innovation in the Body of Masonry *without the consent first obtained of the Grand Lodge.*

So, far from proscribing any change, we are even told how change is authorised.

Freemasonry is not the only ancient institution that permits and experiences change

The Royal Family – itself a Victorian development around the Monarchy – is an excellent example of how old institutions can evolve and change to meet the challenges of a changing world. Many of the public events we see today may appear to be ancient. In fact, some have a relatively recent origin. The annual Garter Day, at which the Knights of the Garter process through Windsor Castle in their robes and insignia to a service in St George’s Chapel, was introduced in 1948, 600 years after the foundation of the Order. Every Coronation Service is an original invention featuring some traditional elements. Those events that do have an ancient origin, such as the annual Lord Mayor’s Show with more than 700 years of history, are regularly refreshed to combine traditional and contemporary elements. Indeed, the City of London’s institutions are outstanding examples of how traditions may continue and reach new audiences if they evolve within a modern framework. And who can deny that the younger generation of the Royal Family are bringing that oldest and most traditional of institutions, the Monarchy, up to date with their focus on the most vulnerable in our society while they (the working ones, at least) still fulfil their traditional role.

During the 40th anniversary celebrations of the Princes Trust, the Prince of Wales was quoted as saying that, “It would be wrong to continue doing things that were right a few years ago, just because they worked then. The Trust”, he said, “must evolve if it is to survive. It must adapt to continue to be attractive and relevant.” The heir to the throne could well have been talking of Freemasonry.

So, history tells us that all institutions evolve and change. What then is the place of tradition? I firmly believe that evolution and change can and must live alongside tradition.

I can visit a Scout Group and see all the traditional activities and priorities taking place alongside modern activities and in contemporary uniforms. I can visit a 300-year-old Masonic Lodge and witness traditions that go back to its origins, while references are made to development plans and online payment for meals.

In neither case does change mean that the organisations have to sweep away all traditions. Scouting still enjoys the outdoors, campfires, knot tying and earning badges. Freemasonry still has its ceremonies and pomp, its allegorical dramas and – once again – its public processions. The changes the organisations have introduced do not erode their fundamental principles or values. They refresh the way the organisation connects with its members and potential members, to ensure that it is still relevant and attractive.

However, we should be careful to distinguish between tradition, by which I mean the collective beliefs or habits developed over time and passed from one generation to another, and imposed dogma, by which I mean the wishes of a powerful sub-group imposed on the wider membership.

The former is healthy and should be respected, while still being allowed to evolve. The latter reflects a toxic culture that is damaging to Lodges, especially today when most of us expect our organisations to be governed in a transparent and inclusive manner.

If we lose all traditions, we lose not only something of the unique flavour of the institution. We also break the continuous threads that stretch from the founders and predecessors to the present-day stewards or guardians, whose responsibility it is to sustain something for future generations.

However, traditions that have outlived their purpose or relevance and which block the development of the organisation are counterproductive to our purpose and damaging and to our health. To slavishly follow them without reviewing, updating or evolving them is granting our predecessors a greater say in our governance than our current members. No wonder G.K. Chesterton called tradition the “democracy of the dead.” Personally I would like to see each generation make its own small contribution to tradition.

Charles Darwin developed his theory of natural selection to explain why some groups within populations thrive while others fail. This comes down to small variations between groups being favoured in the struggle for limited resources. Darwin said there is, “One general law, leading to the advancement of all organic beings, namely: multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die.” Perhaps a more familiar quote is by Megginson who said, “It is not the strongest that survive, nor the fittest, but those best suited to their environment and best able to manage change.” And Carl Sagan said, “Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception.”

So, if we want our organisations and institutions – and especially our Lodges - to survive, even thrive, we must allow them to evolve and change. However, we must also cherish and treat with care our traditions and heritage so that we can appreciate our origins and our historic development and realise that something that is worthy should be passed on better than it was when we found it.

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