

\* Please note that any opinions expressed in these lectures are those of the individual writers and may not necessarily reflect the views of the Province or Supreme Grand Chapter.

## **Lecture 2 - Royal Arch Masonry and Climate Change** by John Beech, PAGSoJ.

In a talk for Gooch Chapter No 1295 on Thursday, 19th November 2009.

Let me start by boring you with a few words of William Shakespeare from Act III Scene 2 of "Julius Caesar.

***"If you have tears, prepare to shed them now" "I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts. I am no Orator, as Brutus is, but, as you know me all, a plain blunt man.....  
For I have neither wit nor words nor worth, action, nor utterance nor the power of speech, to stir men's blood. I only speak right on, I tell you that which you yourselves do know"***

I must also add that my words are not adopted as policy by any superior authority but are simply a few of my own thoughts on the current situation for Royal Arch Masonry.

Every time you pick up a newspaper or turn on a news broadcast you are almost certain to hear an expert proclaiming the disaster ahead of the world as a result of climate change. I recall that several years ago I was on a conducted tour of a Sussex vinery and wishing to appear topical I asked the proprietor for his opinion on the new scare stories about global warming then breaking news. His comment was "How marvelous - that will ripen the crop earlier and increase the strength of the product, it might even become possible eventually to produce an acceptable English Red Wine - pity about the water shortages that might occur, we shall just have to waste less."

In some ways membership of our order can be compared with the good red wine he was hoping to produce, Both are enjoyable to the user, both have a substitute acceptable to many, those who confine themselves to drinking white wine and not venturing beyond the Craft. And as a last resort both wine and speculation could be dispensed with and our non Masonic, teetotal life would doubtless go on and on and on - it may seem even longer than what we are promised by the daily advancement in medical knowledge which for every 24 you live adds six hours to your life expectation One of the greatest difficulties in predicting climate change is that it happens slowly. In our temperate conditions the daily weather pattern is so variable that we are not always sure what season it is, as happened at the end of last month when we experienced an Indian summer half way through autumn - I hope that was not a racist remark - it could be as much as a century before we can be sure that our climate has materially altered. Would it affect the Royal Arch Order if a change in weather conditions occurred? No. We decide days and sometimes weeks in advance when and where to meet and make every effort to attend a planned Convocation whatever the weather - especially if we have paid for our supper. I might challenge that claim a little later but I cannot suggest that a change in the weather is in any way responsible for the dramatic fall in membership that our Order has suffered during the few decades in which I have been a member and a rise in sea temperature of even ten degrees is hardly likely, of itself, to suppress our numbers.

I must be considering the wrong sort of climate and the cause can perhaps be traced not to a meteorological climate change but to changes in the economic climate, the spiritual climate, the social climate or the climate of public opinion. Each of these aspects needs to be examined as a possible contributor to making our order seem less attractive to potential members. I shall try to be brief, partly to save your time and partly to avoid delving too deeply into subjects of which my knowledge is limited such as economics, sociology, spiritualism or market research.

### **Is the economic climate changing?**

Let us have a quick look. Over the passed few decades there is no doubt that there have been some major changes in the economic situation and the only certainty is that in the next few decades there will be more. Any qualified economist is able to predict when they will occur and what form they will take. If you would like to share and profit from this knowledge consult an economist and follow his advice. But never ask for a second opinion. Since the industrial revolution the world's economic

activity has increased progressively despite the occasional set-back. The slightest hint that it might be reducing or even static results in widespread alarm and despair. It is accepted as fundamental in most societies today that because expectations are high everything is scarce and the only hope of satisfying its wants is to increase economic activity. There are unfortunately two major drawbacks in this argument. The first is the long term possibility that the world's resources may become exhausted a situation which, however fashionable and fascinating, is well beyond the scope of this paper. The other is that the spare time created by the industrial revolution will progressively disappear as an increasing population strives to satisfy its self imposed demands. It could be that there are potential members out there who would be happy to join the Royal Arch Order but simply haven't the time to spare. On the other hand there is little evidence that Companions are resigning because they cannot justify the expense of membership. A drive of fifty miles and a potential twenty pounds supper bill could possibly have decreased the number of guests attending some of our Convocations. But only a very small proportion of members who attend a meeting don't stay for supper. The meal is considered by many to be as important as the ceremony. Having created all that alarm I conclude that it is rather doubtful if changes in the economic climate have any greater effect on the health of Royal Arch Masonry than changes in the weather

### **Is the spiritual climate changing?**

It is to be expected that the spiritual climate worsens as the economic climate improves. As the economy has flourished and provided income surplus to our basic needs so the worldly attractions of gambling, drugs, spectator sport, television and above all a wish to keep up with the neighbours have become much easier to satisfy.

Spiritualism is said to be losing its popularity in favour of materialism. It cannot be denied that many sects of Christianity in the UK have lost much support over the past fifty years but recent census figures suggest that despite services of worship being poorly supported most people still claim to be believers in a supreme being. It is a sad fact that each of the major religions of the world proclaim their particular brand to be the only valid truth and yet all are subdivided within themselves. The Christian church in its first millennium managed to organise itself into several distinctive branches and in the second millennium many of these branches grew a myriad of twigs all claiming to be the best, if not the only true representative of the deity. The Muslims were quick to separate into the Sunnis and the Shias and now of late have spawned a small but overactive subgroup the Taliban who to outsiders appear to have overlooked the sacredness of life fundamental to their claimed belief and are happy to destroy either group and even themselves with impunity. The Hindu and the Sikh have been at loggerheads from time to time in their history and even the contemplative Buddhists have subdivided on national and doctrinal grounds. Shades of Judaism the oldest organised monotheistic religion are well catalogued in the VOSL and by the end of the 20th century it had separated into the Orthodox and the Moderns with their principal common ground being their principal common enemies, those who are not God's chosen people and who have sought to destroy them over the ages.

I wonder if the Baha'i movement which holds the belief that all religions are in reality just one and the same will ever be more than a minor sect. With its holy writings taken from the Koran and the New Testament its very existence must be fraught with difficulties. Maybe all organised religions necessarily suffer from imperfection because mankind with the responsibility of organising them is unable to acknowledge its own imperfections.

Freemasonry is not religion but it is fair to say that we should struggle without its teachings. The all important affirmative answer to the first question to a candidate is fundamental to the existence of our order. And yet although the currently cool spiritual climate is possibly a problem for Craft Masonry it is not so for Royal Arch Masonry. We have amongst English Freemasons potential members of our Order equal in number to our total current membership. Grand Lodge Certificates have been issued at twice the rate of those from Supreme Grand Chapter in each of the past ten years so there are plenty of future Exaltees. Our real problem in recruitment would begin if it became difficult to find men who believe in God.

## **The social climate.**

A recent world wide survey ranked Britain in twelfth place of 129 taking into account their Wealth and Happiness. Quite how these factors can be weighted I am not sure. A similar study published shortly after it asserts that the UK population is the most selfish in the world and as such is the least sociable. Whether this is true or not I would draw to your attention that there is a single factor affecting us all that has been the predominant influence over a dramatic change in our social habits over the past fifty years and it is of course chips. Sixty-one years ago the transistor was invented - some of you may remember the variation on the Twelve days of Christmas in which the Partridge in the Pear Tree had been replaced by the Japanese Transistor Radio a product which transformed the relatively quiet occupation of sandcastle building into a painful din for all around trying to peacefully soak up the sun. By 1960 the transistor had evolved into the integrated circuit - the chip. During the past five decades that chip has produced a revolution in our lives. My 9 year old grandson is saving avidly for his Christmas Present of a lap top to replace the outdated desk computer he inherited some three years ago. Without a lap-top he feels quite out of touch with the rest of the world and even the rest of his family. But the personal computer is anathema to the social gathering. It demands absolute one to one attention to the exclusion of all else.

For those of you who use electronic mail I suggest that much more time is now spent in composing and reading written communications than even five years ago. Has the speed, ease and cheapness resulted in too much being said and not sufficient being assimilated? Add to this facility a mobile telephone for everyone and a colour television screen with surround sound and the need to spend resources on travel to meet others disappears. Yes the chip is undoubtedly the prime cause of the lack of interest in our Order and no amount of tweaking of the ritual or modifying the place or date or time of the meeting will overcome this problem. At least not until the novelty has worn off. When the last computer game has been won and the final movie stops and the trees used to make the paper to print out the unread e-mails have all been felled, only then will the young man who thinks want to be a Freemason. But for every two that join there is every chance that one will enjoy the mysteries of the Royal Arch. We may have to wait a while but if the disasters predicted by the weather prophets materialise our wait may soon be over.

## **The climate of public Opinion.**

Like our British weather Public Opinion is ever changing. But the effort and time and money spent in measuring the Climate of Public Opinion is quite disproportionately high. Visit any shopping centre and inevitably there will be a researcher waiting to ask your opinion as the average member of the public, on every subject imaginable provided of course that a supplier of goods or services feels it might help his enterprise and has paid the researcher for his trouble. On one subject however Public Opinion has remained as rigid and unbending as a frozen sea - it has not for as long as I can remember had a good word to say about Freemasonry.

But things could be changing. Thanks in part to the machinations of the European Union it has been established that the requirement for a Mason to declare himself as such when seeking to be a court judge or offering himself as a JP infringes his human rights. The government have therefore graciously decided that the information need not be given. Dare I suggest that this fact should still be included, by choice, on a brother's CV as a matter of course? Might it even improve his chances of appointment?

The current issue of the Melksham news includes a photograph of the PrGM attending a concert organised by the Lodge of Agriculture in aid of Dorothy House Hospice which was a sell-out and raised in the region of five thousand pounds for the Charity. At the West Wiltshire Show in Trowbridge Park a few weeks ago the Freemason's stand swarmed with interested members of the community. E Comp Graham Greenhill was almost overwhelmed and that takes a lot of people. It has been said that the fluttering of a butterfly's wings in a Brazilian rainforest is sufficient to start a hurricane in the gulf of Mexico. The recent publication for Dan Brown of his exciting if lurid novel "The Lost Symbol" might, just might, prove to be such a butterfly for Freemasonry in general and our Order in particular. Since it appeared in the bookshops and the supermarkets a couple of months ago it has remained in the top ten bestsellers week after week. A documentary featuring the book and

"starring" John Hamill, the UGL Information Officer was recently shown on Channel 5 television. This may have helped to boost its sales which have already exceeded a million copies. Some of you may even discover that Santa has managed to do a good deal with ASDA stores to help fill your stockings. Yet there has been no major reaction from the media to the book's content as occurred with an earlier book by the same author written around the Da Vinci Code. That brought widespread criticism from spiritual leaders and is still causing flurries in ecclesiastical circles. The reason is quite simple. Freemasonry has had a bad press for as long as I can remember. If it features in a fictional drama on the box you can always identify the villain by his rolled-up trouser leg. But this book is unusual, it finds in favour of the organisation much to the disappointment, I suspect, of the tabloids. Perhaps it will prove to be a catalyst for the revival of the Order perhaps the frozen sea will thaw and the tide turn.

## Conclusion

Let me end not with a conclusion but a few words of encouragement.

When the house lights are dimmed a single candle flame in the centre of the Albert Hall is visible from every seat.

Three rule a Lodge, five hold a Lodge, seven or more make it perfect.

"If you have a good Lodge, keep it select. Large numbers are not always beneficial". - Dr Oliver  
If attendance is small consider meeting in a smaller room or adjusting the layout so that those present are grouped more closely.

Be ready to answer the questions of the curious after they have opened their Christmas presents and, who knows, next year we may have so many applications that there will be no space in the calendar for a talk such as this to supplement a sparse agenda.

And finally I must add my thanks to the Most Excellent Grand Superintendent in and over the Province of Wiltshire Companion DFJ Blanchard for allowing me to give this talk and to you Companions for the kind and attentive manner in which you received it.