

‘Can we shorten the Toast List?’

STREAMLINING YOUR PROCEDURES: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Lodges and Chapters regularly seek advice about ways in which they can streamline and improve the pace of their meetings, both in lodge and at the Festive Board. The answer is usually in the hands of the lodge or chapter itself.

It is, and always has been, desirable for the enjoyment of Masonic events that they should be conducted in the most expeditious manner possible. It has in the past, however, often been the case that some lodges have had a tendency to do the opposite, and by elaboration and unnecessary delay (time-wasting) over the years, have extended their proceedings beyond what is enjoyable. In the modern world to some brethren, particularly the young, those still working and those with families, this undue length has started to be a deterrent to their interest and attendance. It is also a powerful disincentive to recruitment.

On the other hand, I have also greatly enjoyed meetings in our Province which have been conducted with purpose and a sense of urgency. Not haste; just with a determination to keep things moving, and where the event was concluded at a sensible time. Younger Masons often want to go on somewhere else after a lodge meeting.

In particular, lodges should be reviewing the time at which they tyle; how long it takes them to perform a ceremony and whether there are elements in their ceremonies which, because they have never been reviewed, retard the pace and detract from the essence of what the ceremony is intended to do. It can, quite truthfully, take some lodges up to forty-five minutes longer to perform a Third degree than others.

Many Masons in work, particularly younger ones, nowadays simply cannot manage the start times required by some of our lodges, and it is worth remembering that for decades, our lodges in Barrow, and other similar towns, were unable to start until the main employer in the town closed for the day. Brethren had to go home, wash and change before going to their lodge, and yet they were able to deliver fine ceremonies and hearty Festive Boards which still finished in time to go to bed sensibly for the next day.

The impetus of the conduct of the Festive Board (which is the responsibility of the DC) can vary enormously. It should proceed at his best pace, not the pace of the caterer, for example, and the vigilance of the DC is consequently essential. He is on duty and working. His lack of momentum is often the cause of late finishes. No Masonic Festive Board should take so long that brethren have to leave before it is completed; it is a serious discourtesy to visitors in particular to put them in that position.

And so the question of how to curtail the Toast List (which is perfectly in order) must not be seen as a means of shortening Masonic events without at the same time considering the many other ways in which lodges can save time.

Toast Lists are issued by the Province and are published on the website. They can be curtailed by leaving some toasts out but under no circumstances should local versions of the Toast Lists be devised. It is interesting to note in this context that East Lancashire, in their current published Toast List, have abandoned the formula *‘The Queen and The Craft’*, which has never been permitted in our Province, and whose meaning I have never myself understood.

Toast Lists will vary according to the nature of the evening and the work which has been undertaken. But it should never be forgotten that our sequence of toasts is unique to the Craft and both the identity and dignity of our Masonic proceedings, and the specific association with West Lancashire must be preserved.

When considering the length of 'toasts', we should not forget that what consumes the time is the *responses*. The longest Provincial Toast takes no longer than ten seconds to read out. An inept response can take minutes. It is perfectly in order to curtail responses or not to require them. For example, there is no need, except on special or 'grand' occasions, to have a reply to the Toast to Grand Lodge; nor to the Toast to Provincial Grand Lodge. Except where the Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies directs otherwise (for reasons of protocol) it is up to the lodge to invite a reply to these two toasts. It is not for a senior Grand or Provincial officer present to demand or expect to reply.

Similarly, in lodges where the Master is toasted at each meeting (and there are lodges which do not do this) there is no need for him to say anything other than 'thank you' or advertise an upcoming event in the lodge's calendar, if appropriate. Toasts to Absent Brethren can easily turn into an extensive report on the health of all the lodge widows or poorly brethren, which is business which should be conducted in lodge. Visitors replying to their Toast can, as we all know, bring an evening to its knees by holding the floor and delivering wandering and sometimes inappropriate replies. It is impolite of them to do so. And a Tyler should only give his toast the long way when the Master requests it, and then only for very good reasons.

In the light of these observations, the following is possible in West Lancashire:

The Queen and The Grand Master must be toasted formally.

Grand Officers need not be toasted, particularly if there are none present. Or they can be toasted with no reply.

The Provincial Grand Master must be toasted formally.

The Provincial Officers need not be toasted, but if they are, there certainly need not be a reply.

In the case of both Grand and Provincial Grand Officers, lodges should take care not to appear to be impolite in omitting their toasts, but can be firm in not inviting a response.

The Master can be toasted formally, with a formal response from him. (Slightly different at Installations, but the practice in some lodges of having the Toast to the Master Elect at one meeting and the Toast to the outgoing Master at another is an economical way of dealing with them).

An initiate or brother passing through another degree should be acknowledged with a toast, and encouraged to reply, though he should be assisted with that reply. It should be brief and appreciative.

From this point in the Toast List, lodges can, if they are not careful, allow toasts to proliferate: (Charities; Absent Brethren; Past Masters; Visitors) all of which cause the extension of the evening when it is already late. Not all of them are necessary on all occasions, and if there are Visitors, while it may be impolite not to acknowledge and welcome them, it is unnecessary to require a reply from them.

By consideration of such observations as these, lodges ought to be able to achieve a streamlined profile to their meetings, without losing the unique qualities of them as West Lancashire Masonic events.

Provincial Grand Secretary