

## UNITED GRAND LODGES OF AUSTRALIA?

by Kent Henderson

A great many Masonic minds have, for some years now, turned their thoughts to the question of falling numbers in the Craft. In English-speaking countries, the fall in membership has been substantial, ongoing, and unarrested since the late 1960s. A large number of papers have been written on the subject, including several by this author, and many formulas attempted by many Grand Lodges. In more recent years, mass initiations have become common in many American states—with mixed reports as to their ultimate success.

In Australia, along with much wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth, many attempts to reverse the trend have been made. In some instances, the wheel has been reinvented. In more recent years, publicity, attempts to make the Craft better known and understood in the community, an increasing focus on charitable and community works have all formed part of the plethora of responses. Nothing has worked—despite the excellent intentions of all Grand Lodges, and some very capable people who have sought to tackle the problem. That is not to say that all these efforts are not laudable in themselves—they are. It is difficult to quantify, but it is quite possible—even probable—that without all these strategies membership would have fallen at a faster rate. Much soul-searching has occurred. Is something wrong with Freemasonry? The answer to that is clearly NO. Is there something wrong with how Freemasonry is “packaged”? Possibly, but a discussion on this is outside the scope of this paper.

All these questions, and their answers—to the extent that they can be answered—are axiomatic. Membership keeps falling and, unless divine intervention occurs, will almost certainly keep falling. The demographics of the Craft, at least in English-speaking countries, where the great majority of members are in their 60s and 70s and beyond, will see to that. Clearly, the intake of new members is not—cannot—replace members departing through resignation or death.

Let's look at the Australian figures: So, what do these figures tell us? Nothing pleasant, I'm afraid. In round figures, Australian Masonic membership has declined 75% in 23 years, since 1980. There were more Masons in New South Wales in 1985 than there are in all of Australia combined today. I find this latter fact to be significant. In 1980 we had six Grand Lodges with about 230,000 members. Today we still have six Grand Lodges, but with only 60,000 members. Do we still need six Grand Lodges?

Of course, the numbers will decline further. The rate of decline, indicated by the above figures, is about 20–25% every five years. Note that the percentage decline per five-year period has been steadily increasing. Projecting forward, using an optimistic 20% decline per five years, then in ten years' time we will be down to about 37,000 Masons Australia-wide. It is useful to point out that Grand Lodges, of themselves, cannot solve the membership-decline problem, if indeed it has any solution. All that Grand Lodges have been able to do, arguably, is affect, perhaps arrest, the rate of decline. A view of many Freemasons, unfortunately, is that it is up to Grand Lodge to fix the problem. In reality it is the problem of individual lodges—only therein can new Freemasons be made. There are also attendant problems, such as too many lodges. My thesis here is not about fixing membership decline, but about controlling the economics of that decline.

So, what to do? Realistically, the main concern of Grand Lodges, aside from the obvious sadness in seeing lodges decline and close, is how to fund the Craft. Most Australian Grand Lodges have mighty edifices to support, hospitals, Masonic homes, administration, staff, et cetera. Capital accrued over the last hundred years or so may cushion the blow, but funds are far from infinite, especially when base income (membership capitation) constantly declines.

I return to the question, do we *need* six Grand Lodges? Or to put it in more pertinent terms, can we *afford* six Grand Lodges? The answer is probably already no, and, if not, it clearly soon will be. Larger Grand Lodges—those of New South Wales and Victoria—can probably ‘hang on’ longer than smaller ones. Already Western Australia has sold its main Masonic Centre in central Perth, and moved its administration to a suburban centre. The Grand Lodge of South Australia has recently sold its massive, heritage-listed edifice in central Adelaide, though it has a tenancy agreement with the new owners, for the present. The South Australian problem was that so few lodges meet in the *Adelaide Masonic Centre* as to make continued ownership (and more importantly, ongoing maintenance) quite uneconomic. The wonderful Masonic Memorial Temple in central Brisbane can surely only have a limited economic future as a Masonic building. The United Grand Lodge of Victoria has been endeavouring to downsize its central Melbourne *Masonic Centre of Victoria*, and redevelop the whole site—held up by heritage issues and other factors.

It would be difficult to refute the assertion that the Craft in Australia could be administered more efficiently, and economically, as one body rather than six. A great many administrative functions could readily be combined, with significant cost savings. Do we really need six Masonic magazines, when one quality production would do (and with a wider circulation and attendant appeal to advertisers)? Do we really need six sometimes divergent approaches to shared problems? I note, with applause, that the Australian Grand Lodges have recently adopted a common marketing approach, and some common marketing literature. Excellent. But why stop there? It is now *Freemasonry Victoria*, *Freemasonry New South Wales*, etc. Why not just *Freemasonry Australia*?

Let us assume, for the moment, that one agrees that this is a good idea. There are many ‘good ideas’ that have never seen the light of day, usually because they are stopped by vested interests. In Freemasonry? Do you doubt it? In my fairly lengthy Masonic career, the only person that I have ever found more parochial than a Freemason is two of them. A small example: in my home town of Geelong in Victoria, it took over eighty years to get the Committees of Management of two adjacent Masonic Temples, 200 metres apart, to agree to combine into one new Masonic Centre. How many lodges have handed in their warrants because their members could not, would not, even consider changes that might have staved off extinction? So the question now becomes, in the event you agree that *Freemasonry Australia* is a good idea—and the argument just on falling numbers and economics alone is becoming increasingly compelling—how ever is it to be achieved? Only through considerable blood on the carpet, one might suspect. Not necessary so, if general goodwill prevails, and I believe it does exist.

One example, while not totally analogous to the Australian situation, does provide a clue...

## The German Precedent

After the Second World War, the Craft in Germany rapidly re-established itself, although its membership had been greatly lessened by the War. It was widely recognised by surviving German Masons that the old system of eleven independent Grand Lodges that existed pre-war was unsatisfactory and, indeed, several of these were not to rise again from the ashes. Aside from a lack of unity, the old system had meant that German Masonry had remained largely unrecognised outside the country. This unity was not easily achieved, as it needs to be appreciated that the surviving German Masons grew up Masonically under a number of differing Grand Lodge systems and rites. (Clearly, there are parallels with the English, Irish and Scottish Lodges that formed the six Australian Grand Lodges over a century ago—yet they did achieve unity, though in many cases not without difficulty).

By 1949, a good start had been achieved, when representatives of 151 German lodges met at Frankfurt and founded the United Grand Lodge of German Freemasons (AF&AM). However, complete unity was still not gained, as former members of the old National Grand Lodge at Berlin stood out. Members of this Grand Lodge were nurtured under the Swedish Rite system, and they found that assimilation presented them with governmental and ritualistic difficulties (a problem Australia does not have). Instead, the Swedish Rite lodges erected the Grand Lodge of the Freemasons' Order (GLFD).

Nonetheless, the idea of unity was far from dead, and protracted negotiations ensued between the two Grand Lodges. In 1958, these negotiations led to the formation of the United Grand Lodges of Germany. Particular attention should be paid to the word 'Lodges' (plural). At the convention forming the United Grand Lodges, 264 lodges of the Grand Lodge AF&AM were represented, together with 82 GLFD lodges. The basis of the unity was a Magna Charta, which passed sovereignty to the United Grand Lodges, but maintained the two forming bodies as Land (Provincial) Grand Lodges. Each 'Land' Grand Lodge remained very largely administratively independent, but with external relations and general policy ceded to the United Grand Lodges. A Senate was formed for the United Grand Lodges, with each party having five representatives.

There still remained outside the Union the original *Grand Lodge of the Three Globes*, which had been resuscitated in West Berlin. This situation was rectified after the Union, when it joined the United Grand Lodges and took a seat in the Senate. Meanwhile, a large number of Englishspeaking lodges had been formed in Germany after the War by stationed American, Canadian and British troops. These lodges formed themselves into two Provincial Grand Lodges, namely the *American Canadian Grand Lodge*, and the *Grand Lodge of British Freemasons*, whereupon they both affiliated with the United Grand Lodges. In 1970, the status of the three latterly-joining Grand Lodges was raised under an amended Magna Charta. Each Grand Lodge now has two members of the Senate. Finally then, German Masonry has become totally united, with a unique system of five independent Grand Lodges bonded together under the *The United Grand Lodges of Germany*.

## A Solution?

Perhaps the most efficient and economic way of dealing with the matter is to abolish all State Grand Lodges, and merge them in some way into *Freemasonry Australia*? If so, then three steps in the process are suggested:

- 1) The initial establishment of a Joint Secretariat carrying out the office work but not the real administration and the work of the ceremonial branches of the various Grand Lodges.
- 2) The formation of a complete central administrative structure.
- 3) The development of The United Grand Lodges of Australia—*Freemasonry Australia*.

The first step can be readily seen as an economic necessity, the second developing over time as an understanding of better administrative structures are appreciated, and the third step as an eventual logical consequence on the first two. Using the German model as a guide, there is a way to ensure the economic sustainability of Australian Freemasonry.

Let us consider the following vision for the future. The six Grand Lodges would, in due course (and perhaps in the stages just enumerated), effectively federate, very much like the six Australian Colonies federated into the Commonwealth of Australia just over one hundred years ago. As in that example, the Federal Masonic Government (*Freemasonry Australia*) would be given certain powers, with the States (*Freemasonry Tasmania*, *Freemasonry Queensland*, etc) retaining some powers. Each State body would have equal representation in *Freemasonry Australia* (as in the Australian Senate). *Freemasonry Australia* would have a National Grand Master—and, I suggest, a very limited number of Grand Officers—with the Grand Mastership revolving state by state on a fixed rota (every two or three years), and Grand Officers drawn equally from the States. The location for a Federal Masonic Secretariat might logically be in Canberra. Each State Grand Lodge would still exist, with its own Grand Master and Grand Officers. Functions that can be more efficiently and economically ceded to central administration (fraternal relations, membership database, publicity management, lodge development, finance, general administration, etc) would go to the central body, with the balance left in state hands. Thus, the United Grand Lodges (note the plural) of Australia would be formed—*Freemasonry Australia*. States would retain their own identity, their own ritual and ceremonial, their own ceremonial officers.

The final question may well be *when*, rather than *if*. Increasingly, if the current Grand Lodges are to avoid the everincreasing problem of just 'staying afloat', there is little alternative. The longer it is left, the more of a shell each Grand Lodge will become—the smaller states first, the larger ones inexorably to follow.

## Suggested Reading:

BELTON, John: 'Masonic Membership Myths Debunked' in *Masonic Inducements*, 2003 Transactions of the Victorian Lodge of Research, Melbourne 2004, pp29–46.

HENDERSON, K W & POPE, A R F: *Freemasonry Universal—A New Guide to the Masonic World*, (2 vols), Global Masonic Publications, Melbourne 1998, 2000.

HENDERSON, Kent: 'A Prescription for Masonic Renewal' in *Masonic Inspirations*, 1994 Transactions of the Victorian Lodge of Research, Melbourne 1995, pp78–100.

——— 'Back to the Future', the 1994 Kellerman Lecture for Victoria, in *Australian Masonic Research Council Proceedings 1994*, Melbourne, pp21–2.

——— 'Masonic Government and Practice, a World Perspective' in *Millennial Masonry*, Global Masonic Publications, Melbourne 2001, pp9–16.

KELLERMAN, Harry: 'The Challenge of the Changes in Membership in New South Wales', the 1992 Kellerman Lecture for New South Wales, in *Australian Masonic Research Council Proceedings 1992*, Melbourne, pp9–20.

PUTNAM, Robert: 'The Strange Disappearance of Civic America' in *The American Prospect* #24, Winter 1996, <<http://epn.org/prospect/24/24putn.html>>.  
 REES, Julian: 'It doesn't have to be like this' in *Freemasonry Today* #2, Autumn 1997, p27.  
 THORNTON, Peter: 'Nine out of ten Freemasons would attack Moscow in Winter', the 1992 Kellerman Lecture for Victoria, in *Australian Masonic Research Council Proceedings 1992*, Melbourne, pp27–30.

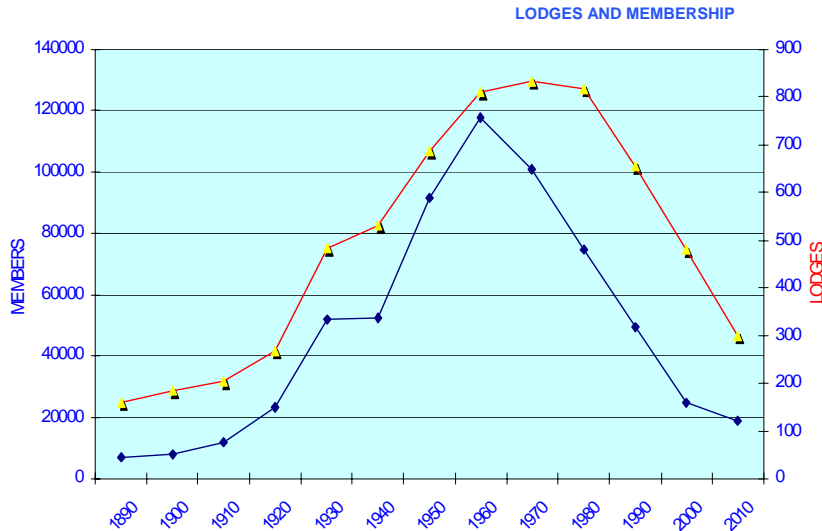
STATE	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2003
Vic	76,178	56,000	45,000	30,896	24,314	18,912
NSW & ACT	77,508	62,582	47,812	34,000	25,000	19,000
Qld	31,768	28,628	24,441	21,000	15,700	12,500
Tas	7,540	6,313	5,177	4,300	3,357	2,200
SA & NT.	18,406	14,806	11,000	8,600	5,389	4,593
WA	16,933	14,799	11,245	9,900	5,471	4,606
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>228,333</b>	<b>183,128</b>	<b>144,675</b>	<b>108,696</b>	<b>79,231</b>	<b>61,811</b>

**Figure 1** Australian Masonic Membership Movements 1980–2003

Source: *List of Lodges Masonic*. Pantagraph Printing Company, USA. Published annually.

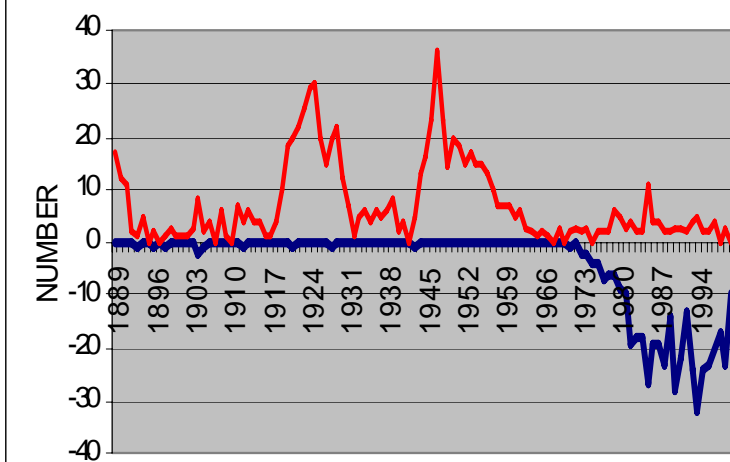
STATE	1980–85	1985–90	1990–95	1995–00	2000–03	1980–2003
Vic	-26.48%	-19.64%	-31.34%	-21.30%	-22.22%	-75.17%
NSW & ACT	-19.25%	-22.60%	-29.89%	-26.47%	-24.00%	-75.48%
Qld	-9.98%	-14.63%	-14.09%	-25.24%	-20.38%	-60.65%
Tas	-15.26%	-17.99%	-16.94%	-21.93%	-34.47%	-70.82%
SA & NT.	-19.56%	-25.71%	-21.82%	-37.33%	-14.77%	-75.04%
WA	-12.60%	-24.02%	-11.96%	-44.74%	-15.81%	-72.79%
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>-19.80%</b>	<b>-20.20%</b>	<b>-24.87%</b>	<b>-27.11%</b>	<b>-21.99%</b>	<b>-72.93%</b>

**Figure 2** Percentage of membership falls, Australian Masonry



**Figure 3** United Grand Lodge of Victoria, Lodges and Membership 1890 forward.

Source: *United Grand Lodge of Victoria*



**Figure 4** United Grand Lodge of Victoria, Lodges opened and closed 1889–1999.

Source: *United Grand Lodge of Victoria*

