

NOTE TO THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE: FREEMASONRY

I was approached in March by a Member of the Court of Common Council, who expressed concern about the potential for influence by Freemasonry within the City of London Corporation. In particular, he expressed specific concern that there was a Members' Lodge, to which women Aldermen and Councilmen were unable to join.

Following our conversation, I wrote to the Member in the terms set out below and said that I would raise the issues with the Committee.

CEL

4-May-16

"You raised with me on Thursday, prior to the meeting of the Court of Common Council, your concerns regarding the potential influence of freemasonry within the Corporation and the need for greater transparency, particularly with regard to the Guildhall Lodge. You also expressed specific concern about the gender restriction on membership of freemasonry in general and Guildhall Lodge in particular, i.e. that it is only open to men.

As I told you on Thursday, I am a freemason, but am not a member of Guildhall Lodge. For the sake of openness, I should tell you that I am a Grand (i.e. national) Officer of the United Grand Lodge of England and chairman of one of its committees.

As I hope you know, I am a passionate believer in transparency and that has been the watchword of the Standards Committee under my chairmanship over the past three years. In relation to freemasonry specifically, when we updated the Code of Conduct late in 2014, we introduced a requirement for members to declare, under paragraph 7 (c) of the Code, their memberships of fraternal and sororal societies, which our guidance advises includes organisations like Freemasonry and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes. This is a change from the previous statutory code which only required Members to register membership of charities, meaning that most freemasons did not have to declare their membership of the fraternity, but only their membership of the Freemasons' Grand Charity.

From the Standards Committee's recent review of Members' register entries, it appears that all those who are freemasons have declared their membership either by stating that they are a freemason, or by giving the names and or numbers of the lodges to which they belong.

Turning to the specific issue of Guildhall Lodge No. 3116, which was consecrated in 1905 for Aldermen and Common Councilmen of the City of London and from which it still draws most of its membership. Clearly as there has been a Guildhall Lodge for more than 100 years, the position is not new. In fact, the number of freemasons and Guildhall Lodge members on Common Council today is almost certainly lower than previously, not least because of the growth in the number of women on the Court. In my fifteen years on Common Council, I have never been aware of any suggestion that Guildhall Lodge or its members have ever acted either improperly or in concert in respect of the activities of the Corporation or its internal governance. I am, however, aware that suspicion might – and indeed occasionally does – arise amongst certain non-masonic members of the Court that the Lodge could exert influence behind the scenes at Guildhall.

If you are aware of any specific concerns about the direct and inappropriate influence of freemasonry – as opposed to there being freemasons individually in leadership positions – in

the work of the Corporation that you would wish the Standards Committee to investigate, please let me know.

Whilst it would be invidious (and indeed in breach of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights) to require Members to declare their membership of any specific organisation (as opposed to types of organisations in the generality), it may well be that the Standards Committee might wish to review its guidance on the interpretation of the Code on this point. I could certainly see an argument that – given the number of Members involved – Guildhall Lodge could reasonably be interpreted to be a ‘club or society active in the City of London’ which we might expect Members to declare their membership of under paragraph 7 (b) of the Code, just as do memberships of Ward Clubs etc.

I will ask the Town Clerk to place this issue on the agenda for the next meeting of the Standards Committee as we will be reviewing the Guidance on the Code of Conduct in any event at that meeting.

On your point regarding gender inequality in freemasonry, you raise an entirely valid issue. Under its current rules, membership of lodges under the United Grand Lodge of England is restricted to men only, and clearly that includes the Guildhall Lodge. Masonry is however open for women to join and in this country there are two Grand Lodges for women: the Order of Women Freemasons (www.owf.org.uk) and the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons (www.hfaf.org). Perhaps, if enough women Members of Common Council wanted to, they could establish their own Guildhall Lodge.

I hope that this responds to your concerns and provides greater clarity on this issue. Please let me know if you are happy with the way I propose to take this forward.”