

BACK TO THE FUTURE - A PRESCRIPTION FOR MASONIC RENEWAL

(The “European Concept” Lodge Model)

The following paper sets out a most successful experiment in Masonic renewal. A small group of committed masons, lamenting the dire state into which the Craft in Australia has plunged, particularly in more recent times, looked at the problems involved and decided to try a practical solution. Given the success that has been experienced it is hoped that by sharing our *Prescription for Masonic Renewal*, together with the progress and results achieved, others may decide to emulate our example and so contribute to rescuing the Craft from the abyss.

Introduction

In 1992, when working on a new edition of my book, *Masonic World Guide* (which, co-authored with Tony Pope, was finally published in two volumes as *Freemasonry Universal – A New Guide to the Masonic World*, in 1998 and 1999), I compiled a table of the membership movements of most Masonic Grand Lodges in the world from 1980 to 1990. The results, while not unexpected, were alarming. Five of Australia’s Grand Lodges were in the top ten membership losses in the world. Between 1980 and 1990, The United Grand Lodge of Victoria lost forty-six per cent of its members. Based on these figures, even the most optimistic casual observer would have to conclude that Australian Masonry in general, and Victoria in particular, was doing something very wrong to have such an enormous loss of membership.

What caused the decline?

During its early history in Australia, freemasonry was not an egalitarian movement. Indeed, it can be argued that it was never designed to be egalitarian. Aside from its teachings, the greatest strength of masonry has always been its mystique.

Prior to the Second World War in Australia, it cost twice the then average weekly wage (around 5-6 guineas) to join freemasonry, and around the average weekly wage as annual dues. Since the war, annual dues have not kept up with inflation. If they had simply done so, annual lodge dues would currently be at a level approaching the present average weekly wage, around \$400 per week.

What occurred is that lodges have, historically, held down dues based on the spurious argument that to put them up would mean “*members would resign*”. This, of course, did not occur, nor would it had the dues been progressively increased in line with inflation. Indeed, effectively the reverse happened – members resigned over time *because* dues had not been put up!

The effect of this action over the years has been a steady fall in lodge standards. The quality of the repast available, in particular, has declined from the regular banquet of pre-war years, to the “*cold sausage rolls and limp sandwiches*” found served at most Australian lodge Festive Boards today. As a result of ever lowering standards, members first drifted away from the Craft. In more recent years, as standards have continued to fall, the drift has become a stampede. When candidates are gained, they often do not stay beyond acquiring their third degree. What I call the “Tolerance Factor” can explain the acceleration of resignations from the Craft, in my view. As standards fell, more and more members reached the point where they could “tolerate” no more. The effect has been compounding. The lower the standards became, the quicker became the pace of resignations. Those that do remain must accept ever-lowering standards. There is no impetus to reverse the trend.

A manifestation of the problem can be noted in the demography of Australian lodges. If one visits a lodge in Victoria, invariably the vast majority, if not all, members present will be Past Masters. When it comes to leaving Freemasonry, or conversely remaining a member, those that remain tend to be those individuals who have invested more of themselves in it. I conjecture that Past Masters are less likely to “jump ship” than Master Masons for this reason, and visual evidence would seem to support this view.

The reaction to this trend in Australia, the temptation, has been to make the Craft even easier to join, to effectively lower the standards still more. The way to get more members, the rationale goes, is to do things such as relaxing dress standards “*as young people don't have dinner suits*”, or as is now permitted under some Australian Constitutions, to advertise for members in newspapers.

The depletion of Masonic membership has had other snowballing effects. As numbers have fallen over the years, lodges have had less and less competent members remaining to perform the ceremonies. In turn, this has meant that less competent members who would have never been called on in the healthier times of the past, are now thrust into office. The ongoing result has been a serious decline in the standard of ritual and ceremonial, which in turn has helped speed membership losses. Masters being prompted in every word of an

obligation is not an inspirational sight, and that is the standard to which many lodges have been reduced.

Another result has been the progressive aging of the Craft. Younger members are not joining, and in all Australian Grand Lodges a substantial majority of members are over sixty years of age. The oft-heard reasons espoused for this are the great diversity of community groups available to join which were not available in the past, and the economic pressures on young families, amongst others. These reasons may have some validity (see “*Freemasons – An Endangered Species?*” – elsewhere in this volume). However, this is not a problem in Europe, replete with countries with similar social and economic conditions to ours, where masonry is mostly expanding.

Another oft-cited reason for the decline in Masonic membership is the wide range of diversions available to modern young men. That this variety exists is clearly true. However, I contend that this is a false and irrelevant argument as to why young men are not joining the Craft. Surely freemasons believe their organisation is superior to other social institutions? Again, no matter how good the contents, few will buy something wrapped in a “*brown paper bag*”. A reactionary trend today in Australian Grand Lodges is towards “Public Relations”, to *package* the Craft in the media. Yet how does one sell a defective product? Certainly, the vehicle itself is sound, but the rust and tatty upholstery do not inspire. Perhaps a media blitz may entice a few more members attracted by whatever hype the *advertising boys* can come up with. However, when new members join and face the reality of old men destroying the ritual, of long boring, speeches, of food they wouldn’t serve at home except at a child’s birthday party – they promptly become that now common Masonic phenomenon, the *Revolving Door Freemason*.

Overall, one is led to strongly suspect that younger men are not joining the Craft because they perceive that freemasonry, in its current form, has little to offer them. I suspect that “*cold sausage rolls and limp sandwiches*” have far more to do with this aspect of the problem than the more *conventional wisdoms* cited as reasons. As soon as you make something cheap and easy to join, nobody wants to.

The root cause, then, of this massive decline in Australian Masonic membership has been the failure of lodges to maintain their level of dues in real terms since World War Two. The result, in the post war years, has been a consistent lowering of standards. The symptoms of the *disease*, not the cause, are poor Festive Boards, poor ceremonial, an aging membership, and a lack of

new candidates wishing to join. Unfortunately, the reaction to the latter has been to virtually “take anyone” which has further compounded the problem.

The European Masonic Experience

In reviewing world Masonic membership figures, aside from noting the disastrous Australian decline, it is also noticeable that membership under a number of other Grand Lodges is expanding, notably in Europe. Could it be, therefore, that European masons were doing something right?

The emphasis of European Freemasonry is in many ways different to masonry in Australia. Current European annual dues average around their average weekly wage, or higher. In Europe, lodges are not often easy to join. Long waiting lists are common, and in some jurisdictions less than 50% of applicants are actually accepted. Standards are very high and ceremonial work is first rate. Few European lodges hold a “Festive Board” as Australian masons would understand the concept, but often hold a dinner, in style, associated with meetings.

Another strength of European lodges is their Masonic education. Under their system, it takes up to five years for a new Apprentice to receive the Master Mason Degree. In the intervening time, the candidate must participate in a great many Masonic education sessions, and is subjected to extensive verbal and written examination prior to his promotion to any higher degree.

In short, European Masonry is to some extent exclusive. It is certainly not easy to attain membership and once attained, promotion takes considerable time and must be earned. The result of these high standards are that because it is hard to join, many wish to, and because those joining are given significant challenges, these are greatly appreciated and valued when attained. Clearly, these are reasons why European Masonry is thriving.

The Creation of Lodge Epicurean

In early 1992, a group of mostly young (but Masonically experienced) freemasons living in Victorian provincial city of Geelong, lamenting the state of the Craft, decided to do something about it in a practical way. They determined to form a new lodge which would be quite different in a great many ways to others working under the Victorian Constitution. Lodge Epicurean, as they named it, would be a top quality lodge, with the highest standards. Anything not consistent with such high standards would be discarded.

It was decided to form the lodge on *Two Great Pillars*, which are as follows:

1. A high quality lodge must be paid for – therefore dues need to commensurate with this. Based on the successful European formula, it was decided on dues at about the average weekly wage.
2. A lodge has two main challenges: getting members, and keeping them.

(a) GETTING MEMBERS. Only an existing member can propose a candidate. We suspected that the reason why members did not repeatedly propose candidates, if ever, was because they either consciously or sub-consciously did not think their friends would be interested. There are probably a variety of reasons for this, but one is probably fear that in the event that their friends do not like the lodge, their friendship might be affected. Members these days are rarely proud of the standards of their lodges. However, if a lodge has very high standards, members do not hesitate to ask their friends to join. This is the secret of gaining new members, and lots of them.

(b) KEEPING THEM. A high quality lodge will greatly assist in holding new members in the longer term, but this is still not enough. There are other social organizations that offer quality. Freemasonry has one great thing more to offer, available nowhere else – freemasonry! But what is it? It is not a charitable organization like Rotary or Lions (though some would make it out to be), although charity is an important part of its teachings. Masonry is first and foremost an education society, one which TEACHES moral and ethics – a way of life. Secondly, Masonry is a universal brotherhood, with all that implies. Thus, what a lodge must do is teach. Exposure to the three degrees is but the beginning. What a lodge must understand is the overriding reason why a brother will sit in a Masonic lodge in the medium to long term is because he knows exactly why he is sitting there. The answer to keeping them, therefore, is to give them quality, and to concurrently educate them in Masonry.

It is therefore, with these thoughts in mind that Lodge Epicurean was created with thirty-five founders in February 1993 in Geelong, based on what we came to call the “European Concept”.

The Guidelines of the Lodge

What were we to be about, specifically? As with every lodge, Epicurean has By-Laws. However, By-Laws are a document largely set in concrete that are produced out of constitutional necessity. What we also created was the *Guidelines for the Operation of the Lodge*. This is a living, evolving document, and it is to this that the lodge works. The lodge Committee of

Management regularly reviews the *Guidelines* and amends them from time to time. All members of the lodge “subscribe” to them. They are the practical expression of member’s collective philosophy on how a Masonic lodge in general, and Lodge Epicurean in particular, should be run. All joining members receive a copy of the *Guidelines* prior to affiliating, and all candidates upon initiation. These *Guidelines*, with commentary where they are not completely self-explanatory, are as follows:

1. *The aim of the lodge in all its endeavours will be quality, in ceremonial, in workings, and in after proceedings. We believe quality must be paid for.*

This first guideline is based firmly on our belief of how a successful lodge should operate, in view of the European experience and how many pre-WWII lodges operated in Australia. The name “Lodge Epicurean” was chosen simply to illustrate the dining/quality nature of the lodge. We believe it is a self-evident truth that people will only join an organisation in terms of what they perceive they will get out of it. This is human nature, for better or worse. Whether we like it or not, to a great extent this “value” will be measured in monetary terms. Of course, with education, members will also see a great many other values to be had in freemasonry, as we know, more so than they will find in virtually any other social organisation. However, this revelation will not come immediately. Why do men pay high fees to join a golf club? How many would pay the dues at the Melbourne Club, or the Victoria Racing Club, if only they could get in? Why does the Melbourne Cricket Club have a twenty-year waiting list to join? It is a question of the quality offered and what prospective members perceive as the value of the organisation to them.

2. *The lodge will meet six times per year, with an Installation meeting (the first in the calendar year), and five working nights, which may be degree work, or lectures/speakers on Masonic subjects. The lodge will normally open at 6.00 pm.*

Most English lodges only meet 4–6 times per year, and we thought this quite adequate. We also considered that less frequent meetings would assist in not rushing candidates through their degrees. In addition, we felt that in terms of time, six meetings per year was more in tune with the time restraints often placed on younger members in particular, in terms of occupational and domestic impediments.

3. *Master Masons will be appointed to office strictly on merit, and encouraged to undertake the work as applicable. Progress to higher office will not be automatic, but will depend on the demonstrated proficiency, attendance and*

interest shown by each individual office bearer. In order to effect this provision, the lodge shall possess a Promotions Committee, which shall consist of a Chairman and such other members as the Master may appoint. It shall meet annually towards the end of each year following any “step-up” rehearsals that the lodge may hold, and consider and recommend to the lodge the Master and Officers for the succeeding year.

As all lodge officers are expected to attend all lodge meetings during their tenure as such, any special or special member accepting any lodge office shall, for his tenure, be deemed an ordinary member of the lodge and shall contribute full dues as appropriate.

In order to affect this guideline, the lodge created a Promotions Committee, appointed by the Master. This Committee annually determines those members of the “Lodge Team” to be promoted to higher office. The Lodge holds one or more “step up” rehearsals in the second half of each year, whereupon all Lodge Officers “step up” into the next highest office and perform as such at a rehearsal. The Promotions Committee policy is not to recommend the promotion of any brother who does not show his competence in this manner. Where a brother fails to satisfy the committee, he will be invited to remain in his current office (if performing satisfactorily in it) for a further year, and if no other Master Mason subsequently proves his competence for the position in question, then the Committee recommends a Past Master to fill the vacancy created for the ensuing twelve months.

The Promotions Committee members represent a cross section of the lodge and often include Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts. In addition, the job of Inner Guard is annually “up for grabs”, assuming all members of the current ceremonial lodge team (i.e.: SW, JW, SD, JD, and IG) gain promotion. Any Master Mason is welcome to try out for this position at a “step up” rehearsal. Clearly, the primary role of the Promotions Committee is to ensure the highest quality of ritual and ceremonial in the lodge. That has been quickly achieved, and the lodge is determined such will be maintained.

4. *Visitors will be vouched for by the "Card System", with responsibility for this placed with the Tyler, Inner Guard and Secretary. No visitor may be admitted unless properly vouched for, or examined.*

Under normal circumstances, the lodge opens at 6.00 pm. All visitors then present are asked to enter the Temple for the Opening. Upon signing the Appearance Book each visitor is asked to fill in a visitor’s card detailing his name, rank, lodge, and which member vouches for him. These cards go to the

secretary, and prior to opening, they are read. The vouching brother signifies to the Master accordingly. If a brother cannot be vouched for he must retire to be examined by the DC or Tyler.

We expect to “pick up” anyone not vouched for prior to opening, and see to the matter then. Only when all visitors are vouched for does the Master open the Lodge. The Lodge holds the view that avouchment is, regrettably, virtually non-existent in Victorian Lodges, but we determined that this would never be the case in Lodge Epicurean.

5. The Master shall annually appoint a Committee of Inquiry into proposed candidates. Candidates shall not be promoted to a higher degree unless proficient, and stringent examination will be introduced and maintained. A candidate must prove his proficiency to the Education Committee, PRIOR to the night of anticipated degree promotion. Unless the Master considers there to be exceptional circumstances, no brother shall receive more than one degree per calendar year.

The Lodge Committee of Inquiry is very diligent in its role. Of thirteen applications from potential candidates to join the lodge in its first year of operation (1993), two were unsuccessful and one was withdrawn. From the remaining ten, seven were initiated, and three held over until 1994. Applications continued to come in steadily, and as of early 1996, the lodge had initiated nineteen new members. All but one (who has moved out of Geelong) is a very regular attendee. As of 2001, of the current forty members of the lodge, twenty-one were initiates in it.

The lodge has adopted the European System of a minimum time lapse between degrees of one year, together with strict proficiency requirements. We require the standard “test questions” for promotion to the 2nd and 3rd degree, plus several extras, bringing the total to twenty. Candidates for promotion must also learn and recite their obligation in each degree before Education Committee members. Master Masons raised in the lodge have a further twenty questions, plus their 3rd Degree obligation to learn prior to them receiving their Grand Lodge Certificate, or being promoted to any office beyond Steward. The lodge holds the firm view that our policy will both assist in member’s Masonic education and cause them to place a high value on the promotion that they have earned.

In addition, the lodge introduced a written *Masonic Education Course* in 1996, which is explained in Appendix 1, below.

It is useful to expand on how the lodge educates its members in general, and candidates in particular. As already mentioned, lodge members firmly believe that the only way a candidate will sit in a Masonic Temple in the medium to long term is because he knows exactly why he is sitting there. Clearly, Masonic education is vital.

While some may consider the lodge' proficiency requirements to be stringent, they are less so than in many other parts of the world, such as America and Europe. The lodge is absolutely determined to ensure candidates thoroughly understand the teachings of their current degree before proceeding to the next – otherwise, there is no point in them advancing. Our *Masonic Education Course* is a furtherance of this belief. As assistance, the lodge has formed its own Masonic library from which books are loaned out to initiates and any other member wishing to borrow.

The lodge also considers that promotion needs to be earned and that if it is, it will be more highly valued. While not compulsory as such, candidates are strongly encouraged to be very regular attendees at both meetings and rehearsals and a lack of attendance will effect promotion. At every rehearsal, the lodge Education Committee meets informally with candidates to assist them with their proficiency requirements and to answer any questions. At Installations, and at 2nd and 3rd Degree workings, Education Committee members retire as appropriate with Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts to conduct *Masonic Education Seminars*. In summary, the lodge believes that candidates must gain the requisite Masonic knowledge to understand our teachings and be able to advance. The lodge also believes that, within reason, if something must be worked for, and waited for, the more it will be appreciated.

6. The Mentor System shall be supported. An experienced Past Master will be appointed as Lodge Mentor Officer.

The Lodge believes the Mentor System to be one of the utmost importance. All candidates are given a Lodge Mentor, most of which are Master Masons. This further involves members in the operation of the lodge and, in our experience, “trains the trainers” almost as much as the trainees.

7. In view of the lodge's commitment to benevolence, a Charity Collection shall occur at each 2nd Rising, or if a 1st Degree ceremony, during the North East Charge. No raffle shall be held in connection with any lodge dinner. The lodge shall regularly donate appropriately from its Benevolent Fund to such charitable organizations as it may select.

This Guideline is largely self-explanatory. In Victorian terms, a charity collection during the North East Charge is unusual, but it does occur in other States. Nonetheless, it is very effective in reinforcing the lessons learnt in that portion of the ceremony. The lodge regularly receives over \$100 per charity collection, and this is applied to both Masonic and non-Masonic charities.

8. Unless it is the official representative of the Grand Master, it shall not be the practice of the lodge to formally receive visitors after the lodge has been opened. All visitors will be asked to attend the opening. Any late-coming members or visitors (properly vouched for) may enter the lodge at an appropriate juncture under the direction of the Tyler, salute in the west, and be seated in the lodge. All visitors must be properly vouched for prior to tylng.

The lodge has done away with the (lengthy!) reception of visitors common in other Victorian lodges and this saves a huge amount of time. All visitors are asked to be present at the opening. Late-arriving visitors are admitted after the opening at an appropriate juncture, shortly before the alarm. The Inner Guard then reads out their vouching cards (passed inside to him by the Tyler), and visitors are vouched prior to their admittance. An unknown brother will have been examined and vouched for by the Tyler. When “late coming” visitors are admitted, they salute the Master and are seated. The Master does not receive any visitor individually except that, should the Grand Master or his official representative be attending, he will receive him formally. Prior to the alarm, however, the Master welcomes all visitors, *en masse*.

These procedures ensure that at all meetings the degree ceremony to be worked is commenced no latter than 6.20 pm, and on occasions a start has occurred as early as 6.15pm. This permits the meeting to conclude by about 7.30 pm and allows members to be sitting down at dinner, after pre-dinner drinks, by about 8.00 pm.

9. The lodge shall hold one rehearsal before every meeting, on suitable day in the week prior, and on a suitable day in non-meeting months, unless the Master shall otherwise resolve. The Master may also call additional lodge rehearsals, as he deems necessary.

10. It shall be the policy of the lodge that the Master shall install his successor, unless the Committee of Management resolves otherwise. No Worshipful Brother can act as Installing Master unless he be a member of the Lodge, unless the Committee of Management shall otherwise resolve in exceptional circumstances.

This is an old Masonic tradition, followed in England and in other Australian States such as New South Wales – but rarely in Victoria. The lodge believes that if a Master is competent to hold the position, he must be competent enough to install his successor.

11. The lodge will only "farm out" excess degree work to lodges known to us to work quality ceremonial and hold quality repasts. If the Master does decide to provide a candidate(s) to another Lodge, such should, where possible, be on the basis of this lodge visiting officially with our team of officers performing the ceremony.

Nothing in the provisions of this guideline shall, however, prevent the Master of the Lodge, or any member of Lodge the Master deems to be competent so to do, from occupying the chair of another lodge in order to promote one of our candidates, with or without the assistance of officers of this lodge.

This is largely self-explanatory. The lodge is not interested in low standards being inflicted upon our candidates. Only where it is ensured that such is not the case will an Epicurean candidate be allowed to receive a degree in another lodge.

12. The minutes of the previous regular meeting, together with a copy of the Summary of Grand Lodge Correspondence, will be circulated with the Lodge Summons to every member. This should enable administrative matters to be dealt with expeditiously in open lodge, and the nights main work commenced soon after opening.

After the lodge is opened, business is expedited very speedily. The minutes and Summary of Grand Lodge Correspondence are pre-circulated to members, allowing them to be taken as read. The actual Grand Lodge Correspondence is tabled for members who so desire to read it later. The lodge holds the view that the seemingly interminable reading of minutes, correspondence, and admission of visitors in other lodges is boring, unnecessary, and at best a waste of time, and thus detrimental to freemasonry. As far as Epicurean is concerned the only thing important in a lodge meeting is the degree ceremonial – conversely what happens either side of the ceremonial is considerably less important and should be effected in the least possible time.

13. Dues of the lodge are as follows (2001-2002 figures):

Ordinary Member(who is NOT a member of another lodge):

Grand Lodge Fee (\$50), Lodge Administration Fee (\$90), Dining Fee (\$360) = \$500.

Ordinary Member(who IS a member of another lodge):

<i>Lodge</i>	<i>Administration</i>	<i>Fee</i>	<i>(\\$90),</i>	<i>Dining</i>	<i>Fee</i>
<i>(\\$360)</i>			<i>= \\$450.</i>		

Special Member(who is NOT a member of another lodge):

<i>Grand</i>	<i>Lodge</i>	<i>Fee</i>	<i>(\\$50),</i>	<i>Lodge</i>	<i>Administration</i>	<i>Fee</i>
			<i>= \\$ 140.</i>			

Special Member(who IS a member of another lodge):

<i>Lodge</i>		<i>Administration</i>		<i>Fee</i>
<i>only</i>				<i>= \\$ 90.</i>

<i>Joining</i>	<i>Member's</i>	<i>fee</i>	<i>&</i>	<i>Initiation</i>
<i>Fee:</i>				<i>= \\$200.</i>

Ordinary members pay the dining fees (6 meetings x \$60 = \$360) in their Annual Dues. Special members shall pay their dining fee on each occasion they attend.

Dining/Dues Cards:

Upon the payment of dues, an ordinary member shall receive a Dues Card, with boxes to check off the six annual dinners. Special members will receive a similar dues card, but without check boxes. If a meeting is missed, the extra cheek box (es) may be used for an invited guest of the member. All meals must be redeemed in the year of issue.

Special Members:

A Special Member is defined as one who resides more than 60kms from the Geelong Masonic Centre, or who has been granted this status by the Lodge Committee of Management.

An ordinary member may, upon application in writing to the Committee of Management become a Special (non-dining) Member, if in the view of the Committee his circumstances warrant it. Upon such status being granted, the

Special (non-dining) Member shall pay Special Member dues, and the dining fee on any occasion he attends a lodge dinner. The Committee of Management shall annually review the list of Special (non-dining) Members and may, at its discretion, require any Special (non-dining) Member to again become an ordinary member, should it consider changed circumstances warrant it.

Payment of Dues:

Any ordinary member may, by individual arrangement with the Secretary and Treasurer in writing, pay their annual dues to the lodge in two or three regular instalments. The member must make such an arrangement prior to end of each previous calendar year, for each ensuing year. Such a member shall, upon payment of the first agreed instalment under this arrangement, be entitled to receive his dining/dues card. This arrangement shall not be available to Special Members.

As will be seen, the annual fee for each member is \$490 – slightly more than one dollar per day, and is in the range of the average weekly wage. The dining component of \$360 is costed at \$60 per dinner over the six “all inclusive” dinners per year ($\$60 \times 6 = \360).

When a member pays his annual fee he receives a dues cards with six “check boxes” redeemable at lodge dinners. Duty Stewards, appointed for each meeting, circulated at the restaurant after each meeting, and clip member’s cards appropriately, or collects \$60 from others. If a member misses a meeting/dinner(s) for any reason, he can use his extra check boxes at subsequent dinners for a guest(s). However, all six dinners must be redeemed in the year of issue. In other words, while the dining component of the annual fee is paid “up front” the member redeems it over the year. Thus, the effective dues of the lodge are only \$130 per year. A second category of membership is that of Special Member. This applies to members residing more than 60 kilometres from the Geelong Post Office (i.e.: members living in Melbourne). These members only pay their Annual Dues without the dining component. Instead, they pay \$60 for their meal on each occasion they attend.

The beauty of having the dining costs included in the Lodge Dues is that this tends to ensure a very high percentage attendance of members, usually over 90%. There is “method in our madness!”

14. Members, and visitors so desirous, will dine together after each Lodge meeting, at a local restaurant. The lodge shall not, on any occasion, hold a Masonic Festive Board.

The lodge purposefully determined to meet on a Tuesday night – a night when most restaurants are all but empty. This invariably enables top quality cuisine and wines to be obtained at a satisfactory price per head. As well, we are able to request, and receive, the restaurant to ourselves. Upon its foundation, the lodge resolved to never hold a “Festive Board”. It is noted that such is unheard of in about 80% of the world’s Masonic lodges.

15. The Lodge shall have a Dining and Social Committee consisting of the Master, Secretary, Treasurer, and such other members as the Worshipful Master may appoint. Dining Committee shall be responsible for the selection of restaurants, and all matters related to lodge dinners, and organising social functions.

The lodge Dining and Social Committee meets regularly and its members are very active. The Master delegates one or more members of the Committee to “investigate” various restaurants. This is achieved by them dining anonymously, and later negotiating on behalf of the lodge. The Master with the consensus of involved committee members determines restaurants used. A restaurant that proves its worth can expect a repeat visit. The lodge usually does not dine at the same restaurant more than twice in one year, but this matter is kept flexible.

16. The Master-elect shall be solely responsible for restaurant selection on his Night of Installation, but may call on dining committee members to assist with arrangements.

17. Members are welcome to invite Masonic guests to a lodge dinner. The member shall be responsible for the dining fee of any guest. It will be in order for members, with the knowledge of the Master, to invite adult male non-members/potential candidates to dine with members at any dinner following a lodge meeting. Such a non-mason needs to be the specific guest of a member, with his dining fee paid by him. It will be the responsibility of the hosting member to ensure such a visitor is properly attired in either a dinner suit or dark lounge suit.

This has been found to prove both popular and useful. Members are strongly encouraged to invite male friends they propose to lodge dinners. Invariably, during the course of the dinner a senior member of lodge will find him seated next to such male friends, and have a discussion with him concerning Freemasonry. A substantial number of candidates have been attracted to the lodge in this manner. There are numerable advantages all around.

- a) The brother bringing his friend along to a dinner does not have to be an expert in Freemasonry – a senior lodge member will quietly chat with the friend at an appropriate juncture.
- b) The brother bringing his friend can also be confident that, even if his friend subsequent has insufficient interest to join the lodge, their friendship will be unaffected; but conversely, the friend will have experienced a quality and enjoyable evening.
- c) The friend, if he decides to apply to join, has already met the members of the lodge socially, and thus comfortably placed for further social gatherings, and particularly for his night of initiation, should such occur.

The lodge itself invites each candidate to one dinner, as a “guest of the lodge”, prior to his initiation night. Again, the beauty of this is that candidates get to know all the members of the lodge prior to joining. This has very obvious advantages.

18. Visitors, so desirous, may attend a lodge dinner, if space exists, upon paying the \$60 dining fee.

Visitors to the lodge are always welcome to attend lodge dinners. It needs to be noted that, officially, dinners are not part of the lodge. It is just “purely coincidental” that these dinners occur on the same night as lodge meetings. The point is that nobody (member or visitor), no matter how “exalted”, has a “right” to attend a lodge dinner, but all are welcome to do so – provided each pays the \$60 dining fee.

It is worthy of note that the ladies are invited to attend the dinner following the December meeting each year, when often musical entertainment is provided. At the Master’s discretion, ladies may also be invited to the dinner following the Installation meeting.

19. It shall not be the practice of the lodge to run accounts. No member shall be entitled to attend any lodge dinner if his dues are outstanding, and all special members and visitors need to pay for their meal prior to partaking of it.

20. The policy at lodge dinners is to strictly limit speeches. No toasts of any nature will be offered, except a toast to “The Queen”. Limited "taking wine" can be undertaken, at the Master’s discretion. These restrictions do not apply

to a guest speaker, who may have been invited to a dinner specifically to briefly address those present.

It is considered that most toasts proposed and responded to at Festive Boards were long and boring and not conducive to pleasant conversation and fellowship. Quite plainly, this is one reason Lodge Epicurean has no Festive Board. No speeches are given at any dinner. The Master might, briefly, “take wine” with selected members, but that is all. The only time the Master speaks at dinner is after the main course, when he requests those present to “circulate” to another table. This custom further assists the fellowship of those present.

Applying the “European Concept” Model

Certainly, given the will, any group of freemasons can set up a quality lodge on the “European Concept”. Clearly, it works. It reverses the great decline in quality apparent in most Australian lodges. It has attracted, and is readily holding, more than its share of worthy candidates and there is every reason to believe this situation will continue in the future. Given about twenty-five or so like-minded members, a new lodge on “European Concept” lines is quite simple to erect.

But what of existing Lodges? Can these be changed into “European Concept” lodges? Yes, of course! However, some worry may be experienced. All “converting” members need to be committed to the *cause*, or else the conversion may not be as successful as it should. Opposition from even a few members in the lodge could make matters arduous. See the case study of the Lodge of St. Thomas, below.

With the success of Lodge Epicurean in Geelong, one can “prove” a lodge on the “European Concept” can be formed in larger population centres. Certainly, one could easily envisage several in Australian capital cities. Aside from Lodge Amalthea, the daughter of Lodge Epicurean in Melbourne (and a clone of it), lodges basically on the Model have been subsequently erected in Sydney, New South Wales; the Sunshine Coast in Queensland; as well as several in the United States. A “European Concept” Lodge is due to be formed in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2002.

As will be appreciated, most lodges in Australia once had similar high standards to that of Lodge Epicurean, which has in reality travelled “Back to the Future”. Nonetheless, given that most remaining active freemasons in Australia have lowered their tolerance to current levels, many will probably not be prepared to adopt the dues structure inherent in the “European Concept”.

Be that as it may, even in a smaller country town, if enough lodge members have the will, standards can be lifted. Any lodge can pre-circulate its minutes and a summary of its correspondence. Any lodge can require all its visitors to enter prior to opening. What is to stop a lodge having a “low cost” meal at the local hotel after a meeting instead of a Festive Board? Later, perhaps, the standard of the food may improve still further. Later still, good wines might be served. A local restaurant might be tried. The ladies might be invited to dine, as might potential candidates. Our small country lodge might even institute a Promotions Committee. It might form an Education Committee, too. Perhaps, with the large number of candidates it is now getting, it might require a greater time between each degree. It might even require candidates to learn a few things in order to advance. Why couldn’t any lodge start off increasing its standards, even by a few small steps? Perhaps more parochial members might even come with you as you change. This then, is the *Prescription for Masonic Renewal*.

Change is the key word. Unless freemasonry in Australia is prepared to travel “Back to the Future”, then it may not have one.

The Internet web pages of European Concept Lodges can be found at:

<http://home.iprimus.com.au/danny55/masonic/index.html>

Our Masonic Education Course can be downloaded in whole or part from:

<http://home.iprimus.com.au/danny55/danny/Security.html>

FOOTNOTE

The first daughter lodge of Epicurean, Lodge Amalthea No 914, was formed at Sandringham in suburban Melbourne in April 1995, as a clone. It was an immediate success, and it has since received a substantial number of candidates and several Joining Members. Amalthea will initiate ten candidates in 1996, its first two working nights being a triple and quadruple 1st Degree, respectively. While this initial influx has since slowed (perhaps thankfully), Lodge Amalthea still initiates two to three candidates per year.

A question often asked is: “was there any problem that was not foreseen when Lodge Epicurean was formed?” The answer is that there was one. Lodge Epicurean and Lodge Amalthea both possess a large percentage of “younger” members – men in their thirties and forties, often with young families and emerging careers. While attending six meetings per year tends to suit them (as

opposed to eleven or twelve per year in other Victorian Lodges), giving more time than that to Masonic activity, given their work and family constraints, can be difficult.

The result of this, which was not initially foreseen, is that while both lodges are replete with Master Masons, few are yet prepared to take office and ascend in time to the Master's chair. While there are adequate numbers of brethren prepared to "go on", neither lodge has a big queue striving for office. The only other "problem" is that both lodges, to some extent, possess too many Master Masons and not enough Past Masters. It is "tragic" really. One would imagine more than some other lodges would be happy to have this "problem"!

APPENDIX ONE

Case Study – The Lodge of St. Thomas No 768, Williamstown, Victoria

Approximately five years ago, The Lodge of St. Thomas, in suburban Melbourne, was looking to hand in its warrant. It had only about twenty-five members, of which only about ten attended regularly. It was a "typical" Victoria lodge. It met eleven times per year, had a Festive Board of doubtful quality, and had not seen a new initiate for many years.

One member of the lodge approached me for advice, which I gave. He then returned to his active members and discussed the matter. As a result, they decided to change. As might be expected, a minority of members were sceptical. Instead of going the "whole hog", they resolved to "partly adopt" the "European Concept" model. They decided to meet ten times per year. However, six meetings alternatively were designated as dining meetings, whereupon the lodge opened at 6.15pm, and subsequently dined at a local restaurant. The other four meetings still retained a normal "Festive Board", and opened at the normal time of 7.30 pm. They also decided to adopt, in its entirety, our Masonic Education program, including the one-year minimum time lapse between degrees.

...and some interesting things happened. Firstly, they found that as they were now having only four Festive Boards per year, as opposed to eleven previously, they had much more money to invest into those four. As a result, they could substantially increase the quality of the repast at those four. They also found that, given the substantial lift in quality, in all areas, that the lodge quickly achieved, members became interested in proposing suitable candidates. The

lodge also became attractive to a number of joining members. Suddenly, the lodge was initiating three to four candidates per year.

Within the space of five years, the membership of the lodge has expanded dramatically, and now it averages about twenty-five members attending each meeting. The lodge also has an extensive social program of quality functions, involving the ladies of members. The lodge is now looking at reducing its meeting nights to eight per annum, and in due time will probably become a full “European Concept” lodge.

In short, it can be done, and a lodge prepared to change does not necessarily have to go “all the way” immediately, or indeed, “all the way” at all. I again repeat a sentence from the last paragraph of my paper: *Why couldn’t any lodge start off increasing its standards, even by a few small steps?* There is no reason at all – all that is necessary is a decision to change.

APPENDIX TWO – MASONIC EDUCATION COURSE

After considerable time in planning, a Masonic Education Course for “European Concept” lodges was introduced in 1996. The course is structured in three Sections, with four parts to each section. Section One is required to be completed by Entered Apprentices prior to their promotion to the Second Degree, Section Two by Fellow Crafts prior to their Raising, and Section Three by new Master Masons prior to them receiving their Grand Lodge Certificate or being eligible for appointment to any lodge office other than Steward.

The course needs to be completed in addition verbal proficiency requirements, i.e.: learning the answers to twenty set questions and the obligation applicable to each degree. Each candidate’s mentor acts his as tutor, with overall supervision by the lodge’s Education Committee.

The aim of the course is not to make candidates “experts” in freemasonry, but rather to give them a broad knowledge of its principles, teachings, history and workings. The syllabus for the course, set at “High School” standard, involves candidate’s reading elected *extracts* from various applicable Masonic books, and answering a range of comprehension questions. The Course material is self-contained, with all *extracts* for study photocopied and attached to each applicable part. Thus, a candidate is not required to gain and consult any books, *per se*, although an extensive “non-compulsory” reading list is attached for those desirous of extending their knowledge further.

Candidates attend *Masonic Education Seminars*, held during 2nd and 3rd Degrees Workings and the Lodge Installation, whereupon “tutorials” are held consistent with the course. We also encourage “older” Master Masons and Past Masters to take the course. Initially, by having candidates’ *mentors* act as course tutors they will effectively be “taking the course” simultaneously, with obvious benefits.

A *Certificate of Masonic Education* is issued upon a candidate completing the Course, which is presented in Open Lodge.

NOTE: Any lodge can readily introduce this Course, whether it works as a “European Concept” lodge, or not. No copyright is claimed for the course, and Lodge Epicurean & Lodge Amalthea would be delighted to share it with any interested lodge. Copies of the entire course, plus all references, can be obtained from the author at \$50.00 per copy (post paid within Australia). Alternatively, the whole course (in sections), plus all references, can be downloaded from a private internet FTP site, the address of which is noted above. Any Mason wishing advice is welcome to email the author at: kenthen@optushome.com.au