

**SPEECH BY THE MW THE PRO GRAND MASTER
THE MOST HON. THE MARQUESS OF NORTHAMPTON, DL AT THE
EUROPEAN GRAND MASTER'S MEETING ON 5TH & 6TH NOVEMBER 2007**



Regularity is an absolute. It cannot be partial or conditional. A Grand Lodge is either regular or it is not. In England's terms, to be regular a Grand Lodge must conform to each of our Basic Principles for Grand Lodge Recognition or it cannot be considered as regular.

Those Basic Principles, agreed with the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland, were codified and published in 1929 but were not something new. They had been developed and refined over more than 150 years as Freemasonry spread around the world and Grand Lodges began to emerge outside these islands. We believe them to be fundamental and unchangeable, as they define what is for us the essence of regular Freemasonry. The Principles were further confirmed by the three Home Grand Lodges in 1938 in the statement they each issued entitled "Aims and Relationships of the Craft". We firmly believe that if any of these Basic Principles were removed or varied, that removal or variation would materially alter the nature of Freemasonry.

There have been suggestions that the Basic Principles should be capable of redefinition from generation to generation, although those making those suggestions seem reluctant to reveal which of the Basic Principles they wish to redefine. I would suspect that one area they would like to redefine is the prohibition of the discussion of religion and politics at Masonic meetings, and the bar on Grand Lodges or individual Freemasons making public comment on matters of religious, political or state policy when acting in their Masonic capacities.

In that context, I was rather surprised that some of you had been discussing the role of Freemasonry in a changing Europe and how Freemasonry can influence, for the common good, the social and moral development of the new Europe. The Home Grand Lodges – England, Ireland and Scotland – would respond that Freemasonry has no role outside Freemasonry and that the only influence it should be seeking is over itself and its members.

We firmly believe that it is not Freemasonry but the individual who can have a positive influence on society. We see Freemasonry as an intensely personal journey of self-discovery, knowledge and personal development. We hope that the individual, during his journey, will absorb the principles and tenets of Freemasonry, so that they become a part of his nature. In that way he will make a contribution for the good of society. If the individual, imbued with the principles of Freemasonry, does not work for the good of society we should then question whether Freemasonry has fulfilled its purpose.

Regular Freemasonry is not, and should never be allowed to develop into being, a lobby group – no matter how universal and noble the cause. One of the great strengths of regular Freemasonry has been that it stands apart from politics and sectarianism, in the memorable words of Dr James Anderson forming “the centre of union between good men and true, and the happy means of conciliating friendship amongst those who must otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance.” Those who formed and developed Freemasonry knew from first hand experience how divisive politics and religion could be. By banning discussion of those topics at Masonic meetings and not allowing their Grand Masters or others, in their Masonic capacities, to make public pronouncements on those topics they were seeking to unite men of good will to enable them to set aside their differences and work together for the common good. That is surely a landmark of Freemasonry, and if we tamper with it we will materially alter the nature of Freemasonry.

I understand that at the Forum in Prague at the end of April there was a suggestion that there should be an addition to the Basic Principles for Grand Lodge Recognition – that of territorial exclusivity, in other words that there should only be one Grand Lodge per territory or country. That suggestion carried the implication that a Grand Lodge was not sovereign unless it had sole control of the Craft in its territory or country. We do not see sovereignty in terms of territory; to us sovereignty is a Grand Lodge having sole authority over its

constituent Lodges and members, wherever they might be situated, and not sharing that authority with any other power such as a Supreme Council.

For historical and practical reasons, the Home Grand Lodges and others could not regard exclusive territorial jurisdiction as a basic principle for recognition. For more than 250 years the Home Grand Lodges have shared territory all round the world and continue to do so today. Indeed, in some areas we share territory with a local Grand Lodge formed since the Home Grand Lodges introduced Freemasonry into their territory. In the United States – where exclusive territorial jurisdiction was a principle for regularity – they have had to vary their views, as in many States the State Grand Lodge now shares its territory with a Prince Hall Grand Lodge, as the Home Grand Lodges do in the Bahamas, Caribbean and West Indies.

The common factor in all these examples of shared territory is that the sharing is by mutual consent, and that is surely the key. If two or more Grand Lodges wish to share territory, why should we impose an arbitrary impediment on them doing so?

A Grand Lodge invading the territory of another Grand Lodge is a completely different matter. Such an action would be intolerable, contrary to all the principles of international Masonic relations, and lay the invading Grand Lodge open to charges of irregularity and the inevitability of having its recognition withdrawn.

Recognition is a bi-lateral act between two sovereign powers. It is not, however, a “right of regularity”, but a privilege. England has been criticised in recent years for not immediately recognising new or re-emerging Grand Lodges, even when they have been regularly formed or revived by Grand Lodges with whom we have long been in amity. The reason for this is a simple one. As the oldest Grand Lodge, without seeking to, we have had thrust upon us the mantle of being the guardians of regularity. That is a heavy responsibility which we take seriously. Additionally, I understand that recognition by the United Grand Lodge of England carries with it a cachet that speeds recognition by other Grand Lodges. Because of these factors, we have to make certain that what we recognise is not only regular but it is firmly rooted within a stable country, free from political interference, will maintain its regularity and has a good prospect of surviving and expanding. In short, we cannot get it wrong!

On at least three occasions we were pressured to recognise Grand Lodges, but we stuck to our usual policy, and were proved right. In two cases within a short time the Grand Lodges were riven with dissension leading to breakaway Grand Lodges being formed, and in the third case even the “mother” rejected its child and withdrew the Charter it had given it.

The last point I wish to make concerns England’s place in world Freemasonry. In his speech to the World Conference in Paris last year, the Grand Master of Austria stated his belief that the United Grand Lodge of England had abdicated its responsibilities in European Freemasonry and that next to nothing was felt of its authority. I would not only disagree but would question what responsibilities we have in Europe, or any other part of the world. We are always available for advice, information and sharing our long experience but we cannot, nor would we seek to, interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign Grand Lodge. We can offer a lead, provide comfort and support in times of trouble, and give practical assistance to new Grand Lodges, but England cannot be a sort of international Masonic policeman arbitrating disagreements within and between sovereign Grand Lodges. We can and will make our position clear on the subjects of regularity and recognition but it is then up to you to decide what your views are. We cannot, and would not seek to, impose our views on others and we do not believe that any other body should do so either. However, we do reserve our right to decide who we regard as being regular and capable of recognition.

Brethren, we have a wonderful diversity of Masonic practice in Europe. We are bound by the same basic principles, tenets and landmarks but have each developed in our own way. We should celebrate that diversity, so long as it remains within the bounds of regularity.