

Video Transcript

Message from the Grand Master: The Ethics Centre

Wednesday 16 December 2020

Brethren

This is the moment that we start again.

You have just watched Dr Simon Longstaff of The Ethics Centre deliver a summary of its detailed review into Freemasons Victoria.

The commentary is groundbreaking. The recommendations are challenging. As Freemasons, it requires our moral courage to collectively step up, and to act dauntlessly in response.

At the Grand Installation in late June, as your Grand Master, I reported to you that I would commission a far-reaching independent review of Freemasons Victoria.

This is that review. The thorough investigations included extensive research into our governance, our behaviours – good and bad, and our efficiencies and inefficiencies in managing our \$250 million organisation. A number of people were interviewed at length, our procedures were rigorously investigated, and there has been a forensic examination of our practices.

You and I now have frank assessments before us of what we need to do. This review was essential as much of the organisation had become so toxic, so unwieldy, and so unmanageable.

New and old Freemasons alike felt that our group behaviour was often so at odds with our Lodge Room teachings.

The warnings are ominous: we either change straight away, or we perish. These are uncomfortable truths. But we must face them manfully.

The Ethics Centre is a not-for-profit organisation delivering innovative programs, designed to bring ethics to the centre of personal and professional lives. Freemasons Victoria has often proclaimed that it is our principles that make a difference.

This is the moment that we say we are more than just slogans. This is the moment when we say that we accept all the recommendations of external independent specialists.

The findings reveal that Freemasons Victoria is an organisation that is ill-equipped to manage itself well as a business. We are not meeting the requirements of a modern 21st Century institution. Our Board structure scores a very low mark of 1, or 2 out of 10. The considered assessment is that our business structure is wholly insufficient for 2020 and beyond.

A little later I will speak about matters concerning the Board, and the future management of our fraternity.

What matters first is how Freemasons Victoria conducts itself as an important fraternity, for which many of us have a great passion.

We have been over-burdened with personal piques and quarrels.

This is the moment that we say 'Enough'.

This is the moment that we all take a collective deep breath, and re-commit ourselves to our fundamental values of 'Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth'.

From tonight, we will start the process of 'Coming Together'.

Let us return to being a true brotherhood. Let us be known for our integrity. Let us enjoy our friendships. Let us practise and enjoy respect. Let us be a shining example to the community with our charity.

And let us face facts. Our membership has dwindled to 7800. Unless we start immediately to change ourselves and our organisation, we need to admit that we will undoubtedly fail, despite our best intentions.

However, we do have a choice. Let us make the deliberate choice to repair our valued fraternity. Let us be positive. If we demonstrate these qualities, good men will find us, and join us. And they will stay with us.

The Ethics Centre emphasises that to prosper, we must unburden ourselves of looking in the rear-vision mirror. Our focus must be on what they call 'Rapprochement'.

A short-handed definition of 'Rapprochement' means a resumption of harmonious relations. It means a restoration of that harmony. Reconciliation. Increased understanding. Renewed purpose.

Rapprochement is associated with forgiveness. Many of us pray daily for forgiveness for ourselves, as well as those who trespass against us. Tonight is the moment that we re-ignite our positivity. This is the moment that we actually walk the talk.

The bullying stops now. The unpleasantness ceases. The hatchets are eliminated. Let us re-commit to being happy, and communicating that happiness to others.

In the weeks ahead, I will share with you details of 'Coming Together' events across Victoria, as we resume from the summer break. There is much healing to do.

As Lodges start to re-open, from as early as January, we will ask Lodges and Freemasons to begin their own journeys of Rapprochement and forgiveness. Part of the process is about restoring the good mental and emotional health of our Lodges and our members.

Throughout 2021, we will have an extensive program of ‘Coming Together’, where our members own the process. Our fraternity’s repair is not about speeches from the Grand Master, it is about self-respect of every Mason across the state, and a renewing of our Masonic vows. We are going back to basics. It will be exciting but humbling.

It is important that every one of our members can take ownership in the next chapters of the Freemasons Victoria story. These are chapters of great hope. We start later tonight by publishing a full copy of The Ethics Centre report at the Freemasons Victoria website. Nothing is hidden. There is full transparency.

This report calls for bold change. It asks us to take pause. It challenges us to recalibrate. It requires us to man-up and commit to the changes that are necessary for our future well-being.

The Ethics Centre assessment is that our Board process has reached the stage of being totally dysfunctional. The report urges us to expand the scope of matters such as the management of our extensive property portfolios, recruiting the best talents of the commercial, possibly-non-Freemason world to help us, in the same way that we have had J.B. Were assisting us for many years with management of our financial investments.

The Ethics Centre report is candid about our Board structure. It is deemed to be unworkable. The 2020s demand that we make urgent change for the better. However, it is also important that you, the members, have complete control over the change process, every step of the way.

The Report calls for a restructure that includes a an independent management hub governed by an independent Board that looks after our business side. A separate structure is proposed for our Masonic activities to be under the supervision of the Grand Master of the day.

Brethren, on Monday morning this week, advance copies of The Ethics Centre report were circulated to Board members.

Last night, Tuesday, the Board met, to consider the profound recommendations of the Report. It was recommended that the Board dis-establish itself. This is not a criticism of individual Board members. It is an adult recognition that our organisation has a structure that is no longer workable.

I am proud to say that the Board members put their own positions to one side. Our President, RWor. Bro. Myles King, set the example by laying down his chains and he resigned from that post. He called on his colleagues to do the same.

Brethren, it is testament to the selfless nature of our Board members that they voted to dis-establish the Board of General Purposes, effective immediately.

This means that an interim Masonic Governing Council will guide us on a caretaker basis, only until the matters can be voted upon by our members on the floor of Grand Lodge.

This Governing Council will ensure shared decision-making, as caretakers, without major initiatives taking place. The Governing Council will include Senior Grand Officers, and our primary leaders such as the Grand Treasurer and Grand Registrar. Our organisation will continue to operate normally. It will be business as normal. Our staff can be assured that their positions are unaffected by these changes.

As our Interim CEO Jeremy Cattell's six-month consultancy comes to an end this month, our Commercial Manager Frank Warner becomes our Acting Chief Executive Officer. This will result in substantial financial savings to the organisation. It will place our day-to-day management of essential operations into trusted hands, during this interim period.

On your behalf, I plan to call a Special Meeting of Grand Lodge early in 2021, so that we can formally start the procedures of change required by our Constitution. Our members will decide the outcome, not me, not the outgoing Board, not the temporary Governing Council. The decision making process will include electronic voting available to all members across the state, as introduced by the Immediate Past Grand Master, Most Worshipful Brother Keith Murray.

Full details of the processes and the motions of the proposed changes will be communicated to all members. There will be a detailed 'roadmap'. This is a totally transparent process.

At the Quarterly Communication proposed for the New Year, our members across Victoria will be asked to consider giving their mandate for these changes.

Brethren, in adopting all the recommendations of this seminal report, I hope that tonight we have all started a vital journey that will see us soon enjoy a much-improved organisation with a modern-day constitution, a contemporary and responsible business unit, with our core values protected.

Brethren, this involves implementing proven and successful methods to help us bring shine again to the jewel that is Freemasons Victoria.

In just over one week's time, many of our families and friends will come together to celebrate the festive season.

Humility, forgiveness, and gratitude are the traits that define the Christmas Spirit.

At this time of year, members of many faiths demonstrate cheerfulness and charity.

As Kathleen, my family and I come together to extend every best wish to you and yours, let us enter 2021 together with the clear mission to restore Freemasonry in Victoria to its great and proper place.

Brethren, will you please join me in this crucial and all-important work?

This concludes the first section of our Business Meeting.

The remainder of the Business Meeting will be streamed at 7.30pm on Thursday.