Confessions of an ex-secretary*

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Most of you have doubtless seen the publicity for such sordid paperbacks and lurid films as The Confessions of a Window-Cleaner. If I were to let all my cats out of the bag, I could probably offer you entertainment no less sensational, though very different in tone and content. Quite a number of you know, from your own personal experience, that some weird and wonderful things happen in this Society from time to time. When Oula Jones, our highly enterprising Programme Organizer, suggested that I should have the honour of being the speaker at our 23rd AGM, I thought, ‘My word! What a splendid idea! Riotous revelations of some of the comical things that go on behind the scenes!’

That was several months ago. I was still revelling in my new-found freedom as a back-bencher. So long as I avoided giving personal offence to anyone, I could say anything I liked. I could tell the amazing story of the meeting which took roughly an hour and a half to approve the minutes of the previous meeting; I could air my personal prejudices about matters of Society policy and administration. With what enthusiasm I started jotting down notes!

Suddenly, in the midst of this rather self-indulgent fun and mounting excitement, I discovered that I should be attending the AGM, not just as plain John Gordon (retired), but as the Society’s new Chairman. Not a free agent, with lots of jokey recollections and all his prejudices showing, but the soul of discretion, the embodiment of impartiality, a monument of respectability and responsibility. Well, well! Can this be me? Or must I say—Can this be I?

Please be warned that the first of my confessions is highly relevant to this unexpected change of circumstances. It dates back many years—long, long before I became Secretary of the Society—to the Second World War. After a long cold winter, spent training as officer cadets, came the day when all of us received our final and decisive reports. Mine consisted of seven unforgettable words. Here they are: ‘Opinionated, but will make a good officer.’ Opinionated? Me? Clearly this must have been written by someone who didn’t know me from Montgomery. However, as I galloped from 2nd Lieutenant to Major in a year and six days, I concluded that the last six words showed pretty shrewd judgement; and the subsequent 20, 30, nearly 40 years have made it clear that the first word was no less shrewdly chosen than the other six. Perhaps it was the shrewdest word of all. So watch out, my dear colleagues. Your new Chairman is not cut out by nature and temperament for sitting on fences.

In the last few months I’ve been reviewing what I’ve learned, during nearly five years as Secretary, that could be of value to the Society. Deeply concerned though I am about indexing itself, remember that my primary concern has necessarily been not indexing but the Society; and that means policy and administration.

One of the most difficult enterprises that people ever undertake—apart, of course, from marriage—is the running of a professional organization by amateurs. I know that lots of amateur organizations are successfully run by amateurs, but that is quite a different matter. We are professional indexers, and this is our professional organization.

The voluntary principle

As an authority on Management wrote, back in the mid-60s, ‘No organization can make much progress without staff.’ If the author of these words has changed his mind about this, he can tell us so now, since I’m quoting from one of the works of none other than K. G. B. Bakewell. This Society has never had any staff at all, in the accepted sense of the term. It has been and is run entirely by volunteers. May blessings shower on the noble army of members who have devoted thousands of hours of their own time to keeping the Society’s wheels turning throughout the last 23 years. The number of volunteers has increased enormously in the last few years; yet the sad truth is that there are

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always gaps in the team, always delays in getting some things done at a business-like pace, always matters which should be dealt with but are not. As a professional Society we ought really to have at least a nucleus of full-time staff. Until that becomes possible, we can only pursue our current policy of sharing out the work-load as widely as possible; but this calls for an almost continuous inflow of new volunteers. The Secretary knows enough about virtually all our members to realize that a very high proportion of them are already heavily loaded with varied responsibilities. Very broadly speaking, we have almost reached the point where the only way in which more members can make time to do Society work is by sacrificing some of the time they are able to set aside for their own indexing work. Even if willing to do this, they often cannot afford to do so. This in turn raises the problem of the Society's finding money to compensate, at least partially, for lost earnings. And so to the further problem of increasing Society income relative to expenditure, at a time when inflation is pushing us in the opposite direction.

Please don't misunderstand me. We have the most fantastic band of devoted workers. Even so, we are never without staffing problems.

The voluntary principle combines with some of the more undisciplined aspects of democracy to complicate the difficulties, not only of staffing but also of management in general. When your staff are all volunteers, what do you do when you find yourself landed with an unsuitable volunteer? We can thank our lucky stars that this so rarely happens in our own Society, but what means are there of dealing with the incompatibility of square pegs and round holes? Let me leave that question with you, and try to open out into the wider field of management in general.

Not structure but miracle

Each professional organization exists for some stated purpose or purposes. Its management has a twofold function: to make decisions about how to achieve the purpose—that's policy; and to put those decisions efficiently into effect—that's administration. Experience has made it obvious that in order to manage, there must be structure. Without structure an organization cannot even survive, much less operate successfully. Think of a bank, a school, a public library service, a trade union, a manufacturing firm, a hotel, an Everest expedition; you can at once see the management structure in your mind's eye, in the form of a diagram. It's always a network of functions and responsibilities, always in the shape of a pyramid. What it boils down to is a chain of command. No matter how democratic, how consultative, how friendly, what makes the structure tick is authority, the two-way discipline of command and obedience.

One of the most interesting things I learned as Secretary is that our Society does not have a management structure. We have no boss, no chain of command. No one, not even Council, can instruct anyone to do anything. I'm not suggesting that this is either good or bad, or that we should or should not make changes. What I am saying is that we are an extremely democratic and entirely voluntary co-operative, not an organization in the generally accepted sense of the term. And in a co-operative, the functions of management are much more difficult to carry out than in an organization. Both policy-making and administration are made slower, more laborious, more expensive, and much more demanding on the time and patience and goodwill of the many members who participate in these processes. To me, it's something of a miracle that it not only works, but that much of the time it works so well.

What everyone in the Society needs to bear in mind is that the miracle works only because between two-score and three-score dedicated members are making it work. From central Scotland to the south coast, from the fringes of the North Sea almost to Land's End, and in quite a number of overseas countries, there are members beavering away, some of them on a regular basis, some for short or relatively long periods to cope with special tasks as the need arises, but all of them keeping the Society operative and on the move. As Secretary, I learned how numerous they are, and how much more numerous they would be if everyone who is willing to undertake Society work could be free to do so. It's true, too, that almost every newsletter includes requests for volunteers for one task or another. But I hope no one thinks this is evidence of unwillingness to serve the Society; on the contrary, it is partly a normal and natural process of replacement, but principally it is evidence of the expanding activities of the Society and of our policy of spreading the load, of drawing a widening circle of members into active participation in the management of the Society. It is one of the ways in which we prove ourselves to be fellow-workers in a dynamic and democratic co-operative, and not mere units in a hierarchic organization.

This talk was given the title 'Confessions of an Ex-Secretary' more in fun than in earnest. But 'confession' doesn't only mean letting cats out of the bag; it also means a statement of belief. There are a great many things that I learned during my years as Secretary; but what I value above everything else is that I learned to share something of the vision and faith which Norman Knight embodied in the Society which he created. With confidence and enthusiasm, may I echo his words: Floreat Societas Indexerorum!