

New President

Zander Wedderburn took over as BPS President at the AGM in Bournemouth. We chatted about oil tankers, mystery shoppers and frogs.

Your nomination literature seemed quite original. Do you think you bring something to the presidency which past Presidents haven't?

I hope so. I'm sure all Presidents hope to leave a mark. My election platform had four planks. Firstly, for the BPS 'to be even more useful in serving society, where our impact is still far too muted and suspected'. That's a constant battle of pushing out good publicity for the many great contributions of psychologists, from preventing reoffending to helping recruit a balanced police force for Northern Ireland. Secondly, for the Society to be 'even more customer-sensitive in serving its members, where the net effect of the Byzantine hierarchy of committees and hard-working volunteers often leaves BPS staff facing angry, frustrated and disillusioned members'. The other two, pushing continuous professional development and statutory regulation for psychologists, are already well under way.

Were you surprised to get the role?

Yes. There was a good 'official' candidate, and I was a relative outsider. I had been active in

the Occupational Section and Division, and it's a long time since we had an occupational President – Harry Kay in 1971, unless you count Ian Howarth in 1984. Curiously, both of these had been my tutors as an undergraduate at Oxford. I think my election platform perhaps rang a few bells too.

Is there any single 'big project' you plan to tackle?

Yes, the customer-sensitivity issue. It's not an easy one. Most of the 108 BPS staff are hard working, highly skilled and enormously competent in all kinds of ways. Just occasionally somebody slips, and a member groans. Sometimes it is systems and committees that slip, and at best they tend to grind slowly, even when they have tried to make things more user-friendly.

What would you like instead?

I'd like everybody who phoned the BPS – member or public or press – to think 'That was wonderful'. Some places I phone are like that – most are not. I'd like the website to be like that too, and responses to letters. It's simple really.

How can the BPS get there?

Not so easy. It's sustained



excellence and perfection I want to see, and we are all humanly error-prone. My best guess would be to hire a professional training coach, after putting the job out to tender, to roam the office from top to bottom, helping to polish and oil. I know it is possible.

Is statutory regulation as a threat or an opportunity?

Both. It is high time that the public knew that somebody offering psychological services was a genuine properly qualified psychologist. Chartering was a small first step. On the downside, the BPS will have to be ten times as attractive to keep expanding and retaining its members if it loses some of this quality-control side. I think it can be.

Outgoing President Graham Davey has said that the Society 'manoeuvres as slowly and deliberately as a giant oil tanker'. Can you change that?

That's the challenge for a one-year President. Up to 1943 it was a three-year post. It can move faster, I know, but it needs mass support and pressure for a fast change. Giant oil tankers do get wrecked sometimes too, and

we are certainly not immune from that risk.

What do you mean by mass support and pressure?

If everybody who read this could work out how they could personally contribute, and then did it, things would change. Even acting as a 'mystery shopper' and phoning the BPS to test their excellence is a contribution. Read the Annual Report, and you will see dozens of members active in the 30-plus subsystems. But we are short of nominations for Council, which only takes three Saturdays a year. Hmmm.

What do you do in your own spare time?

I'm a father of four, grandfather of 7.75. My children are friends, and their children think I am useful as a horsey or monster. I still play league squash weekly, village club curling monthly in winter, and holiday golf. I play fiddle and guitar occasionally. I run a website for new authors, www.canyouwrite.com, and a small city garden with frogs in its pond. Every year I give up smoking my pipe. Life is very full. Somehow I plan to fit in being a full-time unpaid President.

Zander Wedderburn is a Professor Emeritus of Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, where he taught occupational psychology in the School of Management for 32 years before retiring in 2000. Before that he was a researcher for five years at the University College of South Wales and Mon. in Cardiff, and before that an assistant foreman making steel tubes in Corby. His main research interest is shiftwork, although his publications range from dichotic listening to cognitive dissonance in voters.