

Changing ethos

THE Honorary General Secretary's position is exceptionally powerful and there is a need to trim it.' This forthright statement comes not from one who opposes the present incumbent, nor even from one who never reached or never aspired to such exalted status within the Society. It is the considered opinion of the outgoing holder of the office, Tony Gale.

Tony Gale retired as Professor of Psychology at the University of Southampton in 1994 and is now Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Portsmouth. He has been involved in Society Boards and committees ever since he was on the organising committee for the Annual Conference in Exeter in 1970, a conference that was, incidentally, noted for its radical departure from some set ways. He has been a member of Council for over a quarter of a century, and was President 1989–90.

Many readers of this publication need no introduction to Tony. They may have read previous profiles of him (April 1989; June 1992), and will be used to his provocative ways. Nevertheless — or perhaps even more so because of this — I wanted him to tell us, after two years as Honorary General Secretary, what he now felt should be brought to our attention.

Tony had already been accorded honorary life membership of the Society, signifying our recognition of his significant contribution to the Society's work. Why then, in 1998, had he wanted to come back as Honorary General Secretary?

'It was a good time to stand for office. It was time for a change. Several exciting things were happening — the first ever strategic plan, radical ideas for changing the committee structure, for extending Society democracy, and the appointment of a Development Officer to see through a programme of change.

'Ingrid Lunt had chaired a Council task force which produced a 'Vision' statement for the Society. This became integrated with the strategic plan, to give the Society a sense of direction and a set of specified objectives. Ingrid was elected President and

JOHN SHEPPARD *interviews Tony Gale, who this month finishes as the Society's Honorary General Secretary, on his time in office and his view of recent changes in the Society's structure and functioning.*



Tony Gale and one of his flock

wanted me to work with her on bringing about change: she is a team person.

'There was an election, and that is a good thing. We still need people to stand for office. It's hard to persuade members to stand.'

Reorganisation

The Honorary General Secretary is titular head of the Society's office, a role, it has to be said, that different 'Hon Gen Secs' have interpreted in rather differing ways. Tony is not one to stand shyly back. 'That was part of the challenge. The office has nearly 100 staff. There was a need to change the management structure and to give the staff a voice in helping change direction. The Honorary General Secretary is answerable to Council on staffing matters.

'For the first time the President had a desk in the office, visited regularly and spent time with staff. Ingrid initiated a

series of forums, where all the staff could meet together, so she could explain Society plans for change and encourage people to express their concerns.'

How does Tony see these changes? 'The office was once like a corner shop or a small family business. It has now grown in size, has a salaries bill of £2 million plus, and needs a different style of organisational ethos. It is a complex organisation with many roles to play.

'If you read the inside cover of the Annual Report for last year you will see all the things the Society has to do; and that's virtually all done in the office.

'Chris Brotherton, Head of the Department of Applied Psychology at Heriot-Watt University, who was at that time Council representative on the Society's Finance and General Purposes Committee, studied processes in the office. He identified 17 major areas of work, suggesting we needed 17 directorates. In the end, these areas were condensed into five directorates — Publications and Communications, Finance, Operations, Science and Practice, and Membership and Qualifications.

'We have just appointed Barry Brooking as Chief Executive after a rigorous and demanding selection procedure [see p.172 this issue]. He will have a management team of five key people, each with a major area of concern to manage. There are already several key Boards and committees and they all work within one of the five directorates, each of which has or will have one or more elected directors sitting on the Board of Directors.'

What is the operational effect of these changes? 'Our Boards and committees are chaired by members. The Chairs of the key Boards are now called Directors. They work with managers in the office to

implement policy. Directors are seen to be analogous to directors in a company — they are responsible for particular functions and are accountable to Council.

‘The managers are responsible in the office, working with the Chief Executive to make sure Society policies work in practice. So a new equilibrium has been set up — more responsibility for honorary officers and committee Chairs, matched by more autonomy for managers and staff.’

We have seen reference to these changes in some recent ‘President’s columns’, but how will it work in practice? ‘Well John, until recently you were Chair of the Admissions Committee, the committee which sifts through thousands of applications each year. You had already given staff authority to process many of the straightforward ones.

‘David Legge, our current Head of Office and Development Officer, suggested this was one area where we could speed things up further by giving the staff more autonomy. So we have moved to a situation in which admissions staff can process the majority of applications, leaving the difficult cases to the specialists.

‘We no longer have to wait, perhaps months, for a committee to authorise every single decision. We trust the Chair, working with staff, to ensure that everything happens smoothly and quickly.’

Staff consultation

Just how are we ensuring that staff do have that voice they need? ‘We invited ACAS in to give us advice on setting up a sort of works committee. We now have a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with elected members of staff. It can discuss all matters affecting staff working conditions, but does not discuss individual cases or grievances.

‘Different members of JCC act as its Chair and its Secretary for each meeting. The committee has a direct route through me to the Board of Directors and to the Personnel Subcommittee, which I chair. It works very well.’

This Personnel Subcommittee, which deals with staffing policies, remuneration, staff development and training, and reviews staff grading and salaries each year, is itself a fairly new development. ‘Yes, it has only been in existence for a few years, but already there have been changes.

‘We now have a panel to consider the majority of annual applications for regrading or special payments, and it includes an elected member of staff as well as key management people and members, such as the Chair of SCPEO [Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities].

‘The Society is committed to Investors in People (IiP) [a programme of individual staff development]. Pat Frankish is taking the lead on this. The key idea is communication. Staff need to understand what their role is and to have a sense of ownership for Society policies.

‘Each member of staff needs a personal development plan and the employer provides necessary training to help develop all staff. The JCC is very keen on IiP, not only for staff, but also for the Board of Directors!’

Demanding and enjoyable

So the ‘titular head of office’ has had an awful lot to do? ‘Yes, that has worried me,’ admits Tony. ‘The Honorary General Secretary is in a powerful position to influence things, in my view too powerful. I am also currently Chair of the

Communications Board and a member of the Investigatory Committee.

'I was told, on the day I was elected, that I had a basic schedule of 80 meetings a year, apart from other important activities such as sitting on appointment panels or working on particular task forces. Members don't like it if you constantly give apologies and don't turn up to meetings.

'There is now a recommendation that the Honorary General Secretary does not sit on the Investigatory Committee. I am no longer a member of the three main Boards, or of the Fellowships Committee, the Admissions Committee, or the Graduate Qualifications Accreditation Committee. I am stepping down as Chair of the Communications Board; in future there will be a Chair of a combined Communications and Publications Board. So we have cut down the role of Honorary General Secretary considerably.'

This still does not sound like a job designed for a part-timer. 'I mentioned the equilibrium between the policy makers (the governance) and the managers and staff in the office (the executive). The Honorary General Secretary is a sort of fulcrum, usually in office for three years ensuring



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the balance is right. So it is quite demanding and you need to be free for two days a week on average. If you are effective then there are benefits. If not, big problems can arise.

'We can't get people to stand for office and rarely do we require elections. We need more equality of opportunity for members to help run the Society.'

'Currently the Council is a board of trustees, and trustees cannot be paid for their work or their employers be reimbursed for their time. So the recommendations for constitutional change, which have Council's overwhelming support and have just been voted on by the members at large, would separate out the Trustees and enable members to have more participation in governance, reimbursing people or their employers where necessary.'

Why, I asked, is Tony standing down after just two years? 'It was sensible at a time of major change to bring in an old lag, but I hate the English way, which is to keep a self-perpetuating oligarchy in office.'

'I want to see more members and younger members stand. Now many of the changes are in place, it is time for me to step aside so new blood and new ideas can be injected into the system. I also have to admit that getting up at 5am to take a four and a half hour train journey to Leicester is no joke.'

Nevertheless, it sounds as if Tony has relished his time as Honorary General Secretary? 'Yes. The Board of Directors for the last two years have all pulled together in a joint effort. It's good fun working with an effective team.'

'These have been two years of major change for the Society and for its staff. When I was President, 10 years ago, my role was mainly ambassadorial, being a figurehead, with little to show for a year in office. We have had two Presidents who have pushed along change, and I have enjoyed the ride.'

And next ...

But what of the future? Is Tony vanishing from Society activity altogether? Well, by his own account, almost. Apart from a couple of residual short-term commitments he intends to let young blood have its way.

Despite the way he is given to describing himself, 'a boring old fart', the University of Portsmouth is by no means his only interest outside the Society. When he left Southampton, colleagues financed his acquisition of a flock of chickens which, he is pleased to relate, lay all year round.

He is equally proud of his own offspring and while perhaps they will not be requiring so much attention as the chicks, one being a senior lecturer in Birmingham, the other vice-president of an American computing firm, he is eager to keep up regular contact, not least because of the 'amazing' grandchild.

He does try to avoid interfering in his wife's pottery business, but has taken to gymnastics and managed to shed two and a half stones.

So he does not foresee any problem filling the large hole which we in the Society shall find in his wake. Personally, though, I shall be surprised if his name disappears from our circles just yet.