Speech for Cooks dinner 13th November 2019

Master, Wardens, Liverymen, Fellow guests

It is a pleasure to be asked to respond on behalf of all your guests and to thank you for your welcome and generous hospitality.

I was sitting in the barber’s chair a short while ago and the usual conversation took place and he asked me how I spent my time in retirement. When I told him about my varied interests, including the livery, he asked me what a livery company is and what it does.

I have been asked this question on a number of occasions in the past and I have pondered on why, as a movement, we are relatively unknown and consequently so is what we do. My consideration of this has been brought into much sharper focus by the looming general election and the possibility of a change of Government. If that should come about, the City Civic and the livery movement could face a significant threat to its continuing existence. This was further reinforced in my mind when watching the Lord Mayor’s show last Saturday. How sad it would be if that colourful event disappeared from our annual events calendar.

Livery companies cover a variety of trades and professions many dating back to mediaeval times but some companies are products of the modern internet age. However, we are not known in the wider country and even within the City itself, among many of those employed in City based companies, there is only the vaguest idea of what a livery company is and does.

Change is inevitable and is necessary if society or any component of it is to progress, but as a movement we have grown comfortable and complacent. We have assumed that because we have existed in our present form for so many centuries, we will continue to do so into the future. This is not necessarily the case.

We all know the importance of the City to the national economy but I am not here to make a political or an economic speech. Instead I want to highlight the importance of the various livery companies and why we should be more pro-active in projecting ourselves.

The Pan-livery steering group conducted a survey of Livery company charitable giving in late 2018 and although this is by no means a comprehensive survey, it indicates that some £67m was donated as grants over the previous year, with about 66,000 hours of pro-bono time provided.

Financial giving covers a broad range of activities including education, housing and financial support for training and apprenticeships. Pro-bono support covers a wide range of activities such as mentoring and supporting students, careers advice and PR advice.

These are not insignificant figures but they are a clear understatement of what the livery movement provides. So, in this era of modern and instant communications why are we so poor at projecting ourselves?

To many people the City of London as a local government unit is seen as a small anachronistic institution, with peculiar ceremonies and traditions completely out of tune with modern life, and the livery companies, when we are considered at all are also regarded as an equally strange and anachronistic adjunct, but we all know that the City is a major contributor to the national economy and the Lord Mayor is an important part of the process of selling Britain diplomatically, financially and economically across the world as well as being the head of local government in the City.

Should the livery companies act solely in their own individual interests to publicise themselves or should collective action be taken? There is a saying that if we don’t hang together, we will surely hang separately and I believe this to be true in this context. I also believe that to do nothing is to go into reverse. We all know that a business which fails to invest will eventually decline or fail

We have a duty to our respective companies to provide a properly grounded base to ensure not only our survival but also our future growth and development. As a starting point, perhaps we should ask the PR Practitioners to devise a strategy to which we can all subscribe, which will raise our profile collectively as well as individually both within the City as well as in the wider reaches of the country.

I believe that the Pan livery initiative was a well-meaning attempt to start this process, but the concept was not thought through properly and little or no attempt was made to sell the reasoning behind the project. This idea should not be abandoned, because if we are not careful, we could find ourselves sleep walking into a situation for which we are ill prepared and which could threaten our future survival.

Master, wardens, ladies and gentlemen I do not wish to end on a downbeat note. This has been a very happy and enjoyable evening and a celebration worthy of the longstanding traditions of the Associated companies. The Worshipful Company of Cooks has given us a dinner, which lives up to its well-deserved reputation for culinary excellence and I am very pleased to invite all the guests present to rise and join with me in toasting the Worshipful Company of Cooks, root and branch may it flourish for ever.