

Going round in circles with knobs on

COLIN Newman is the Society; the Society is Colin Newman. This is how many, both within and outside the Society, see things. The Society's Executive Secretary for the best part of 20 years, his name is well known to members and to many non-members, and his face familiar to all those who have served on Boards or major committees, attended main conferences or general meetings of the Society. Yet this year we have to adjust to a new reality, for at the end of March we lose our good and faithful servant.

I track Colin down in his familiar lair at the Leicester office, where his assistant is trying to show him how to transfer an e-mail. 'About a year ago this arrived and at that stage I was into the dinosaur generation,' says Colin self-deprecatingly. However, he is becoming familiar with the machine and finds the spell-check a joy. 'It guesses what I want to say,' he marvels. 'I hope to have gained a new skill by the time I leave.'

For those of us who have enjoyed working with Colin, this seems an apt illustration of his character. He may project a rather old-fashioned image: brought up by missionary parents in colonial East Africa, coming to university in the mother country as his big adventure, and still preferring to cash a cheque rather than to use a hole in the wall (for an earlier profile, see Kitzing, 1989).

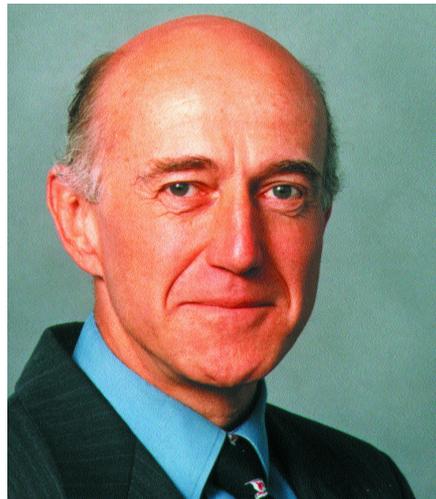
Scratch the surface, though, and find a different picture — of one always ready to listen to others, to consider new perspectives, even to modify his own well-tryed ways of working. With Colin at the helm, the Society has come a long way, and it has certainly not done so against his will.

'When I started in 1980 there were about 9000 members; now there are over 32,000. Divisions have increased from five to eight. Sections have doubled in number. Staff have increased from 19 to almost 100. My own area, Psychological Affairs, itself now has 19 staff rather than three.

'The academics have been so effective in producing applied psychologists that the professional side of the Society has grown enormously. Yet the scientific side of our

JOHN SHEPPARD *interviews Colin Newman, who is retiring after two decades as the Society's Executive Secretary.*

activities is more active than ever before. The diversity of cultures is almost unique to psychology, and we struggle with our image as a result. There is still, though, the basic starting point of a degree in psychology, a scientific attitude, roots in a scientific past, which bring us all together.'



There have been many notable achievements during these two decades. Colin picks out particularly the establishment of the *Register of Chartered Psychologists* (the Order in Council, he happily remarks, was made on his 45th birthday), and the recognition that we really must institute a system of continuing professional development (CPD).

'The need for statutory registration is still growing, though there is a tension within the Society as some groups still do not see it as vital.' He believes we are light years behind some professions in the matter of CPD. 'I think we got it right in putting the onus on the individual member, but it is worrying that a survey suggests one-third of our members are still not convinced of the need to stipulate 40 hours. Times are moving on and government regulation would be less congenial than self-regulation.'

These and other achievements

notwithstanding, Colin recognises that the Society has been very slow to adapt to its enormous growth. He glances back at that computer, now amusing itself. 'I've got this incredible screensaver. It goes round and round in circles with knobs on — just like the Society — starts to get somewhere then suddenly vanishes and starts again.

'The main philosophy of the change now to be implemented lies in what has happened to the Society. We have had committees which work in hierarchical arrangements to each other, ultimately under Council. They have striven for consensus. Chairs of committees have seen themselves as relatively neutral people trying to draw out committee opinion, to resolve policy issues, then promote them forward. We have this Byzantine structure of committees answerable to committees.' He opens an annual report at the page that graphically illustrates our confusing mass.

'It is very collegiate — everybody feels involved. Everyone wants to be consulted, even on matters remote from their own committee's responsibilities. This has constrained the Society's behaviour, made it very cautious. With all the extra committees, all the consultation between them, the Society has become very slow to act. There had to be changes in the organisation, to move towards a more managed system.'

In the new system, the office structure has been divided into five Directorates (see Figure 1). Each will have a directorate manager (a member of the office staff) and one or two Directors (members of the Society).

'Under the new system, staff managers will play a far more managerial role, working to individual Directors who, though they may be still chairing Boards, are actually part of a structure setting broad-brush policy issues. A lot more action can be taken with staff working in a more focused way to an individual, allowing things to be done more quickly.

Directors will be much more accountable and will have to show much more leadership.

‘It should become more efficient, more speedy, more easily reactive, but the cost could be the spirit of collegiality. The trick is going to be managing to keep the feeling of involvement, with the average member still having a say in the organisation, so that it doesn’t become a very small core of people holding all the power with everybody else just shouting from the sidelines. That will determine how successful it will be. The other important factor will be the quality of the managers who will operate the system.’

He pulls out the new management diagram and enthusiastically expounds on its virtues. He accepts that it had to be imposed on staff, that this could not be a co-operative exercise. He is acutely aware, though, that not all staff embrace this upheaval so eagerly as he.

‘Change brings uncertainty. There are implications for individuals’ career prospects. Hurt feelings need balm applied. Some ruffled feathers have still to be smoothed.’ He also accepts that there are risks, as well as opportunities, in a situation where only two out of five managers have prior experience with the Society.

He acknowledges with apparent equanimity that when this management chart was unveiled he himself plainly did not figure on it. ‘I said, I don’t mind being written out of the script.’

‘My actual job has changed over the years from being someone who worked with the committee structure. I thought of myself as the committees’ butler. I had to write the agenda, facilitate the work of the committee meeting, then come back to the office and work out how we were going to implement the decisions.’

‘As this committee work became too much for one person others were appointed, very capable and often younger colleagues. Those appointed were, in a sense, duplicating me. I never quite liked the term manager: it seemed to me I was more of a facilitator, rather like a university head of department, encouraging, painting the wider picture and broadening horizons, giving colleagues full scope to use and develop their own skills parallel to mine.’

‘More recently, others have been appointed with specialist skills I don’t possess. I became technically a manager, trying to get results through the action of others, and that is the way the Society is having to move forward. The manager is going to have to fight for resources for the particular team and be answerable to the particular Director.

‘The structure can and should work, but the proof of the pudding is going to be in the eating. It will take a while for all parts of the Society to catch up with the changes. There are growing pains in changing a system, and we shall have to see how effectively it does actually work.’

A financial settlement was reached. Nevertheless, some would resent being eased out in this way. That is not Colin’s stance. ‘I am glad I had my years with the Society when I did. I am pleased now to be able to step down and let others take over. Although it is slightly early, it is an appropriate moment for me to go. The skills that were necessary for running the Society of the past are not the skills needed for future senior staff.’

Colin delves in the drawer and brings out another piece of paper, his communication with staff when it became known that he was to step down as the post of Executive Secretary disappeared. ‘I welcome the new arrangements,’ it says. ‘I commend the new management structure as it will give many new opportunities for things to be done even better than now.... My early retirement is completely consistent with my own aspirations and personal ambitions.’

Many members know that Colin is a competitive dinghy sailor and that sunny summer Saturdays spent in committee rooms have not been an unblemished joy for him. He lives, he points out, equidistant from three coasts and handy for inland waters too. He would not be averse to helping out with the administration as well as taking part in the races now that he is to have more time.

He is proficient at DIY and will be considering ‘all the jobs that have been left’ over the years at home. He also looks forward to greater use of his demountable caravan, especially once his wife Barbara retires from her own work as an educational psychologist.

He is a keen church member. He values his family. His two sons are now living and working elsewhere in England, but he talks

of them with pride and affection and will clearly appreciate the chance to keep in closer contact.

It is apparent that there will be a full life for Colin beyond St Andrews House. Yet he will also be keen to offer his voluntary services to the Society of which he is a proud Fellow, ‘though equally I am happy to step down completely and let new people make a fresh start,’ he diffidently hastens to add.

Colin’s commitment to the Society is self-evident, his enthusiasm for necessary change undimmed by his awareness of the human element involved, and of the need to avoid casualties along the way. It seems inconceivable that we would let him go completely.

Reference

Kitzinger, C. (1989). Colin V. Newman, Executive Secretary: The Society’s ‘Sir Humphrey’. *The Psychologist* 2, 204–205.

FIGURE 1 The Directorate structure in the office

