

The BPS at 110: Legacy, trends and back to the future

by Gerry Mulhern

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May I begin by saying what a pleasure it is to have an opportunity to address conference as President? Seldom, if ever, do I have an opportunity to speak for half an hour on any topic I wish without fear of contradiction or interruption – at least I hope so. The downside, of course, has been the paralysis of possibility – and an inability to address all the issues I would have wished, and indeed to deal with those I have chosen in sufficient detail. In the end, I have chosen to reflect on the Society and, although some material may be inwardly focused, I hope that non-members, who are of course members elsewhere, will find resonance with their own organisations.

Since becoming actively involved in the work of the Society, I have been fascinated by how we have come to be as we are. Significant events in our history have undoubtedly shaped our present character, ethos and way of doing things and, as we celebrate our 110th anniversary, I propose to highlight some important milestones which have helped forge this great Society of ours – our legacy if you will. However, we must only look back as a means of helping ourselves to move forward, drawing inspiration from our legacy and using the insights to build for the future. So, I shall focus on several historical events and trends and use these to express some personal thoughts about the way ahead for the Society. These thoughts are akin to a collection of fridge magnets – all share the common theme of being stuck to the same fridge, but may have little else in common – and they can differ in size and prominence of location on the fridge door. As such, they do not constitute a considered agenda for change – at least not at this stage.

With a membership list standing at 49,021 at 31 December past, today we are the second largest learned society and professional body for psychologists in the world, and the second oldest. This year, The British Psychological Society celebrates its 110th anniversary.

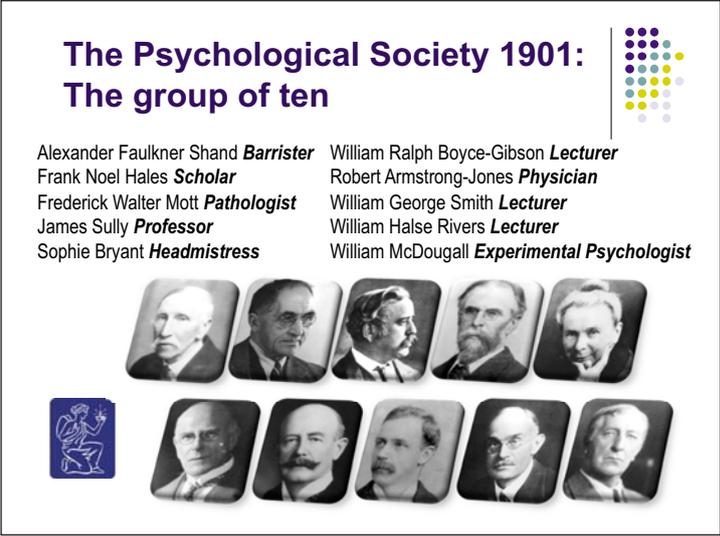
The pedants among us, may wish to point out that it was actually The Psychological Society that was founded in 1901 and renamed The British Psychological Society in 1906 in order to avoid confusion with a similarly named but less savoury, unacademic group. It occurs to me that, since the name The Psychological Society is no longer used by this long defunct eponymous group, is it a name that might suit us once again – particularly as we are committed to more effective global influence in the future. I am reminded of the inspired rebranding of the American Psychological Society to the Association for Psychological Science and its subsequent greater global influence, although I realise this may have been merely coincidental with the name change.

Indeed, to go a little further, and following the great spectacle of the recent marriage of William and Katherine, I wonder if there will ever be a better time to contemplate again the possibility of a Royal Psychological Society.

So, whether it is our 110th or strictly our 105th anniversary, the origin of our great society lies in a meeting of a group of 10 individuals at University College London with the declared aim of advancing scientific psychological research, and of furthering the cooperation of investigators in the various branches of psychology. Membership was restricted to those who were – I quote – “recognized teachers in some branch of psychology or who had published work of recognizable value”.

Anyway, these are the group of 10. The more eagle eyed among you will have noticed nine men and only one woman – not impressive, but undoubtedly one more woman than in many similar nascent organisations of the time.

**The Psychological Society 1901:
The group of ten**



Alexander Faulkner Shand Barrister	William Ralph Boyce-Gibson Lecturer
Frank Noel Hales Scholar	Robert Armstrong-Jones Physician
Frederick Walter Mott Pathologist	William George Smith Lecturer
James Sully Professor	William Halse Rivers Lecturer
Sophie Bryant Headmistress	William McDougall Experimental Psychologist

You may already have your personal favourite, but there are three whom I would highlight here. William McDougall, perhaps the best known and the father (as it were) of social psychology. Then William Halse Rivers – William Halse Rivers Rivers in fact – first co-editor of the *British Journal of Psychology*. Thirdly, I would like to dwell briefly on Sophie Bryant – a fascinating individual, and I can think of no better person to have led the

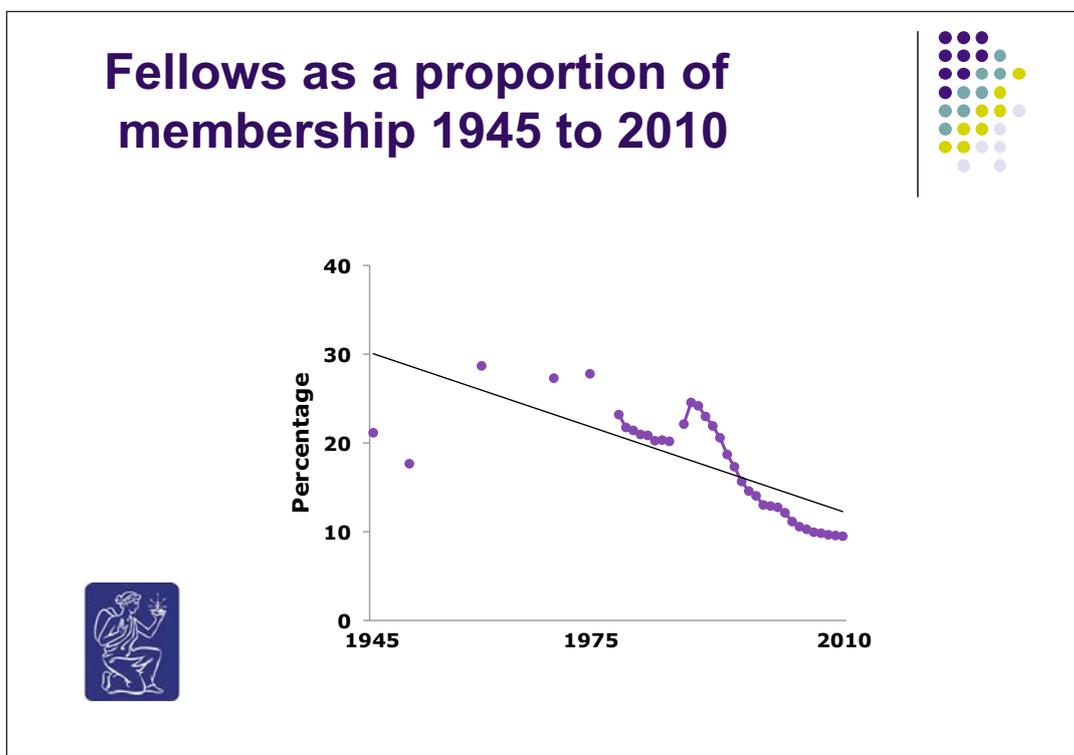
vanguard of women into psychology. She was a headmistress and mathematician. She was the first woman to receive a Doctor of Science in England, the first active woman member of the London Mathematical Society, the first of three women to be appointed to a Royal Commission – in her case, the Bryce Commission on Secondary Education – and among the first three women to be appointed to the Senate of the University of London. She climbed the Matterhorn twice and was reputed to be one of the first women in London to own a bicycle. She was a supporter of women’s suffrage but, somewhat controversially, proposed that emancipation be delayed until women were better educated. She died at age 72 on an unaccompanied walk near Chamonix in the French Alps.

From this beginning, and by the end of 1918, membership of the Society stood stubbornly below 100 members. That year, following his return from service in the Great War with the Royal Army Medical Corps, Charles Myers was instrumental in effecting the Society’s first major sea change. Myers persuaded colleagues within the Society to support specialised groups of applied psychologists and, partly to pre-empt the formation of separate new groups, on Myers’ advice, the Society agreed to broaden its membership criteria to include those – I quote – ‘interested in psychology’. Within two years, membership had risen by some 600 per cent, Medical, Industrial and Educational Sections had been formed and an Aesthetics Section was established in 1922. Regional Branches

were formed in 1923, and the Society rented its first premises in 1926 from the Royal Anthropological Society in Upper Bedford Place, Bloomsbury.

In 1920, Myers was deservedly elected first President of the British Psychological Society. It is humbling to follow in such illustrious footsteps. Until relatively recently, the Society celebrated Charles Myers through an annual lecture in his name, the first given by Sir Frederic Bartlett in 1964. Sadly, the popularity of the lecture had begun to wane and, following a consideration of options, was discontinued a few years ago. I wonder if we might in the future consider attaching Myers' name to one of our Society awards in order to keep alive the name of our first President and one of our greatest reformers.

The developments of the 1920s created the basic shape of the Society we see today and, to use Society historian Sandie Lovie's phrase, the reforms initiated a tension between the scientific and practical aspects of psychology which has animated the Society ever since. Indeed, far from a recent phenomenon, an early manifestation of this tension was a proposal to BPS Council in 1925 for the formation of a Psychological Club along the lines of the pre-1919 Society, with a view – I quote – 'to communicating and discussing papers of a more technical nature than those calculated to interest the members of the present Society as a whole'. In wisely rejecting this proposal, Council, perhaps unwisely, instead proposed the creation of Fellows of the Society elected – I quote – 'on grounds of psychological eminence and standing from amongst the Members of the Society' – an elite within an elite if you like, which has stubbornly retained this character, despite several recent attempts by Trustees to open up the grade of membership.



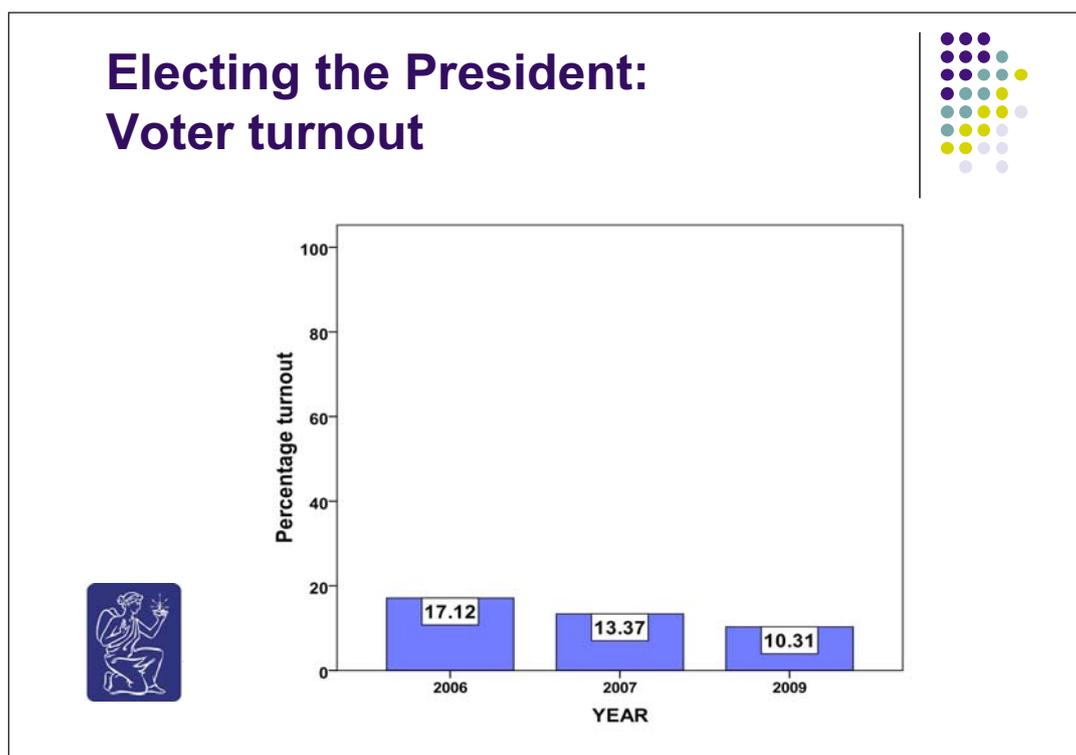
As early as 1936, the issue of the Society seeking a Royal Charter had been raised. I was personally surprised to see the issue arising as early as this, for it would be another thirty years before the Society was granted the status of a Chartered Society. But, if I was surprised by this, I must admit to being staggered to learn that the first register to

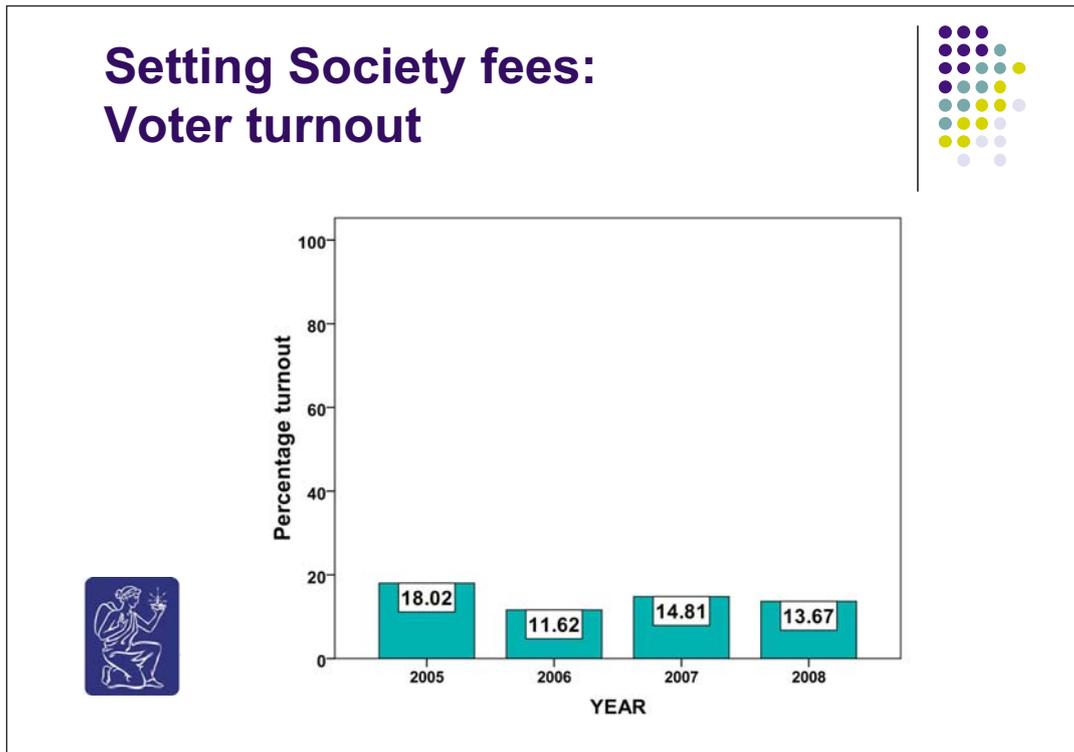
recognise professional psychologists within the Society was proposed in 1934. This register recognised a group for whom psychology was – I quote – ‘rapidly becoming a profession...making it their vocation and livelihood’. The subsequently named Professional Status Committee began to maintain a register, inclusion on which was dependent upon – again I quote – ‘*competence* in theoretical knowledge of psychology and its applications’ (my emphasis). Again, to paraphrase Lovie, qualification was based on professional training but not necessarily on paid employment, and a degree at honours level was not necessarily required. *Plus ça change* I would suggest in light of recent discussions the Society has had with the Health Professions Council regarding qualifications versus standards of competence.

All of the above illustrates the extent to which the Society had developed as a member-led organisation with a bottom-up, democratic and representative ethos – something that I know is jealously guarded by many members.

But, to what extent is democracy within the Society more apparent than real? In any case, is a maximally democratic model necessarily the best one? Currently, all of the major decisions within the Society are taken by member ballot – election of officers, changes to Rules, setting of subscriptions, and so on. Also, positions on member network committees and other positions of responsibility are advertised and elections held. Society accounts are approved at an Annual General Meeting along with confirmation of elected honorary officers, honorary fellows and honorary life members. The AGM is followed by an Open Meeting at which any member can raise any issue subject to having given notice to do so. Finally, following the collection of a modest number of member signatures, the Society is required to hold a Special General Meeting to discuss an exceptional matter brought forward by the members in question.

All very democratic indeed – until, that is, we consider the following:





This democratic deficit (for I would argue that's what we see here) is further compounded when we consider typical attendance at our Annual General Meeting. At our last AGM held following our Board of Trustees meeting in June in our London office, in addition to the Trustees, the meeting, which was quorate, was attended by three members, two of whom were present to receive Society awards, and the other to represent the newly formed Community Psychology Section. The Open Meeting followed – I need not paint a picture. Without question, the Society had fulfilled its obligations – but is anyone prepared to argue that in practice the process was representative or democratic, or even member-driven?

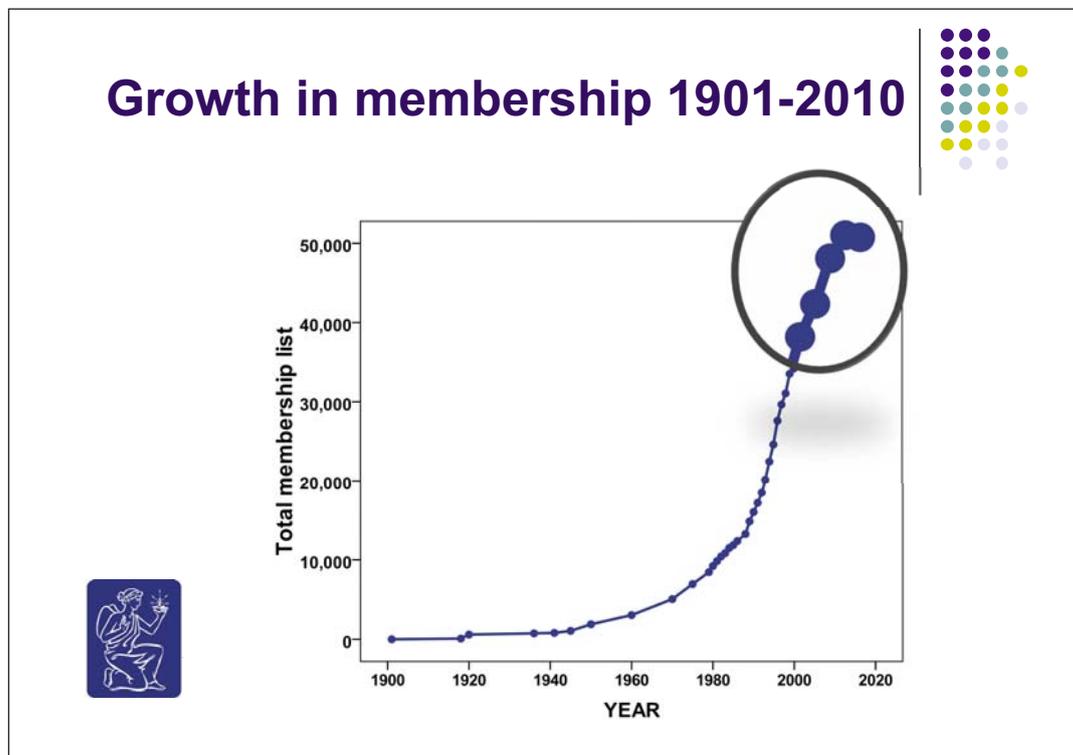
One of the clearest examples of where democracy may be failing the Society is in the setting of annual subscriptions. Currently, the Society's Schedule of Subscriptions is contained in our Rules with any change subject to a change in the relevant Statute, requiring a two thirds majority of votes cast in a vote of the full membership. This is expensive, slow and unpredictable, and I ask whether it is fit for a modern organisation. Two attempts by Trustees in recent years to modernise the process have been defeated by the narrowest of margins in a vote of membership. In 2006, a resolution to allow the level of annual subscriptions to be established by the Trustees subject to certain limitations failed despite 65.99 per cent supporting the resolution. The day was carried by 34.01 per cent in a voter turnout of 12 per cent. Leaving aside the cost of the postal ballot, the attempt to modernise our system of setting subscriptions fell to the wishes of 4.1 per cent of the membership.

So today, as up and down the land, the nation passes through polling stations, I ask whether democracy may be overrated – at least for some of the Society's decision-making processes? If it is not overrated, then we must find a way to increase member engagement dramatically. We must also find a way to modernise systems that require modernisation.

As I have said previously, the Society received its Royal Charter in 1965. This was undoubtedly a pivotal event, because, although many members may not have been aware of it, the Society had changed fundamentally from one that was entirely member-driven and bottom-up, to one that had a responsibility to deliver upon objects enshrined in the Charter. This responsibility increased by an order of magnitude in 1987 when the Charter was amended to allow the Society to maintain a Register of Chartered Psychologists with all that that entailed. As I see it, the move of regulation to the Health Professions Council in 2009 has effectively placed us back where we were as an organisation in 1987 – and it is to this new reality that we must adapt.

Having considered major aspects of our legacy and some trends therein, I turn to several further trends regarding changes in membership patterns which I believe provide an interesting perspective on where we are today. The source is the 2010 Annual Report.

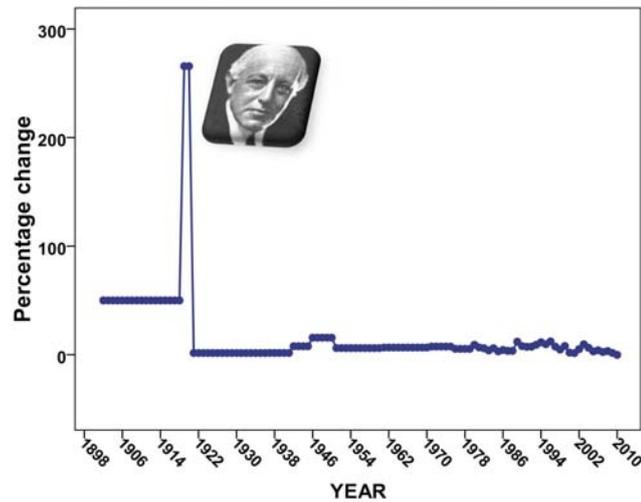
I turn now first to one of the most pleasing features of our development as a learned society, namely our growth in membership from our humble beginnings of 10.



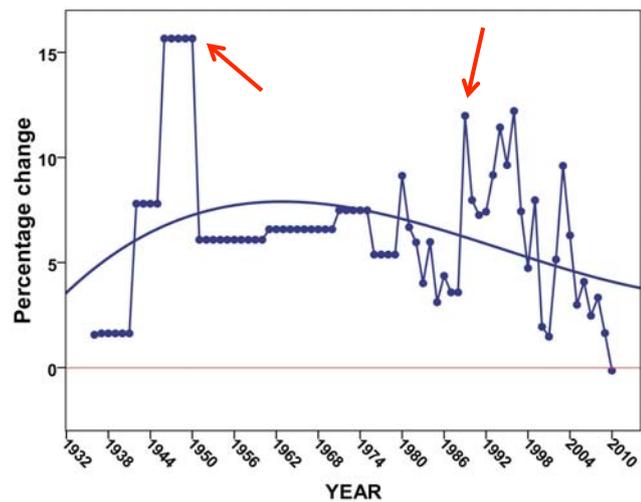
A picture of great success I think you will agree, particularly from the 1980s onwards. But just a little note of caution. In 2010, for the first time in our history, the membership list dropped, albeit by a very small number. Of itself, there seems to be little to be concerned about and this likely reflects a wash through of a few members leaving after joining the HPC register. However, were the trend to be repeated in 2011 and 2012, we may wish to give the matter further attention.

If we consider the year-on-year change in membership, the pattern looks like this. Actually, the spike which rather swamps everything is the result of Myers' 1919 reforms, so let's look at changes after this time.

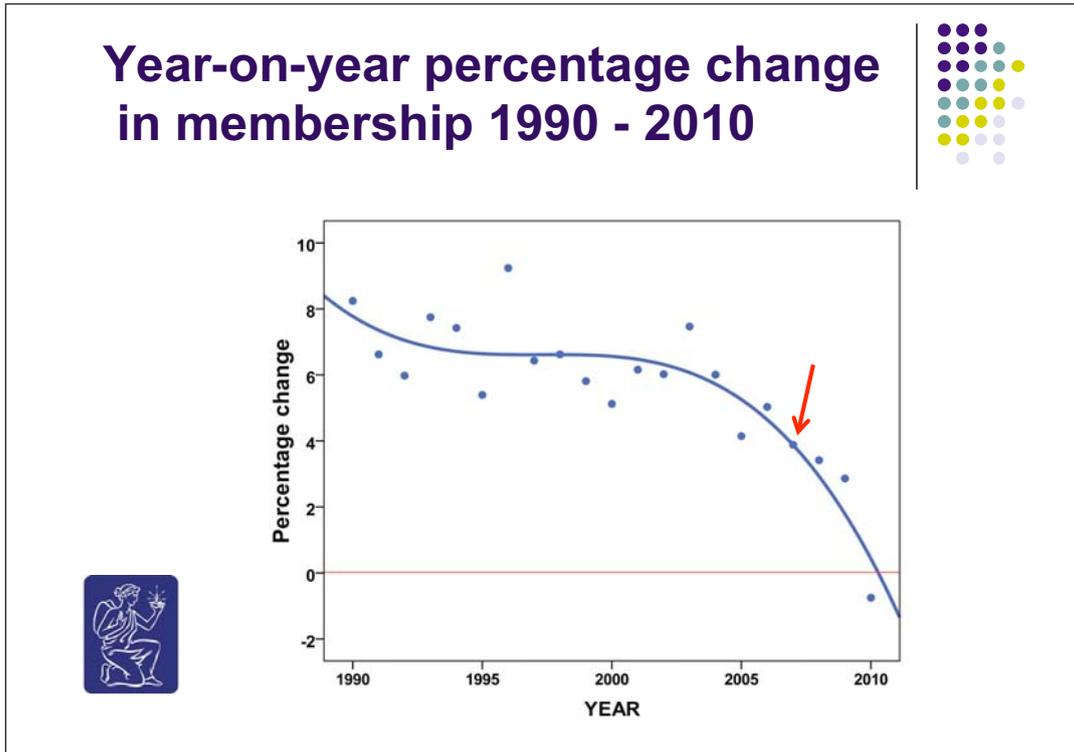
Year-on-year percentage change in membership 1901 - 2010



Year-on-year percentage change in membership 1935 - 2010

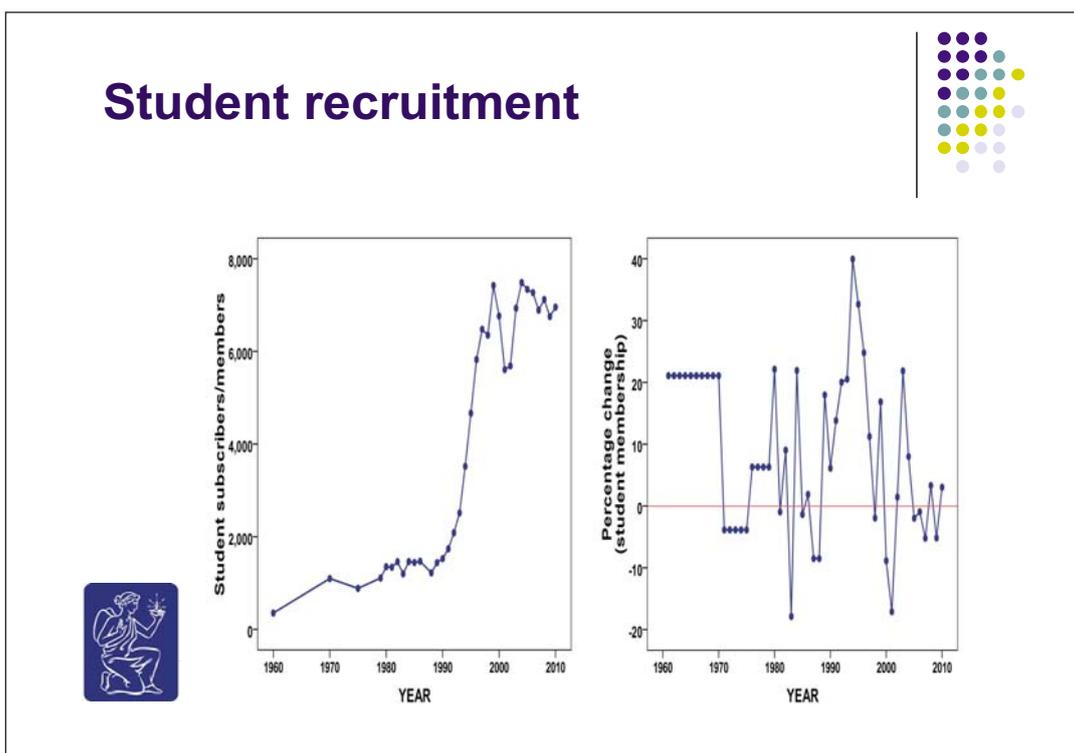


As we can see, by and large, after significant growth post Second World War, growth has been dodging along at around 5–6 per cent per annum – until, that is, the 1990s, which saw another peak at greater than 10 per cent followed by a gradual fall-off. If we drill into this, we can see a noticeable drop after this point, leading to the first case of negative growth.



So it is clear that we cannot take member recruitment and retention for granted and – make no mistake – recruitment, retention and the quality of services to members must be paramount considerations in the future. I know that the Director of Membership Support and Services, Simon Bowen, and the staff in our product teams and elsewhere are doing an excellent job in moving the Society to a much improved position regarding member services.

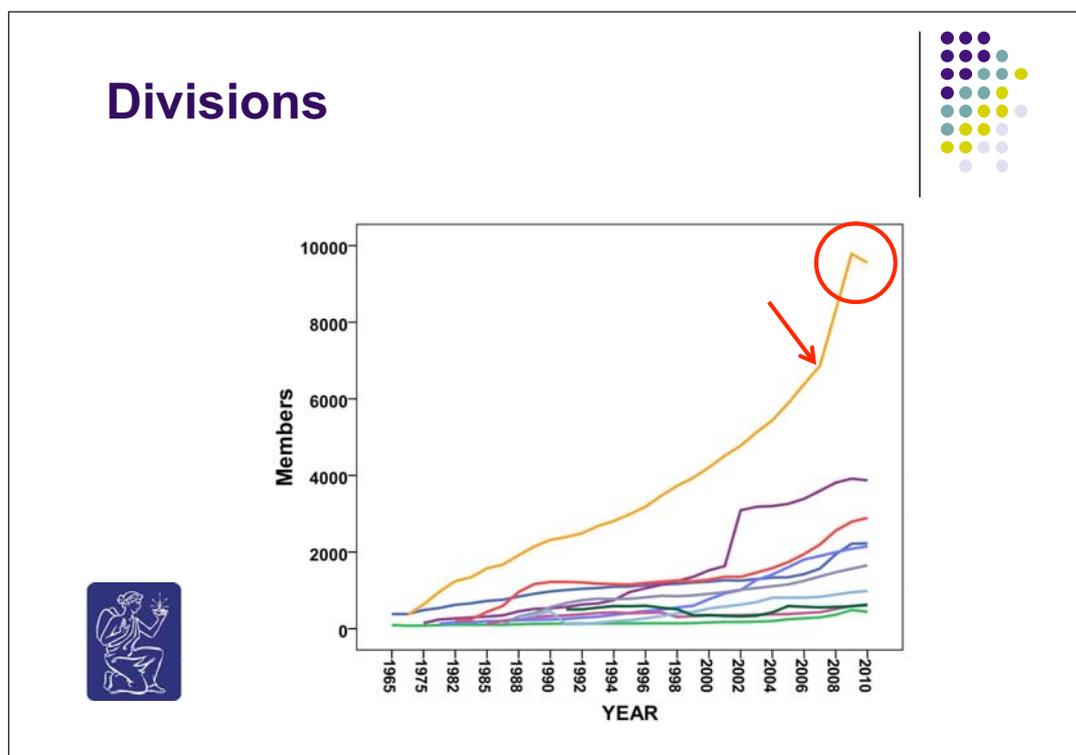
Regarding recruitment, a hugely important supply-side factor for the future Society is growth in student membership, both tertiary and secondary. Here we see that student



recruitment is somewhat vicissitudinous, especially given the steady growth over time in numbers of psychology undergraduates and A-level students, so this likely reflects variation in the focus on students from year to year. Undoubtedly, we are entering a challenging time in higher education in the UK, and the impact on psychology undergraduate numbers remains to be seen. Whatever the case, we must prioritise student recruitment and improve services to student members, and it is pleasing that much good work is already been done by BPS staff and members. In particular, I would highlight the role of Branches in recruiting in local higher education institutions. It is also very encouraging to see a lively uptake of our new free corporate schools membership, which I predict will grow rapidly year on year, as did our excellent Research Digest, which now reaches tens of thousands.

Furthermore, having been relieved of our gatekeeping role post-HPC, and now that the grade of graduate member is no longer the gateway into fitness to practise, I believe the time has come to open up graduate membership to anyone who is teaching psychology at secondary level, regardless of whether they have a primary degree in psychology or not. I know that, for some, this may be too radical a suggestion, but we must learn to adapt to the new dispensation and to think outside well-trodden furrows. I don't think I need spell out the possible benefits to these individuals, and to the Society, of opening up graduate membership in this way.

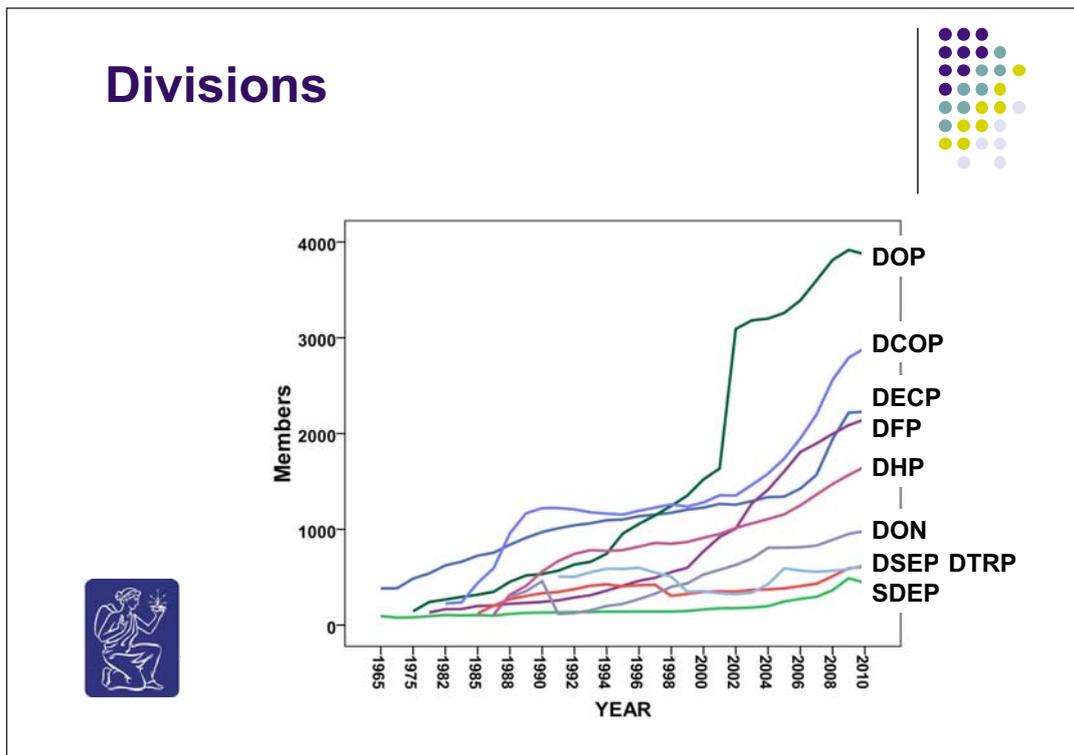
I turn now to the Society's professional Divisions. Here we have the number of members in each of the Society's Divisions between 1965 and 2010. Again we see that the trends for smaller Divisions are somewhat obscured by the Division of Clinical Psychology, so let's look at the DCP before focusing on the others.



Here we see impressively strong and almost linear growth in DCP membership from 1965 right up until 2007, when there is a noticeable shift in the pace of growth, clearly

coinciding with the lead-up to statutory regulation and the tantalising prospect of automatic migration to the HPC register on the basis of divisional membership. If we can be sure of little in this life, we can always rely on human self-interest. Let's hope that the first ever dip in DCP membership does not reflect this tendency now that HPC registration has been secured.

Now let's look at the other Divisions. Here we see more patchy trends. In general, growth has been steady with one or two spectacular gains. Actually in the case of the Division of Occupational Psychology, this does not represent a sudden surge of interest in the subject or demand for occupational psychologists – rather it reflects the fact that the Occupational Psychology Section was merged with the Division in 2000.

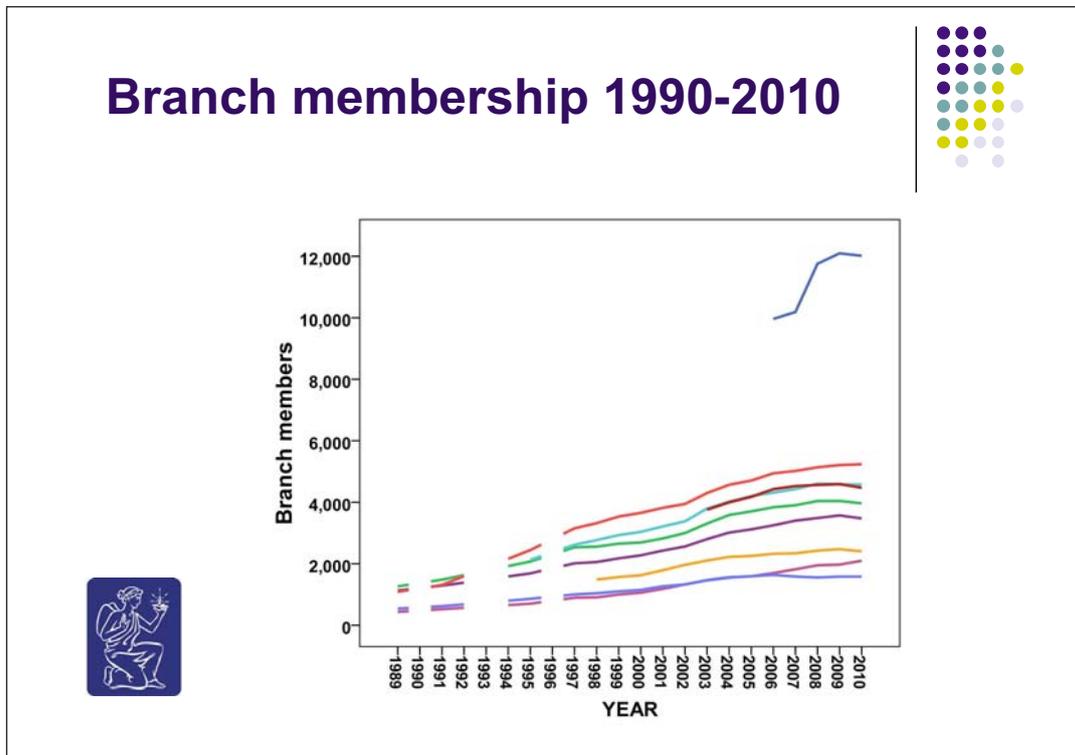


Again, there is evidence of a surge approaching HPC regulation, but only among those for whom it is an issue – thus occupational, educational, health and counselling. The extent of future growth or otherwise in membership of Divisions is an empirical question.

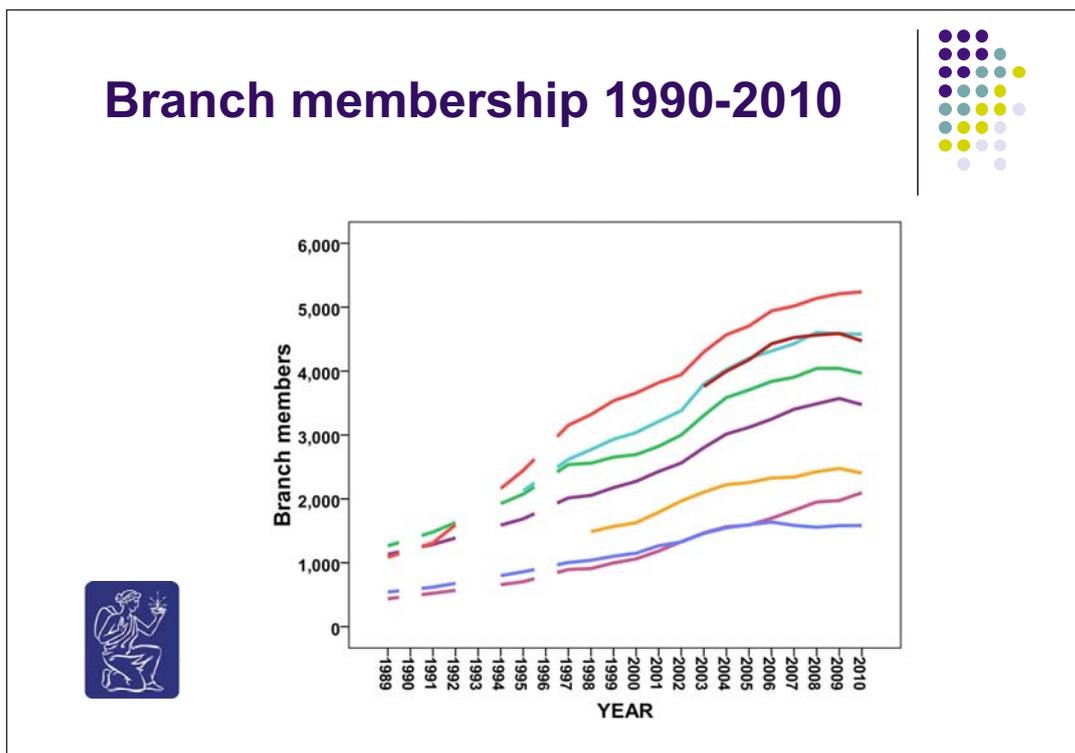
I have thought for some time that, sooner or later – and I hope sooner – Divisions will need to reconsider their core purpose – to reinvent themselves if you will. This will require willingness to embrace the new post-HPC era with an open mind. I am conscious that the titles of Divisions are, for example, the Division of Health Psychology, rather than the Division of Health Psychologists, or Clinical Psychology rather than Clinical Psychologists. This is a far from an esoteric distinction and may be a useful starting point for discussing core purposes going forward.

I now turn to our Branches. I have already said that I regard Branches as an extremely important vehicle for member engagement. For many, the Branch *is* the Society and vice versa. Branches play a pivotal role in recruitment – indeed prior to the extension of the Branch network to all regions, recruitment in areas covered by Branches was considerably

higher than in areas not covered. One of the great pleasures of my presidency has been the opportunity to visit many of our Branches. It is clear that some Branches are currently in a very healthy state and some less so.



If we look at changes to Branch membership, we can see some interesting trends. Again, these are obscured by our very large London and Home Counties Branch, which has a large and increasing membership, so let's look at the rest.

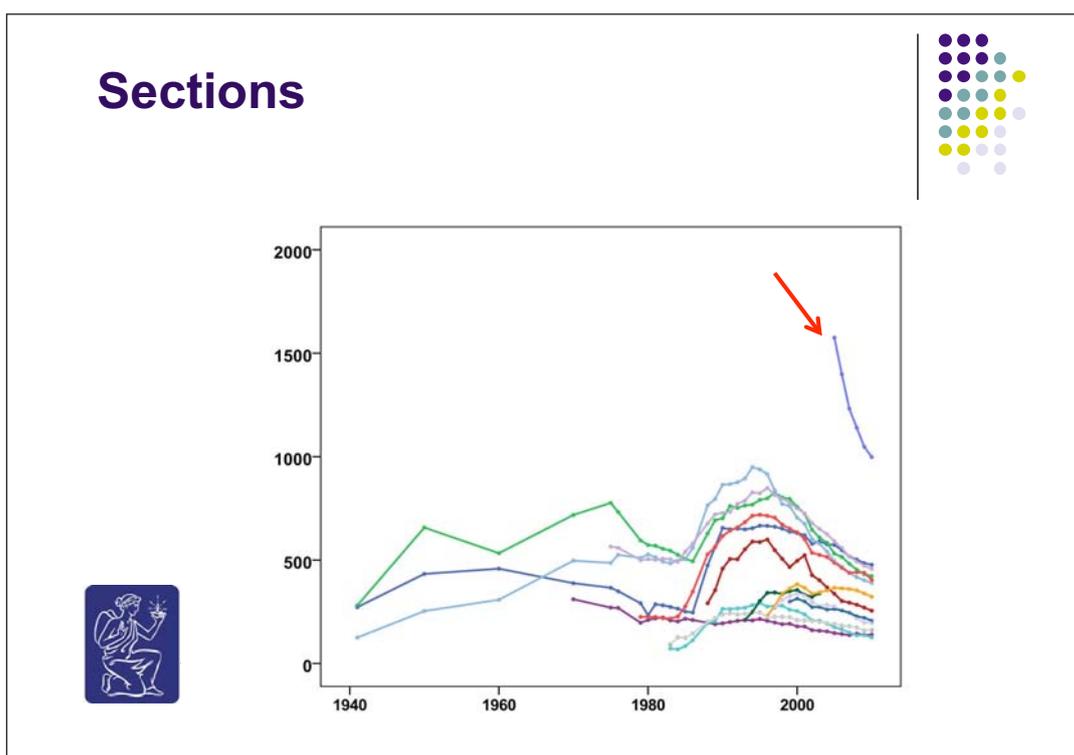


Bear in mind that members do not join a Branch – rather, upon joining the Society, they are assigned to their Branch based on geography. Changes in Branch membership therefore show something rather different than for other member networks. So in as much as the figures represent overall recruitment to the Society within geographical regions, the trends may be taken to suggest something about the overall health of the Society in a region. Most Branches appear to show the recent dip in membership, although it is clear that it is possible to buck the trend – presumably through a proactive approach to recruitment and retention.

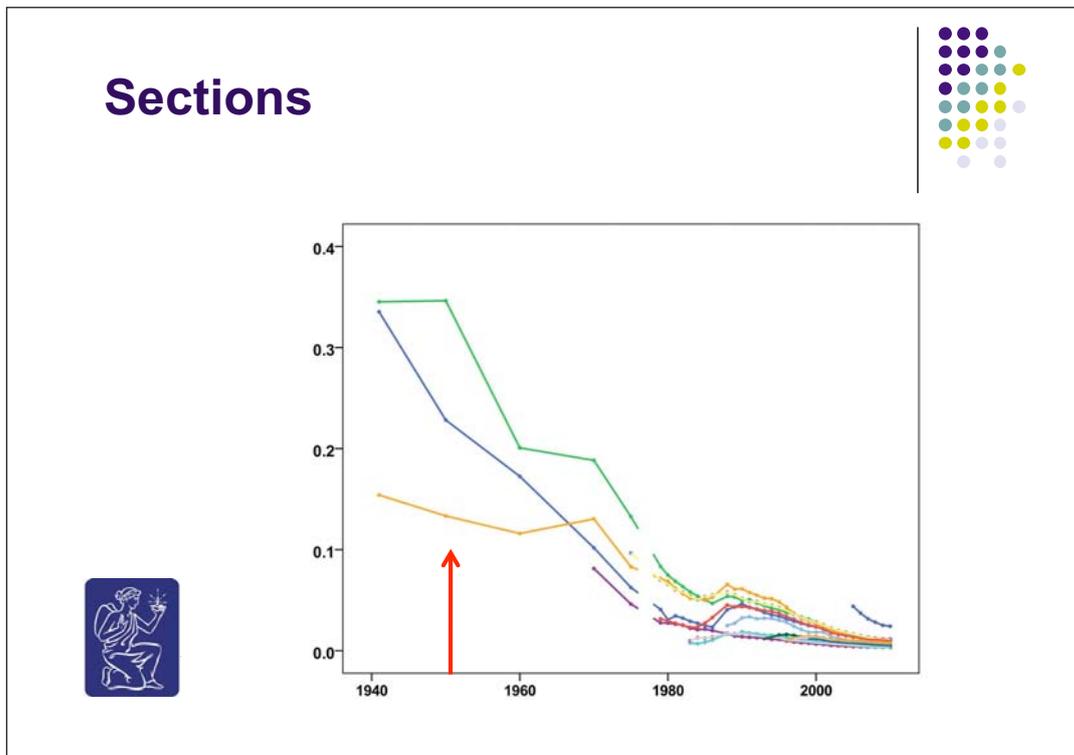
I believe that Branches should be considered our prime vehicle for delivery of many of the Society’s future services and activities and future investment in branches should reflect this, such that all Branches have administrative staff located in their region – not just in the legislative regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In future, with the will, I can envisage ever more vibrant branches undertaking functions outsourced by the Society’s central office, including temporary deployment of central office staff to a Branch – I can think of no better way for staff to gain an understanding of the activities of members on the ground.

Such investment would of course be matched by greater accountability of Branches in terms of achieving agreed objectives regarding recruitment, sharing our science with the local community, and ensuring comprehensive coverage within the totality of a Branch’s boundaries. Currently, there is an understandable tendency to concentrate Branch activity in a compact area, allowing convenient travel and often based on a critical mass of Branch activists. This can lead to waxing and waning of Branch activity over time as those on the periphery become fed up travelling to the centre, or as a loss of critical mass due to people moving on creates a vacuum. I was therefore most interested on my recent visit to the Wessex Branch to learn of the growing success of their recently formed network of hubs within the defined Branch region – an idea which I would urge all other Branches to consider.

Finally, I turn to our Sections, which define our discipline in terms of its content and scientific status.



Here we see that the profile of membership has remained fairly flat with something of a bulge in the late 90s and a drop thereafter. The Qualitative Methods Section, indicated by the arrow was started relatively recently and has a relatively high number of members as might be expected from the recent strong growth of interest in qualitative methods. However, as you can see, it has suffered a steep year-on-year drop in membership and is rapidly converging on the other Sections.



The picture becomes clearer when we consider Section membership as a proportion of the total membership over time. The challenge facing Sections is evident as early as the late 1940s to 50s and the picture has become gradually bleaker ever since. The timing is no accident, since the downward trend broadly coincides with a meeting in June 1946 of five men (yes, all men) at the invitation of Oliver Zangwill in Sir Frederic Bartlett's rooms in St John's College, Cambridge. The outcome was the formation of a new group – the Experimental Psychology Group – to cater for those – I quote – ‘actually engaged in psychological research’. In 1959, the group became known as the Experimental Psychology Society. Oh that Zangwill, Bartlett and the other three had instead chosen reform from within the Society, with Branches the vehicle for these reforms.

I believe that the health of Sections is arguably the Society's greatest challenge – especially in light of our declared intention to expand our learned society function and to support psychological science in all its facets. I am aware of the excellent work on promoting our science already being done by staff members Lisa Morrison and Kelly Auty.

How might we seek to rejuvenate sections? For rejuvenate them we must. The answer is likely to lie in several places, with some Sections merging, perhaps even with relevant Divisions, given my earlier comments. Although a challenge, we also have a great opportunity to invest in, and to bring about a renaissance in, our Sections to help promote our science.

I also believe that we must seek to engage in meaningful and productive work with our colleagues in the Experimental Psychology Society, something which we do to an extent along with the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments. As it stands, there is a significant overlap in membership of the BPS and EPS and, more importantly, a considerable common purpose with respect to the discipline. I believe that, with the right will, the whole could be so much greater than the sum of our parts, and I urge both societies to grasp opportunities – for the sake of our science.

I am also on record as being somewhat critical of the relative paucity of our relationships with international learned societies. As the second largest group of its kind, we have at best a patchy track record of showing international leadership and of engaging in productive international collaboration. Again, we share massive common purpose with our fellow societies abroad, and we must play our part. This will require a culture shift within the Society – one that I sense is already in its early stages. No longer must we be reticent in accepting some invitations, nor should we engage in our peculiarly British characteristic of insisting that a member should have an invitation before seeking Trustees' approval to make an international visit. Our approach should be much more proactive and strategic.

My ultimate ambition would be to see much closer and more active cooperation across the international scene – with our colleagues in the US, in the Association for Psychological Science, the American Psychological Association, the Society for Research in Child Development, the American Educational Research Association, and others. Closer to home, we are already seeking to work ever more closely with our friends in the Psychological Society of Ireland whose President and Treasurer I'm delighted are with us here in Glasgow. Elsewhere in Europe, in the Asia Pacific region, the Indian subcontinent, Africa and elsewhere in the southern hemisphere, I hope to see a burgeoning of activity in the future. Colleagues, international leadership must be one of our driving ambitions.

Time has undoubtedly beaten me, and, in spite of a lot of effort, I have been unable to produce a slide of a respectable fridge door containing the fridge magnets discussed in this address. However, I hope I have provided some insights into why we are as we are and perhaps made a case, following recent events, for an exciting era of renewal and partnership in the Society for the good of our discipline in all its facets.