President’s page

Welcomes

28 October 2020

A Presidency of two halves

This will be my last welcome page for Tax Adviser, as the Presidency will pass to Peter Rayney on 17 November. This will be marked with an online event raising funds for the Bridge the Gap funding campaign for the tax charities, which I hope many of you will attend.

It has been a Presidency of two halves. I was fortunate to be able to participate in almost all the major events that usually take place during a Presidential term, and meet members across the United Kingdom. Then the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and it became apparent that Peter’s programme for 2020/ 21 would be significantly disrupted. We agreed that we should both serve 18 month terms, not least to allow time for his programme to be reshaped.

When I reflect on my Presidency in future, I suspect it will be the second half I will remember in particular. I will recall how the Institute rose to the challenge of the pandemic; rapidly ensuring the safety of staff through enabling homeworking; adjusting its cost base to ensure it remained financially sound, and accelerating the overhaul of financial reporting to give a much clearer picture of likely future financial outcomes; engaging intensively with HMRC on the impact of the various support measures, and making suggestions on the detail of those proposals, many of which were adopted; and, above all, an immense effort to communicate to members and the general public how they could apply and benefit from the support measures available. This has involved a substantial amount of work from both Institute staff and volunteers, for which we all should be very grateful.

It has actually been a two year journey for me. From October 2018, I was able to devote more time to Deputy Presidential duties than would be usual, and I was asked to lead the project to recruit our new CEO, which led to Helen Whiteman’s appointment. I suspect that this is the most important service I will ever do for the

Institute. During those two years, we have also focused on developing the Institute's strategy. The central themes of our strategy are education – ensuring we continue to offer relevant and valuable qualifications to as wide a population as possible; excellence in professional standards and leading the debate on regulation of the tax profession; and representing an engaged and growing membership, so that taxpayers, tax authorities and opinion formers all recognise the value of Chartered Tax Advisers. In my view, the pandemic has served to demonstrate that these are the correct strategic goals rather than suggesting a change of course.

What the pandemic has done is to accelerate change in certain areas; for example, moving to examinations taking place online was expected to take place at some point, but the pandemic has made this a necessity, at least in the short term.

I also have some observations on issues which may impact on how the Institute's strategy is executed.

First, the tax profession is not immune to the phenomenon of new and disruptive entrants to the market. Tax return software often comes with additional modules which can help some taxpayers to file returns without professional help; providers of tax information (here, I should declare an interest as an employee of Croner-i) are expanding their offerings into areas coming closer to advisory services; and we see the rise of the 'tax return platforms' – the 'Ubers for tax', putting taxpayers in contact with a tax professional who will do their return for a fixed price. The provision of affordable tax products and advice to taxpayers is a public good. However, ensuring that these entrants provide accurate advice and fully compliant returns presents new regulatory challenges, and the Institute should consider how it can help to provide solutions.

My second observation concerns the fragmentation of the profession. Tax professionals in the UK are represented by a number of bodies. There are good reasons for having more than one body; for example, the ATT and CIOT deliberately offer qualifications at different levels. However, at many of the meetings hosted by HMRC that I have attended in the last two years, it has struck me that the wish of all the representative bodies to be present leads to very large meetings. As we all know, the larger the meeting, the harder to arrive at agreed outcomes. I don't think this is the time for any radical change, but I do think that the professional bodies often work best for taxpayers when we co-operate and co-ordinate our activities.

Finally, I need to thank a number of people for their support and guidance over the last two years; the other members of the Presidential team in that time, John, Ray, Peter, Susan and Gary; Helen and her leadership colleagues, John, Karl and Roz; Sarah for her support as my PA; George and Hamant for their advice on what I have written and said; Jeremy and Jane at the ATT; and Lisa, who is always there at events, physical and virtual, ensuring they run smoothly, and making sure these columns appear every month.

It has been an honour to be your President.

I wish you and your families and colleagues well, and I know you will give Peter your full support.

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