President’s page, November 2016

Welcomes

01 November 2016

The importance of stewardship

By the time you read this, I shall be halfway through my presidential year. We’ve just had the most enjoyable President’s reception at the Natural History Museum, which is our ‘thank you’ to all the volunteers who contribute so much to everything the Chartered Institute of Taxation does. Even more importantly, the autumn Admission Ceremony has just been held, where certificates and prizes were presented to new fellows and associates as well as to graduates in the Advanced Diploma in International Taxation (some of whom had travelled from overseas to receive their diplomas). Our examinations are fundamental to the institute, which started them shortly after formation in 1930. Apparently we still have the papers from 1932, in case anyone wishes to test their knowledge of surtax – although we no longer have examiners to mark scripts from that era!

The Institute now celebrates those who have been members for 50 years by presenting them with certificates too; some are still practising tax! One particular pleasure was awarding a certificate to a new associate in the presence of his grandfather, now in his sixty-fourth year of membership. The CIOT is now very close to 18,000 members, which naturally I hope to celebrate before handing over to John Preston next May.

One of our core principles is stewardship – which I believe underlines everything we do. We should rightly celebrate the work put in by those who came before us but we should aim to pass on a better institute to those who follow. Part of this involves making sure we are indeed the leading professional body on taxation by including in our governance and activities a wide range of individuals working in taxation. Our Charter permits the Council to admit up to ten Fellows annually, without examination. Up to now, we have admitted several individuals in most years who have prepared a thesis, or other body of work, which may include some who prepare

a qualifying thesis as part of studying for the Birmingham MSc in Taxation or the new Oxford MSc. Council has just taken a decision in principle additionally to admit a small number of new fellows on the basis of their proven experience and expertise. There are senior, well-qualified tax advisers who missed the opportunity to take our exams 20 or 30 years ago, but who currently or prospectively contribute to our Institute. By admitting them as members we can involve them more fully in our committees and council. The CIOT sets its sights on being the leading professional body in taxation in the UK; this move will help enhance our role. Members should be reassured that priority will always be given to those submitting theses, or bodies of work and that any new admissions will be considered carefully by Council, subject always to the annual cap of ten admissions. New fellows will of course have all the benefits and obligations of membership; these are not honorary appointments.

Presidents do rack up plenty of train and plane miles. It has been a quite different experience for me to meet many of our branches, whether to deliver a technical talk, attend a social event or the annual dinner. So far I've been to Cambridge, Cardiff, Croydon, Edinburgh, Exeter, Isle of Man, Leeds, Harrow, London, Manchester and Norwich with more visits to come. The diversity of the branches is impressive, as are the numbers attending branch events. Even in the online world, the power of meeting people is fundamental.

John Cullinane, Anne Fairpo and I have spoken at party conferences for the three largest political parties as part of our seminar programme with the Institute of Fiscal Studies. Our topic has been the role of taxation (or not) in tackling inequality. Each event has been well-attended and they are good opportunities to engage in debate and demonstrate the Institute's educational role, without straying into party politics.

Our joint project on tax policy making with the Institute for Government and the Institute of Fiscal Studies has also led to discussion events in London and Edinburgh with those involved in the policy-making process. The project has also sought evidence from a wide range of contributors and our open letter to the new Chancellor has been well-received. We hope to publish our report later this year and ideally see some of our recommendations adopted.

At the same time, John Cullinane and I have both given evidence – and the CIOT has submitted written contributions – the Treasury Select Committee's inquiry into taxation, including the Making Tax Digital project. We have also submitted written evidence to a House of Lords' inquiry into tax policy.

Taking a leading role in the debate on tax policy is a key part of what we should do, as we work on improving the UK tax system.