Rotary’s membership problem: A framework for analysis

By Tony Thomas, Secretary, RC Central Melbourne-Sunrise* and Chris Egger, D9800 Membership Director

Summary
Rotary’s continuing good work in the community goes without saying. But in the Anglosphere, including the Australasian region, Rotary as an institution is in worse trouble on membership trends than most members realize.

This lack of knowledge is because Rotary shrinks from offering publicly any useful time-series data on membership trends – which are adverse in virtually all parameters in the Anglosphere. Rotary is well endowed with data reports and publishing them in management-style format wouldn’t seem difficult. (1)

By contrast, it takes mere minutes to discover rigorous time-series data on key indicators of any government department/body, major charity or public financial corporation. Lions Clubs publish comprehensive data on their membership and trends.

Rotary’s worldwide membership has been static for 19 years, with declines in the Anglosphere and Japan being offset by growth in India, South Korea and German-speaking countries. Obviously Rotary’s membership situation has deteriorated significantly on the basis of members per 100,000 of population. In Australia, for example, the actual fall in the past 22 years is about 28%, but per capita membership has halved.

Lions clubs worldwide and in Australia are significantly outperforming Rotary in membership trends. The two groups are of similar size. From mid-2009 to October 2014, Lions worldwide put on 3.5% member growth (Rotary: minus 1.8%) and in Australia, Lions performed relatively even better, losing only 0.5% of members while Rotary Australia lost 9.8%. (See Appendix 1).

If Rotary clubs Australia were better aware of their serious situation, they may be more open to innovation. Many clubs’ framework and culture are virtually unchanged from 20 years ago – except that the clubs have shrunk and aged.
International Membership

International Rotary membership (1,207,000 as at 30 June 2014) has been static since 1995 (1,207,000) – i.e. 19 years, with membership declines in most developed countries (except for German speaking countries) matched by growth in many developing countries in particular India.

![Rotarian Members Worldwide](chart.png)

Country data includes:

**Members lost, 2003-13**
USA 58,481 (-15%)
England 7,743 (-16%)
Japan 23,248 (-21%)
Australia 5,260 (-14%)
Canada 4,167 (-14%).

**Members gained, 2003 -13**
India 34,068 (38%)
S. Korea 12,671 (26%)
Germany 11,114 (27%)
Taiwan 7,567 (49%)
Brazil 4,045 (8%).  (2)

In 2011 the RI Board endorsed regional membership growth plans of 3% per annum for fiscal 2012-15. This has been unsuccessful.
The graph below is membership for RI Great Britain & Ireland (RIBI):

**Australia /NZ/ S.Pacific**

The membership of Zone 7B and 8 (Australasia/S.Pacific) in 2003 was 47,273 and by end-June 2014 was down to 39,413, a fall of 17%. The target for June 2015 is 41,944, which appears a bridge too far as members at Feb 28, 2015 (39,214) were down about 200.

The growth plans for the region will be reviewed later this year in Melbourne, by a team comprising Noel Trevaskis (Zone 8), Jessie Harman (Ballarat), Malcolm Lindquist (Mitcham SA), Philip Archer (Melbourne) and John Prendergast (NZ).

This zone’s members are relatively older than Rotarians generally. At 2012, 83% of zone members were aged 50+, compared with 70% for Rotary worldwide. About 33% were retired, compared with 21% worldwide. There appears a risk of a sharp membership fall in 2022 as a ‘bulge’ of older members passes out of the system.

**AGE OF ROTARIANS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>Australasia: %</th>
<th>Global: %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Australia

In Australia Rotary membership in 1992 was 42,559 and seems to have peaked in 1998 when Royce Abbey was world president at over 43,000 members (3). From 1992 to March 2015, membership fell 28% to 30,569 and with club numbers stable, average club size is down from 37.6 members (1992) to 27.

Rotary membership in Australia is about 13 members per 10,000 head of population. This is a far cry from Rotary's peak in Australia on a per capita basis in the late 1980's when Australia had around 26 Rotarians per 10,000 head of population.

Zone 8 (Australia/PNG) membership at 2012 was 31,826 and at end-February 2015 had fallen 4% to 30,569.

The shortfall on the 2012-15 member growth plan (3% growth pa) is 11.5%. The planned 34,559 vs actual 30,569 at end-Feb 2015 involve a 3,990 shortfall. (4)

None of the 21 Districts in Australia met growth targets and only one District, at Feb 2015, had improved its membership in 2012-15. That district was D9790 which covers the northern suburbs of greater Melbourne and northeast Victoria, with membership up by 2.0% largely due to the net addition of two clubs.

The budget for the Membership Growth Plan was $US 52,000. This spending doubtless led to a better membership result than would otherwise have occurred.

District 9800 (Part-Melbourne and northwards to Echuca)

For District 9800, member numbers have fallen from 3,133 in 1998 to 2,445 currently, down 22% in 16 years. The best recent year was 2007-08 when a number of large clubs all put on good growth, but this was not sustained. In the past six years the membership fall is 9%.

Currently for each club having a good year on membership growth, about two are downsizing. The number of clubs is stable but average club size in the past six years has fallen from 38.3 to 34.4 members.
## District 9800

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Clubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2678</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2591</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2519</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2520</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2441</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015^</td>
<td>2445</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^ At March 12

### Sample club  D9800 – RC Central Melbourne-Sunrise (RCCMS)

Membership trend for this club (author Thomas’s) is graphed below:

![RCCMS membership as at 1 July](image)

The graph illustrates the stasis in this club’s membership since formation in 1988. The club commenced with 44 members and 26 years later has 44 members. The peak was 68 in 2003 with a slide thereafter. This club is vigorous and well-connected, with significant community work, but lately has had difficulty finding lucrative fund-raising projects.
**Conclusion**

Rotary in the Anglosphere has been on a long-term decline, despite the best efforts of many Rotarians. This report seeks to provide a framework for analysis. Solutions or adaptation are further issues. One significant question is why Lions are outperforming Rotarians on membership.

31/3/2015

* This report is written in Thomas’s personal capacity, and is not an official document of the club.

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(1) *RI headquarters obtains comprehensive member data not merely for administrative and billing purposes but for “Tracking membership trends, developing membership characteristics, producing demographic analyses, and supporting membership retention.”*


(3) All data for Australian membership pre-1992 was lost during an RI computer upgrade.

(4) The plan itself, as published, lacked any numerical data or target on membership.
# Appendix 1

**World Major Service Club Membership trends: Rotary versus Lions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Countries &amp; World</th>
<th>30-Jun-09</th>
<th>01-Oct-14</th>
<th>Member Change</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>67,611</td>
<td>74,120</td>
<td>6,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>65,797</td>
<td>71,378</td>
<td>5,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>368,145</td>
<td>332,636</td>
<td>-35,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>371,612</td>
<td>329,523</td>
<td>-42,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>105,661</td>
<td>126,933</td>
<td>21,272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>177,754</td>
<td>225,330</td>
<td>47,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>94,932</td>
<td>88,377</td>
<td>-6,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>109,274</td>
<td>117,886</td>
<td>8,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sth Korea</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>61,273</td>
<td>59,692</td>
<td>-1,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>83,636</td>
<td>78,023</td>
<td>-5,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>18,638</td>
<td>31,743</td>
<td>13,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>34,057</td>
<td>43,031</td>
<td>8,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>33,680</td>
<td>30,392</td>
<td>-3,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>27,236</td>
<td>27,109</td>
<td>-127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>2,933</td>
<td>23,562</td>
<td>20,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>Rotary</td>
<td>1,234,527</td>
<td>1,212,436</td>
<td>-22,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>1,322,683</td>
<td>1,369,608</td>
<td>46,925</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

China’s restriction on Rotary clubs accounts for close to a third of Rotary’s global underperformance versus Lions.

Lions world membership data now includes Lioness and Leo members. At 28 Feb 2015 the total was 1.389m. Rotary worldwide would be almost identical at 1.385m at Feb 28, 2015 if the 165,000 Rotaractors were included.

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