

“Be True To Yourself”

Professor David C Wilson, immediate past president of CIWM, looks back at his time in the role and offers some advice for new president, Enda Kiernan

How has your year as President compared with your prior expectations?

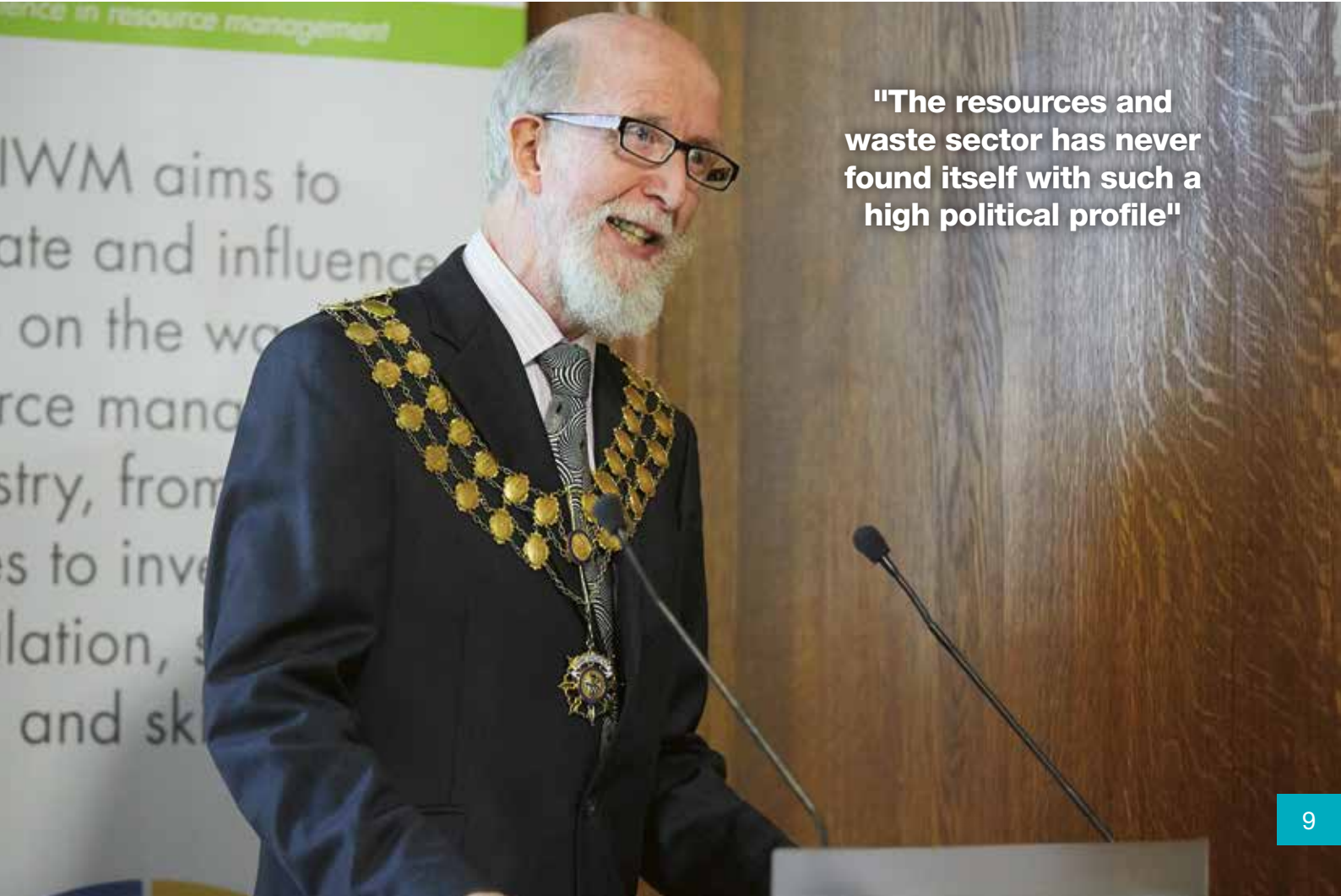
I was expecting to make a major time commitment for centre visits. But I had forgotten the need to prepare beforehand! It is surprising just how long it takes to prepare presentations; even if there are some common themes, each Open Meeting tends to have a slightly different focus, which requires the presentation to be tweaked, which again takes time.

What were your aims for the duration and have these been achievable?

Logistically, I had two aims. The first was to visit all ten

CIWM Centres at least once, which I had achieved by the end of April. The second was to write a monthly column for the Journal, and to mix feedback from my Presidential activities with “opinion pieces”, reflecting both the topics of the moment and my own particular “hobby horses”. I was disappointed towards the end of the year, when illness forced me to cancel five follow up Centre visits as well as missing my last column in the November Journal.

My third aim was to promote my theme for the year, solid waste management (SWM) as the forgotten utility service, essential to modern society. My three strands within that were public health and environmental protection; the shift to



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a more circular economy; and international SWM, focusing on the global waste crisis, with more than three billion people worldwide lacking this basic service. I believe that I have at least partly achieved that.

Your Presidential report published at your inauguration had a focus on community waste management in low- and middle-income countries. Were you happy with how this was received and the impact it had over the course of the year?

The 2015 Global Waste Management Outlook, which I led for UNEP and ISWA, documented the global waste crisis, and recommended mainly “top-down” solutions, how international organisations and national governments can work with (often the larger) cities to develop integrated and sustainable waste management systems. It is my experience that such approaches take a lot of time, so the GWMO also recognises the need for parallel work from the “bottom up”, helping the poorest communities to help themselves in the short term. So, when I had the privilege to choose my Presidential report topic, I commissioned WasteAid UK to prepare a toolkit. The aim was to provide practical guidance on community waste management, focusing on low-cost technologies, which local people can use to make products to sell locally from the low value organics and plastics in the waste – thus helping to solve their local waste problems, keeping plastics out of the oceans and giving themselves sustainable livelihoods to feed and educate their families.

The toolkit has been very well received. In terms of impact, in its first year, the toolkit website was visited by 56,300 people from 202 countries or territories, with the

toolkit downloaded in whole or in part 6,945 times; which is impressive. The toolkit has also won an ISWA Publication Award as one of the best publications of the year, and there have been two papers published in the peer reviewed literature, one looking at optimising the technology for making paving slabs using recycled plastic film as a binder.

As a next step, WasteAid hopes to support a long term volunteer and experienced waste professional Sally Talbot to undertake a PhD under Professor Margaret Bates at the University of Northampton. The aim is to establish the evidence base to support the further development of community waste management in the least developed countries. Any company interested in funding this research is invited to contact WasteAid.

Has any particular topic dominated your year?

That must be plastics, interestingly with a very international focus. The impact of *Blue Planet 2* in drawing public attention to the devastating effects of marine plastics has been a game changer. Add to that the “China ban” on the import of plastic wastes for recycling, and the resources and waste sector has never found itself with such a high political profile. These topics accounted for my two international visits, eight CIWM Centre Open Meetings and were prominent at many other events; they also provided me with four columns in the Journal.

Has the CIWM Presidency allowed you to go anywhere you might not have gone otherwise, or experienced something you might not have experienced?

I have two answers here, both related to the hot topic of marine plastics. The first was a visit to No 10 Downing Street a few

days before Christmas, when I joined Tearfund to meet with the Prime Minister's Senior Environmental Advisor, the retired Tory MP Sir John Randall, to follow up a letter we had published in the Daily Telegraph the week before, urging the Government to focus not just on the easy wins of banning cotton buds and plastic straws, but to include international aid to developing countries to improve their SWM (see *Feb Journal*, pp15).

CIWM and WasteAid later published a report showing that extending solid waste collection services to all and eliminating open dumping and burning would not only bring huge local benefits to public health and the environment but would also cut in half the weight of plastics entering the oceans. These efforts appear to have had the desired effect (see *June Journal* pp17), at least in the short term.

I was later invited as CIWM President to attend the 2nd Klosters Forum on how to stem the flow of plastics into the oceans. Being part of an extremely diverse invited group, given two days to work together in the sunny Swiss Alps in July, was both enjoyable and interesting, and hopefully will contribute to the development of viable solutions.

Who have you awarded your President's medal to and why?

Mike Webster, the Founder and CEO of the resource and waste sector's very own charity, WasteAid. Mike gave up secure employment five years ago when his children were still very young to set up a new charity, initially drawing little or no salary. The charity is now taking off, helped in part by the success of the CIWM-sponsored Toolkit; income has doubled this year, and looks set to triple that figure next year to more than a quarter of a million pounds. This includes several DfID-funded projects as part of programmes aimed at preventing plastics entering the oceans. I have great hopes that Mike and WasteAid will be able to make a real difference in tackling the global waste crisis.

What advice would you give to Enda Kiernan and future Presidents of CIWM?

The best advice I was given, by another Trustee, was "Be true to yourself", and to ensure that you focus on and showcase those things that are important to you. I would add "Enjoy" – being President of CIWM is a privilege and an honour, and the year will quickly pass by.

I would also add, do not be put off by the amount of time I put into the role. I had the advantage of not having a competing day job, but CIWM needs most Presidents to be firmly embedded in the sector, which implies having to juggle Presidential duties with an already busy work schedule. So, having limited time is just fine – the rest of the Presidential team is there to support you and will try to pick up any Centre or other invitations which you as President cannot fulfil.

Have you observed any shifts in the sector over the last 12 months, and in CIWM?

In terms of the sector, the answer is again plastics. The combination of the Blue Planet 2 effect and the China ban has given us an unprecedented political profile and a once in a generation opportunity to make a step change. By the time you read this, we should know if we have managed to turn that into meaningful policies with real teeth, in Defra's *Resources and Waste Strategy* for England.

For CIWM, it has certainly been an interesting year. The constitutional changes have been adopted and are now



with the Privy Council for approval, so hopefully the new streamlined Trustee body and Members Council will be in place next year. Colin Church and his staff did an excellent job in modernising the organisation and working with Executive Committee and Trustees to develop an action plan, both to refocus CIWM on supporting, empowering and connecting professionals across the resources sector, and to tackle the financial deficit. Our challenge over the next period is for us all – members, centre councils, other volunteers, executive committee, trustees and staff – to work together to bed down and implement all these changes.

What do you think (or hope) people will remember your year as President for?

Hopefully, as an active President who has managed to visit every Centre and had something interesting to say. Perhaps even as the person who raised the profile of SWM as an essential utility service, and of the need to address the global waste crisis, the three billion people lacking access to basic services that we take for granted. CIWM's objects under our Royal Charter are "to advance for the public benefit the art and science of wastes management worldwide...", so this is OUR problem, not just someone else's ...

You've been a prolific writer for the CIWM Journal over these last twelve months. Do you plan to keep contributing?

I welcomed the opportunity to write a monthly column as President, although sometimes the deadline did creep up more quickly than was comfortable... I would like to thank former editor Ben Wood, who was happy to accommodate one, two or three pages at my whim, and was always very professional, positive and supportive. Clearly, having a monthly column is a Presidential perk, but I do still have some hot topics I would like to share, and I would welcome the occasional invitation to contribute in the future. ■