

## **Interview with Michael Farthing, ECF Chair of Council**

### **Tell us about yourself, background, work, and interests outside chess.**

I'm now retired after a career mainly in IT, and before that teaching and a period working for the Cambridge Examination Board (looking after IT syllabuses). As well as being an indifferent chess player I have been an indifferent amateur actor, a more or less competent hill walker and wild camper, and a lover of languages and history. Currently I have a busman's hobby - building an operating system from scratch purely for fun - I have no wild idea that anyone else will use it.

### **In February of this year, you were elected to be Chair of Council. Why did you stand for this position?**

The Chair of Council is chosen by a vote of the members of Council, not the Board, and the vote was not unanimous - there was another candidate. The Board's role was just to organise the election and confirm the result.

The trigger for my standing for the post was that it was suggested to me (in the bar, following the 2019 AGM, so in 'vino stupiditas'). More seriously, I suppose I felt it was a new and exciting challenge, and I did have some clear ideas for new directions - but I wasn't anticipating Covid.

### **How long have you been playing chess and which club(s)/county do you play for? Any well-known scalps?**

I've been playing chess now for 62 years, being taught by my father when aged five. I remember he delayed teaching en passant until it arose naturally in a game between us, when I felt most aggrieved that he'd got an advantage by springing a new rule on me! As a boy I played incessantly - a small group of us every break in a corner of the playground, each with a pocket chess set and this continued to university. After that was a long gap until I returned first to online chess and then OTB about ten years ago. I now play for Morecambe in two leagues and Lancashire (usually as a humble u140 with an occasional excursion to u160). I also usually manage about half a dozen weekend congresses each year.

### **Tell us about the role of Chair of Council.**

It's a lot more varied than I had anticipated. I was a bit worried about my ability to keep myself neutral but actually during the Finance meeting [in July] I was so busy with the mechanics of ensuring everyone who wanted to speak could do so and trying to keep things on track, that I had no time to even think about my own views. In fact, I'm laying down my roles as league and congress representative simply because I don't think I can combine this with being Chair. But a lot also happens outside the meeting - advising on planned motions, responding to general queries and suggestions from Council members and trying to ensure that all member organisations have appointed reps in the first place. And I get landed with jobs nobody else wants to do such as running an election for the direct members' representatives or working out a mechanism for conducting a card vote on Zoom.

### **Please explain to members the difference between the ECF Board and ECF Council.**

The best analogy (if perhaps a tad grandiose) is that the Board is the Government and Council is the Parliament. Council has the problem here that it only meets twice a year for just five hours each time and therefore its scrutiny of 'The Government' is somewhat constrained. But the Board cannot set membership fees without the consent of Council and it is Council that elects (and can dismiss) the Board.

### **As Chair of Council, what aims do you have for the role?**

I see the role as one that should seek to strengthen the ability of Council members to influence the Board. It is more subtle than just a struggle for power between the two because Council (at its best) can raise issues, ideas and sometimes criticisms that a Board (at its best) will listen to and learn from, and it is that inter-play which should be fostered. One of my first initiatives was to set up a forum - which did spark some interest but at present does not look to have been a success. However, I also have in mind that with the emergence of internet conferencing, we could have extra informal meetings as well as the formal Finance Meeting and AGM. These might be dedicated to exploring particular issues of current interest.

**You got off to a very good start at the online Finance Council Meeting via Zoom in July. How difficult is it keeping an online meeting in order?**

It was a lot easier than I expected. There were a couple of moments where I felt I had to be quite assertive but I was very pleasantly surprised at the ready cooperation of representatives in observing the procedures and keeping quiet when not called to speak. It was a new approach for us all and I think everyone was making a special effort to make it work. I had a separate host to help me and we had planned to mute everyone when they were not speaking, but actually this was only very lightly enforced; it was a discipline that wasn't really needed.

**Before becoming Chair of Council you had experience in other ECF roles including Silver Rep and as a member of the Governance Committee. Did these roles give you an insight into how the ECF is run?**

Very much so - though my knowledge is still quite limited to the mechanics of governance. I know little of how the County Championship is run, or the Chess Academy or the training of arbiters (and I could extend this list much further). However, I know those who do and that knowledge was part of what was needed to be a Silver Rep - the relatively small amount of 'constituency' work provided a lot of satisfaction. Governance has also proved surprisingly satisfying and I have felt proud to be part of a team whose job is to review the effectiveness of the ECF's procedures. Of course, my rosy view of that does not find universal agreement.