



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

Burlington House, Piccadilly
London W1J 0BQ, UK

T: 020 7734 4582/ 3307

F: 020 7494 0166

Info@ras.org.uk

www.ras.org.uk

Registered Charity 226545

MINUTES OF COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 9 FEBRUARY 2006 IN THE COUNCIL ROOM AT BURLINGTON HOUSE

AGENDA

1. PRESENT

Prof. K.A. Whaler (President), Dr R.C. Smith, Professor D.W. Hughes, Professor E.R. Priest (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr M.A. Hapgood, Professor I.D. Howarth, Dr H.J. Walker (Secretaries), Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor R.L. Davies, Dr S.F. Green, Professor D. Gubbins, Dr J. Mitton, Dr A.M.S. Richards, Mr I.W. Ridpath, Professor E.I. Robson, Professor M.J. Rycroft, and Dr I.P. Wright.

APOLOGIES

Professor M.A. Barstow Mr J.D. Shanklin Dr I.P. Wright Prof. M. Grady

IN ATTENDANCE

M. Rowan-Robinson Executive Secretary

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 8 December 2005 were approved with the substitution of 'and agreed' in place of 'viz' in paragraph 5.4 and the correction of some typographic errors

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Webcasting The Senior Secretary reported on the uniformly favourable feedback so far received to the first webcast and urged Council to encourage as many people as possible to view and comment on it. He noted

with reference to the projected 'Titan' webcast that there were concerns about broadcasting new results over the Internet. Speakers had been reassured that they had full control over what was included in the programme. Council welcomed this initiative and were pleased that even after the 3 month period during which they were available via the RAS web site, the webcasts would be preserved on DVD,

3.2 Geophysics Education

The Executive Secretary reported that the report was in a near final form and that its principal author, Professor Aftab Khan, hoped to be able to present it at the March meeting of Council. Following a review meeting with the Executive Secretaries of the RAS and the Geological Society of London (GSL), it had been suggested that the report would achieve more impact with Government if it highlighted the concerns of UK industry. Professor Gubbins raised the issue of the accreditation of degrees in geophysics by the Institute of Physics and the GSL. He felt that the RAS should be more engaged since he was concerned about the attrition of the physics components in first degrees.

3.3 Leap Seconds

The Geophysical Secretary reported that the Observatoire de Paris was experimenting with use of a modern internet-based protocol (SOAP = Simple Object Access Protocol) to disseminate timing information relevant to astronomy and space science. If successful, this could free the community from its dependence on the time standards maintained by the International Telecommunications Union. He would monitor the situation and report back on progress.

3.4 Open Access Publishing

The Executive Secretary reported on the debate on 17 December 2005 in the Science and Technology Committee, held in Westminster Hall. The DTI minister present had clarified the government's position on scientific publications. This was that the market should be allowed to develop without institutional barriers being put in the way of any particular publishing model. He had added that the best way to retain freedom of choice for authors was to encourage competition and innovation between current business models. This, the more moderate language of the Committee members and evidence that RCUK was re-thinking some aspects of its 'open repository' policy (which will be explored in a meeting organised by the Science Council in the Spring), encouraged the Executive Secretary to believe that change to the current publishing arrangements would more measured than had once been feared would be the case.

4. BURLINGTON HOUSE

4.1 Phase 2 plans

The Executive Secretary outlined the modifications proposed to the outline plans to better accommodate the larger numbers expected to visit the Society's apartments as a result of the installation of a lecture theatre. He indicated the tentative timetable and requested

that Council should meet as late as possible in July in order to be able to approve the tender documents which were not expected to be ready before then. On the assumption that work commenced in November it was proposed to evacuate staff to the 'Tower' apartments in Burlington House belonging to the Linnean Society, as well as to the Society's annexe above the GSL. He noted that some editorial staff were already 'homeworking'. In response to a query, the Executive Secretary was happy to report that staff were engaged and positive in their feelings about what would be a very difficult and trying time. He added that he had been authorised by officers to appoint a HR consultant to assist him undertake immediate and mid-term planning, since the project was an opportunity to review and if necessary revise job descriptions in the light of the priorities agreed at the Strategic Away Day in July 2005. Finally, he noted that the Treasurer had started discussions with the Society's investment manager to ensure the most effective managed cash flow.

4.2 Contracts

The Executive Secretary then proceeded to list the contracts which he wished to enter into on the basis already approved at the Council meeting in December 2005 viz Peregrine Bryant (Architect and Lead Consultant); Hockley & Dawson (Consulting Structural Engineers); MCA Consulting Engineers (Consulting Mechanical and Electrical Engineers) and Sawyer & Fisher (Chartered Surveyors). He added that, in due course, it would be necessary to appoint a Planning Supervisor to ensure compliance with Health and Safety regulations as well as a Party Wall Surveyor. The former would cost around £2000 and the latter some £100 per hour. Council agreed to all of this and also to the appointment, should this be urged by the lead consultant, of a Building Control Approved Inspector (to provide services which otherwise would have to be provided, for a comparable fee of around £2,000, by the Westminster Building Control Department).

However the proposal that the Executive Secretary, with the occasional assistance of Ms Dolores Altaras, the independent architect co-opted onto the Burlington House committee, should perform the role of clerk of works was questioned. It was felt that this would be a false economy since a full time clerk of works would be better placed to ensure the contractors delivered precisely what was required of them.

5. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

5.1 Revised BAA Agreement

The Treasurer, in introducing this item, reported that the BAA Council had not so far been able to approve the Agreement because of concerns over their library, part of which, under the Agreement, would be co-located with the RAS collection. As a result he asked Council to approve the Agreement on the condition that it was approved in an unaltered way by the BAA; otherwise it would be necessary to renegotiate and bring a new version back to Council. In view of the previous agenda item though, the Treasurer added that the BAA Council realised that space

constraints in Burlington House would make it impossible to house a separate BAA library after the refurbishment.

The new Agreement, the Treasurer explained, was necessary to regularise the changed position created by the lease entered into by the Society and the ODPM under which 'rent' and service charges are payable. The Agreement passed on a 1/10 share of these costs to the BAA (a smaller proportion, it was noted, than had so far been used to calculate the BAA's share of combined utility costs) and detailed the Association's rights to the use of the refurbished premises, adding that the BAA would not be asked to contribute to the costs of refurbishment. When asked why the figures were linked to RPI rather than annual calculations of actual costs, the Treasurer replied that this had been traditionally done at the request of the BAA in order to reduce planning uncertainty, but added that the Agreement allowed for periodic re-basing.

With this clarification Council gave its approval.

5.2 Remuneration (cost of living increases)

The Treasurer explained that Council approval was needed since the conditions of employment and remuneration, which applied to most staff and others in regular receipt of payments from the Society, stated that annual cost of living awards were discretionary. The present proposal followed the recent past practice of the Council. At this point he, and the Executive Secretary, withdrew. Following a discussion about the basis on which staff salaries were calculated, Council approved a 2.2% increase with effect from 1 January 2006 and suggested that an *ex gratia* payment might be made to compensate staff for the disruption caused by the refurbishment of Burlington House. At this point the Treasurer and the Executive Secretary returned to the meeting.

5.3 Elections to Council

Council approved the balloting list, which had been placed on the table with the exception of Dr L Fletcher who, it was suggested, should be asked whether she preferred to be on the 'G' list of vacancies.

5.4 Whitrow lecturer

The Secretary Ian Howarth asked Council to approve the invitation to Professor Carlos Frenk to deliver the 2006 Whitrow Lecture. This was warmly endorsed.

5.5 IAU General Assembly (GA)

Before inviting the Treasurer to introduce the previously distributed paper, the President noted that it was most likely that the UK delegation would be led by Professor Rowan-Robinson as National Representative and proposed that he be allowed to contribute to the discussion of this item. This was approved by Council.

The Treasurer first explained the actions taken by the Society, as the National Member of the IAU, to refresh the membership of the Union by proposing the candidature of some 100 new members and the withdrawal, on the grounds of

inactivity or death, of approximately the same number. He went on to outline the ways in which the Society was encouraging scientists, including younger scientists not yet eligible to become members of the IAU, to attend the Prague General Assembly.

Turning to the resolutions to be discussed at the General Assembly and on which the National Representative would be required to vote, the Treasurer first dealt with the proposed budget for 2006-2009. This incorporated a reasonable (3%) annual inflation factor and left the UK proportionate contribution unchanged so he had no hesitation in asking Council to authorise the National Representative to approve the proposed budget. Council so approved.

He next turned to the resolution proposing a change to bye-law 4. Currently it states: 'Individual Members are admitted by the Executive Committee upon the nomination of a National Member or, if the individual in question is not represented by a National Member, by the President of a Division.' It is proposed to *delete* 'if the individual in question is not represented by a National Member'. This, the Treasurer said, on the face of it this will weaken the role of the National Members like the RAS e.g. a President of a Division could nominate any British astronomer without the involvement of the Society, and whether or not we thought such a person suitable. On the other hand it strengthens the role of Division Presidents, presumably in the expectation that a President will take a scientific view over whatever motivates the National Member. This may be a critical factor in countries where appointment to international bodies is politically controlled; for the UK/RAS, he concluded, the change seems unlikely to make much practical difference. In discussion it was agreed that it was hardly conceivable that any scientist proposed by the president of a Division would not be acceptable to the membership as a whole- and in addition to the cases which might otherwise run foul of national politics there were perhaps more where nominations were not made through the National Member for reasons of simple inefficiency. Council accordingly agreed that the National Representative could approve this change to bye-law 4, after listening to the debate.

Finally the Treasurer turned to the proposed change to the statutes concerning the conduct of voting at the GA. At the Sydney GA in 2003 the procedures were changed (from voting by individuals present to voting by National Representatives). The RAS supported this change and subsequently re-affirmed it at a meeting of Council in 2004. It was now proposed, as consequence it was supposed of lobbying by the American Astronomical Society, to separate out 'issues of a primarily scientific nature, as determined by the Executive Committee,' which would be voted on by individual members, from other issues, where voting will remain with National Representatives. The Treasurer added that to be consistent with the principles agreed by Council in 2004 the Society would need to be satisfied that the proposed procedure is 'scientifically responsible' and 'democratic in a real sense', that the procedure 'ensures that all matters of significance have received thorough consideration by all relevant bodies of the Union before being submitted to a formal vote', and that 'decisions on such matters are not taken by a small minority on behalf of the membership'.

After discussion about the relative merits of 'direct' (delegates at the GA) and 'indirect' (via National Representatives) democracy, Council concluded that the optimum way of proceeding was by harnessing the benefits of both. As it was not possible to propose amendments, Professor Rowan-Robinson was asked to explore with the IAU Executive Council the possibility of changing procedures without the

necessity of a formal resolution at the GA. If this was possible, and the Executive Council were minded to agree to them, the new procedures would require that resolutions passed at GAs by individual members votes, would remain provisional until ratified by the wider membership. Without this condition being agreed to by the IAU Executive Council in advance of the GA, Council instructed the National Representative to oppose the resolution.

In response to a question the Executive Secretary undertook to provide Council with the current list of UK members of the IAU.

It was agreed to consider the proposed ‘2009 Year of Astronomy’ at the March meeting of Council.

6. COMMITTEE REPORTS

6.1 Membership Committee

The Chair, Dr Smith, introduced the report which fell into 2 parts.

The first dealt with the proposed response of Council to the letter received from PPARC following publication of the report on ‘The PhD and careers in astronomy’. Most discussion centred on the 4-year PhD viz the balance during the first year between training and research; compliance with the Bologna Accords; the impact on international students attracted by the relatively short duration of UK doctorate degrees; the confusing ‘message’ sent to students by the simultaneous existence of 3 and 4 year PhD programmes (the result, some felt, of PPARC’s poorly managed introduction of 4 year scholarships). Council agreed that Professor Davies, who sits on PPARC’s committee reviewing studentships, would assist Dr Smith to compose its response, which would be sent under the name of the Executive Secretary. The President noted that the length of the UK PhD was a major issue in the International Review of Physics and Astronomy and that the Society needed to give much more thought to it.

The second dealt with membership grades. Dr Smith reported that after a long and at times confusing discussion the Membership Committee had concluded that it was mistaken to believe that those professional astronomers who remained outside the Society would be attracted into it by a change in the nomenclature used to describe its membership. Even if they were, it was not clear that the number of non-RAS professionals was sufficiently significant to justify such changes, changes that may not be welcomed by the non-professional fellows of the Society. ‘Back of envelope’ calculations made by the Treasurer and Professor Hughes suggested while most senior members of the community were members, up to 50% of professional astronomers remained outside the Society. The Senior Secretary reported that he was undertaking a more rigorous analysis. Some members of Council disagreed about the efficacy of nomenclature, taking the view that limiting ‘full’ fellowship to a professional level grade sent a clear message that the primary purpose of the Society was the promotion of astronomy and geophysics through support of its professional community. Others felt that membership of the Society would only matter to professionals if it was linked to their academic career prospects and /or salary.

Turning to lower subscription rates for overseas members, it was suggested that there was no compelling pressure from members for different treatment nor would it be easy to devise equitable rules. Why, for example, should fellows based in Paris be charged a lower subscription rate when, arguably, they would find it easier to use the Society's facilities than fellows based in Aberdeen or Belfast?

Given the range of opinions, as well as the need to establish a firmer statistical baseline, it was agreed that membership grading should be re-examined as part of other possible changes to the Governance of the Society (which will be discussed at a subsequent meeting of Council).

6.2 Education Committee

The Secretary, Dr Walker introduced her previously distributed paper. It was agreed that Professor Barstow should be invited to talk about this recent review of Space Education and other related developments at the March meeting of Council.

6.3 Library Committee

The Chair, Mr Ridpath spoke to the paper which had been laid on the table. He highlighted the committee's decision to ascertain whether the journals to which the Society subscribed offered electronic access and the costs of allowing Fellows to access them from terminals in Burlington House – and from remote stations.

6.4 Finance Committee

The Treasurer spoke to this paper, which had been deferred from the December Council. Council was concerned to learn that the Paneth Trust had been inactive for a year and asked that it be kept informed of the worrying situation.

6.5 Publishing Proposals

The Treasurer informed Council of the proposals received in response to the Society's invitations.

The first was for proposals to exploit the images owned by the Society in the form of portraits, pictures and diagrams. The Library Committee had already considered the 2 proposals submitted and recommended acceptance of that from the Science Photo Library. This accorded with the Treasurer's opinion too.

The second was for proposals to develop a new book series on astronomy and geophysics under the Society's imprimatur. 6 proposals had been received, though as yet not evaluated.

The Treasurer asked for approval to enter into negotiations with the Science Photo Library and to review the book publishing proposals under the aegis of the Finance Committee, following which recommendations will be brought to Council.

This was approved

6.6 MNRAS Editorial Meeting

In noting this item, which had been deferred from the December Council, it was agreed that MNRAS was a 'run away' success. Its managing editor (and that of the other managing editors) that would normally have made their annual reports at the February meeting of Council will do so in March, which has the benefit of coming

after the annual meeting of the publications management committee. Dr Richards indicated that she would raise the issue of data sets storage on that occasion.

7 REVIEWS

International Perceptions of UK Research in Physics and Astronomy The Geophysical Secretary led a discussion on his previously distributed paper. He noted that the four sponsors planned to make separate official responses to the review report thought there was scope for joint actions as well.

It was noted that the report had been (largely) ignored by the media, which was a great pity. This may have been the result of the way in which the release had been managed; more likely it was because of the absence of specific recommendations in the Report. Council agreed that the Report, while largely painting an encouraging picture of the state of astrophysics and solar system physics, identified some issues of grave concern, in particular those relating to human potential (the PhD training of UK scientists, the career development of young scientists, the need for more female staff) and to the viability of university physics and astronomy departments (including the challenge of supporting inter-disciplinary work within such departments).

The Geophysical Secretary agreed to draft a formal position paper, which he hoped could be signed off at the March Council, and which could be sent to Lord Sainsbury, Science Minister, Sir David King and Sir Keith O’Nions, respectively Chief Scientist and DG Research Councils as well as bodies including the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee.

OTHER

8.1 Candidates for Election

Council approved the election of the candidates listed in previously circulated papers and posted on the RAS web site

8.2 The Minutes of the Monthly A&G (Ordinary) Meeting for 08/12/05 and 13/01/06 were approved

8.3 The President informed Council that the Society would be participating in ‘University Challenge-the Professionals’.

AOB

- It was agreed that Council will meet on July 28 (time to be confirmed)
- The next meeting of Council will be THURSDAY 9 March at 1300
- There was no agreement for the suggestion of a service at St James’s Church Piccadilly to commemorate deceased fellows. However there was agreement that some other means of paying respect should be investigated

Council rose at 1700