



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING 14 MAY 2010 AT 1030 IN THE COUNCIL ROOM

1. PRESENT: Professor A.C. Fabian (President), Professor A.M. Cruise, Professor M.A. Hapgood, Professor J.C. Zarnecki (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr H.J. Walker, Professor M.A. Barstow and (Secretaries), Dr R.J. Barber, Dr E. Bunce, Professor P.K. Browning, Professor M.G. Edmunds, Professor B.K. Gibson, Dr J. Greaves, Professor A.W. Hood, Professor O. Lahav, and Dr J.A. Wild.

APOLOGIES: Dr I.A. Crawford (Secretary), Dr I.F. Corbett, Professor K. Blundell, Professor J.E. Drew (Vice-President) and Professor R. Ivison

IN ATTENDANCE: Prof. R. Davies (President-Designate); Dr R. Massey (Deputy Executive Secretary); D. Elliott (Executive Secretary)

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 12 March 2010 were approved and signed following a) reiteration that a revised library budget including the proposed costs of binding journals would be offered by the Library Committee and Librarian to a future meeting of Council and b) after clarification that the agenda item 'President's Business' of necessity would take the form of unadvertised, sometimes confidential, oral reports.

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Dr Massey reported that the Demographic Survey would be undertaken by Sean McWhinnie of *Oxford Research and Policy* and Anita Heward. He would update Council on its progress at the July meeting.

3.2 The Executive Secretary informed Council that at the deadline (13 May) there had been 50 valid applications for the '2010 RAS Fellowships'. The selection panel, chaired by Professor Davies, would consist of Professors Zarnecki, Frenk, Howarth, Elsworth and Kendall. It was hoped to upload and share application forms on a secure web site but multiple hard copies had been requested as a backup. He noted that implementing the criteria stipulated by Council had not been without difficulty. In particular, some applicants had ignored or misunderstood the requirement that they were in possession of a doctorate at the time of application. Some potential applicants queried their eligibility under the 'ordinarily resident' condition. Where it was inappropriate to adjudicate on individual circumstances,

they were informed that the purpose of the fellowships was to deal with the problems created for post-docs based, normally, in the UK. If, subsequently, it emerged that an applicant had no obvious connection to the UK the panel would take appropriate action. Finally, there had been some initial confusion about the 'one Fellow per institution' cap. Council made it clear that the selection panel should rank applicants purely on the basis of merit and, if necessary, advise the 2nd and 3rd placed candidates to make arrangements at an alternative institution (and be given a reasonable amount of time to do so) in the event that, otherwise, more than one Fellow would end up in the same institution.

4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

The President reported on meetings with the Chair of STFC, Professor Sterling (together with members of the 'Particle Physics Action Group') and the Astronomy Forum (the latter held during the NAM in Glasgow). The General Election, coming so soon after the formation of the UK Space Agency (UKSA), had added another layer of complexity to an already complicated funding situation for astronomy and space research. It was, he felt, unlikely that further steep cuts overall could be avoided but it was important that funding arrangements for the new Agency did not adversely impact on STFC supported projects. This made the task of preparing the bids for UKSA and STFC for the next Comprehensive Spending Review even more critical. It was suggested that the acting Director of UKSA, Dr Williams, might be invited to a future meeting of Council.

There was some discussion about the relative roles of the RAS and the Astronomy Forum but it was concluded that the formulation posted on the web site sufficed, viz:

'The Astronomy Forum is an independent group drawn from heads of astronomy research groups in the UK (or their nominees) at professorial level to discuss issues and, as appropriate, present its views to STFC, BIS and other bodies. Forum members try to represent the views of all research astronomers in their respective universities. The RAS facilitates Forum meetings. It is chaired (currently) by the President of the RAS and meets (usually) in Burlington House. The Forum complements the activities of the RAS whose membership encompasses a wider range of interests spanning geoscientists, overseas based and advanced amateur astronomers, historians as well as students and 'Friends'. The views and activities of the Forum are not necessarily those of the RAS although a common view is sought'.

This chimed with the conclusion reached at the Glasgow meeting where it was agreed that the close links needed between the 2 bodies could be best achieved through having the Forum chaired by the RAS President (except where s/he was not an astronomer, where one of the Vice-Presidents would take on the role).

5. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

5.1 The Report of the House of Commons S&T Committee on the *Impact of spending cuts on SET and scientific research* was noted

5.2 The consultation document on *Earth Sciences in the 21st century: A forward look* was noted

5.3 Dr Massey speculated about the impact for Science of the changes brought about by the General Election at which both of the MPs who were FRAS, Lempit Opik and David Heathcoat Amory, had lost their seats. Combined with the defeat and retirement of several other members, it was agreed that the Society needed to re-position itself with a new House of Commons devoid of many of its former champions of Science.

6. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

6.1 The Treasurer outlined the proposal from *Venue Cymru*, a conference centre in Llandudno, in connection with the 2011 NAM 2011. After describing its facilities and proximity to a range of affordable accommodation he presented the special delegate rate offered, on the assumption of 400 participants, of £170 (inc.VAT) for the 5 days Sunday 17 – Thursday 21 April 2011 (and £40 per day for day delegate registrations) to include room hire; conference audio-visual package; poster display boards and; mid-morning/ mid-afternoon refreshments and a two course lunch. This had been scrutinised by the Finance Committee, which concluded that, with registration fees of about £210 (full) and £140 (student) and other concessions (e.g. for RAS members), the RAS grant needed to make the budget balance ranged from £18,000 to £25,000 depending on attendance (in the range 400 to 600). The organisers of the NAMs at Glasgow and Hatfield had been consulted about the proposal - the only feasible plan for NAM2011 that has emerged since Sheffield withdrew – and had responded positively. If Council approved the proposal Professor Edmunds had agreed to act as chair of the SOC while the Treasurer and Executive Secretary would form the kernel of the LOC while Society staff would manage the event, in association with the *Venue* employees.

Council welcomed this initiative noting that following the 2012 NAM at Manchester University it may well be a template for future NAMs. Professor Hapgood and the President volunteered to join the SOC to represent respectively the cosmology and MIST communities stressing that the programme should embrace mainstream as well as minority interests. It was suggested that the scientific programme should run between Monday morning and Thursday lunchtime in the expectation that many delegates would travel to Llandudno on the Sunday. On this basis it was agreed that Professor Edmunds, the Treasurer and the Executive Secretary should visit *Venue Cymru* on 28 May and, subject to satisfactory discussions, enter into a contract.

6.2 Professor Hapgood spoke to the letter received from Professor Cannon, Chair of the UK Panel for International Union of Radio Science (URSI) requesting that the Society meet some of the costs of adherence currently borne by the Royal Society. Professor Cannon explained the Royal Society believed that requiring Learned Societies to pay 51% of the international subscription to International Unions strengthened the engagement of UK scientists in international R&D. For 'single-subject' unions identification of a single UK learned society or institution was straightforward. That was not the case with URSI, hence the proposal that the RAS should meet 20% (currently £1400 pa) of the Learned Societies' share (with the Institution of Engineering and Technology and the Institute of Physics bearing the remaining portion in equal parts). Professor Hapgood, speaking on behalf of the MIST community, confirmed that URSI was an important focal point for scientific discussions and that some level of RAS contribution would be appropriate. He was, though, not sure that it should amount to 20%. He added that the Society was still awaiting a response from the Royal Society to its letter of October 2009 concerning a similar request in respect of adherence to the International Union of Geodesy & Geophysics.

Council agreed that the Society should make a contribution but before agreeing to the sum requested should seek the views of the UK radio astronomy community. Accordingly the Executive Secretary was asked to contact Professor Richard Davis (Jodrell Bank).

6.3 The 2009 Annual Report was adopted by Council and duly signed by the President and Treasurer.

6.4 The Report of the Honorary Auditors was noted

6.5 The report of 'NAM 2010' was noted and the Executive Secretary instructed to send the congratulations of Council to its organisers.

6.6 The report of the Committee for Women in Astronomy and Geophysics was noted

6.7 Dr Greaves spoke to her paper setting out the case for establishing a scheme to provide short-term support, of the order of £1K per month, for young researchers who had lost their postdoctoral position as a result of the current economic circumstances, were in genuine need and whose work was of strong scientific value. She explained that the intention was to help with the cost of living for up to six months, allowing the researcher to complete papers, give talks, etc while looking for another position. While Council was sympathetic, concerns were expressed that, with the prospect of further cuts, this could represent a large, open-ended commitment; further, that the chances, in present circumstances, of displaced PDAs finding another research position were slim and, above all, that primary responsibility lay with their current employers through retraining, redeployment and redundancy payments (and the State in terms of unemployment payments). Dr Greaves agreed to consider these points and submit a revised paper for the July Council (which, as a retiring member, she would not herself be attending).

6.8 Professor Cruise outlined the business conducted at the recent meeting of the International Committee which focused on members domiciled abroad. In particular, given their necessarily limited access to many of the benefits of membership such as meetings and other events in Burlington House, rather than offering a reduced subscription what steps could the Society take to make them feel more involved? A number of possibilities were discussed including a grants scheme to encourage overseas domiciled members to attend the NAM; electronic access to slides and audio commentary from scientific meetings; an international award; a dedicated e-bulletin and section of the web site and a subject 'blog forum'. The next step was to pass these ideas to the Membership Committee for its consideration and in due course its recommendations to Council. Finally, Professor Cruise observed that for many scientists based overseas who were not Fellows their knowledge of the Society was restricted to its research publications. Accordingly, it was important to have an effective interface between the Society's and Wiley-Blackwell's web sites.

Council thanked Professor Cruise for leading the International Committee during its infancy and confirmed that he would be replaced, as chair, by Professor Ofer Lahav.

6.9 Professor Barstow reminded Council that the Specialist Discussion meetings were an important (and much envied by foreign astronomical societies) feature of the RAS calendar. However the process by which they were arranged was somewhat *ad hoc* (the 'A' and 'G' Secretaries invited proposals from the community and thereafter attempted to achieve a balanced programme). He invited Council to draw the Secretaries' attention to particular

topics, perhaps associated with forthcoming events (missions, anniversaries etc), which, collectively, it wished to see incorporated into the programme.

6.10 Council approved the appointment of Charles Barclay as Chair of the Education Committee following the imminent retirement of Julien King

7. FINANCE

7.1 The report of the Finance Committee was noted. Dr Berman was due to rotate off the committee, having completed two 3 year terms. However in view of his City experience and bearing in mind the need for continuity at a time of large turnover of key personnel, exceptionally, Council agreed to extend Dr Nigel Berman's membership of it for a further period of 3 years.

7.2 The Treasurer spoke to the 2009 Audit Finding prepared by Baker Tilley and in particular 2 issues raised by the auditors. First, in respect of the Society's 'heritage assets' (such as historic instruments and rare books), the Finance Committee had signalled that valuations should not be included in the balance sheet to avoid grossly overstating the true worth of the Society and divulging too much about its valuable items. Instead they would be disclosed in the notes to the financial statements, by groups/classes of assets (without values), with an explanation as to why they were not reported in the balance sheet. A new valuation of artefacts, though, would be carried out to satisfy insurance needs. Second, in respect of the auditors' recommendation that, to ensure a segregation of duties, there should be a regular, independent, check of the bank reconciliations the Treasurer was minded to hire an appropriately qualified outside party. At this point Dr Barber, a member of the Finance Committee with considerable professional financial experience, volunteered to undertake this task on a 6 monthly basis. Council gratefully accepted this offer. Following this discussion, Council authorised the Treasurer to sign the 'Letter of Recommendation' to the auditors confirming that the Society had observed due propriety in the conduct of the audit.

7.3 The Treasurer presented an up-dated Operations Plan noting that, on the basis of information received after the table was prepared, the projected surpluses were probably exaggerated by some £30-£50K since they did not take into account changes to rates of VAT and National Insurance contributions recently reported as a policy of the new government, nor a detailed budget calculation of income from the sale of publications.

7.4 The revised Risk Assessment was noted.

8. PUBLICATIONS

8.1 The Treasurer summarised the main issues discussed at the recent meeting of the Publications Management Committee (PMC). In particular, he informed Council that the speed of production of papers in both research journals had declined in recent years since volume increases had not been matched by increases in editorial and production staffing, which the Editorial Board, the Society and the Publisher had managed to keep at a constant level by absorbing the greater throughput of papers. Subject to Council's agreement, it was proposed to rectify this by adding one *MNRAS* editor, one editorial assistant and one production editor to the teams, though not all at once, at a full year cost starting in 2011 or 2012 at the latest of some £100,000 p.a. Secondly, he reported that the PMC had deferred any decision to discontinue print production of the research journals and move to electronic publication as long as a significant fraction of the subscriber-base remained attached to hard

copy (though the trend towards e-journals was very marked). Finally, he asked Council to approve subscription price increases in 2011 of 9% for *MNRAS* and 6% for *GJI* and *A&G*. While the increase for the last two journals was ‘industry standard’ he informed Council that the size of *MNRAS* and *MNRAS Letters* combined over the past decade had risen by 135%, while subscription rates had risen by only 111%, so the budget had absorbed inflation for a decade, plus 24%. Following some discussion about the £/\$ rate of exchange which it was prudent to factor into the budget projections for publications, Council approved both the price and staffing recommendations.

8.2 The report of the *MNRAS* Editorial Board was noted with considerable satisfaction.

8.3 The report of the *GJI* Editorial Board was noted with considerable satisfaction.

9. OTHER

9.1 Council approved the following candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in the Officers’ Report for April 2010 and posted on the RAS web site.

Battaglia	Marina
Bulger	Joanna
Burrows	Keiran
Cappellari	Michele
Collett	Thomas
Dehneu	Walter
Downey	Olivia
Dunkley	Joanna
Dunn	Jacqueline
Fulda	Paul
Hall	Aimee
Hindson	Luke
Hutchinson	James
Jaffe	Yara
Kelly	James
Maxwell	Michael
Miles	Richard
Dorset	
Morris	Glenn
O'Sullivan	Stephen
Pastrav	Bogdan
Potts	Dale
Rawlings	Jason
Russell	Jennifer
Schumacher	Hana
Sclater	Gillian
Semionov	Dmitrij
Sfair	Rafael
Stinson	Greg
Sullivan	Mark

Tugwell	Katherine
Uthas	Helena
Volschenk	Constant
Weston	Jennifer
Wilson	Colin

9.2 The Minutes of the A&G meeting of 12th March 2010 were approved and signed

10. AOB

10.1 Dr Barber suggested that the incoming President may wish to convene an ‘away day’ at which issues of governance (including the whole-scale revision of bye-laws) might be considered.

10.2 The President reminded Council that the next meeting would take place on Friday 23 July at 1100 but that this was the last meeting for himself and for Professors Cruise, Hapgood, Edmunds and Gibson and Drs Greaves and Wild. Council thanked all of them for their contributions to the work of the Society.

Council rose at 1355

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R.L. Davies
President

23 July 2010