



# ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

Burlington House, Piccadilly  
London W1J 0BQ, UK

T: 020 7734 4582/ 3307  
F: 020 7494 0166

[Info@ras.org.uk](mailto:Info@ras.org.uk)  
[www.ras.org.uk](http://www.ras.org.uk)

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## MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 9 MAY 2008 AT 1100 IN THE RAS COUNCIL ROOM

**1. PRESENT:** Professor M. Rowan-Robinson (President), Professor M.E. Bailey and Professor R.A. Harrison, (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr M.A. Hapgood, Dr H. J. Walker and Dr I.A. Crawford (secretaries), Professor M.A. Barstow, Professor A.M. Cruise, Professor M.G. Edmunds, Professor B.K. Gibson, Dr J. Greaves, Professor J.H. Hough, Dr J. Mitton

**APOLOGIES:** Professor R.L. Davies and Professor I.D. Howarth (Vice-Presidents); Professor I. Robson; Dr A.J. Ball; Dr L. Fletcher; Dr V. Nakariakov and Dr J.A. Wild

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Professor A. Fabian; D. Elliott (Executive Secretary) and Dr R. Massey (Policy Officer).

### 2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 13 March 2008, with minor corrections, were approved and signed

### 3. MATTERS ARISING

**3.1** Professor Fabian left the meeting for this item. The Treasurer reported that, following discussions with the editorial board, it was proposed that Professor Fabian will step down as Editor in Chief (EiC) and as an editor of MNRAS at the Editorial Board Meeting at the end of May. At that meeting Professor Carswell, currently Deputy EiC, will take over as EiC for a period of at least 2 years and up to a maximum of 5 years. Professor Carswell will appoint a Deputy EiC from among the other editors and identify a replacement editor for Professor Fabian (and also for Professor Ofer Lahav, who, because of pressure of other work, has announced his resignation from the Editorial Board this summer). Whether Professor Fabian returns as an editor is a decision that will be made following his term as President of the RAS; similarly whether he is re-appointed as EiC will be decided when Professor Carswell leaves the position. Finally it was proposed that the term of office of EiC is restricted to 5 years, renewable once by mutual agreement. Council approved these proposals.

#### **4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS**

**4.1** The President reported that he had represented the Society at the centenary banquet in Tokyo of the Japanese Astronomical Society and presented a handsomely bound 2 volume edition of the works of Sir William Herschel (for arranging which, thanks were due to the Librarian Peter Hingley).

**4.2** The President reported on the ‘community session’ at the Belfast NAM and his meeting (with Professor Fabian and the Executive Secretary) with Professor Wakeham following which he had sent the following message to the Presidents of a number of foreign astronomical societies:

‘I’m writing to you in your capacity as President of the ...Following strong public concerns about the UK funding situation for astronomy and particle physics, the UK Government set up a Panel to review the health of Physics in the UK, chaired by Professor Bill Wakeham, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southampton. The situation that gives us the gravest concern is planned reduction in university grants, which would reduce the number of astronomy postdoctoral positions in the UK from 329 in 2007 to 246 in 2010, a reduction of 25%. I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing to write to Prof Wakeham, saying something about the strength of UK astronomy, and, if you agree with this, saying that the UK’s expenditure on astronomy is not excessive compared with other European countries. The actual figure for total UK expenditure on astronomy and space science is about 140 million pounds per annum, this figure including our subscriptions to ESA and ESO which account for 82 millions pounds p.a. I believe this represents about 0.01% of GDP. If you would be willing to write a short note to Professor Wakeham about this, it should go to [luke.moody@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:luke.moody@esrc.ac.uk).Many thanks’

**4.3** The President went on to summarise his meeting with the Chief Operating Officer at STFC, Professor Richard Wade. It appeared on close inspection that while the list of potential cuts to astronomy was considerable, the proposed ‘rebuild’ (using the £40m held back to fund new activity) would result in astro-projects ending up at roughly constant volume. The net outcome would be a cut of about £33m, of which all but £1m would fall on grants. The President added that if this had been known earlier, while the RAS would still have argued against precipitate withdrawals from or immediate closures of facilities and argued for a review of solar physics and ground-based STP and a plan for operating costs of High Performance Computers, and while there would still be a serious problem with grants, he might not have portrayed the situation as a crisis for UK astronomy. He felt it was important to begin to talk up the positive aspects of UK astronomy taking encouragement from the DIUS Secretary of State, John Denham, who once again had expressed strong support for basic science at a recent meeting at the Royal Academy of Engineering, while alluding to the damage caused to the standing of UK science by the negative headlines generated by the astronomy (and particle physics) communities. He also took encouragement from the meeting with Science Minister, Ian Pearson, who had left him with the impression that there could be a mid-term adjustment to STFC’s budget, not least to compensate for the rise in international subscription costs resulting from the strong euro. However he noted the wish of Council to defer further public comment pending the government’s response to the IUSS Committee report( see 4.4) and the publication of the revised STFC Delivery Plan and, in the meantime, to be chary of relying on verbal assurances and to be sensitive to the continuing anxieties of the community.

**4.4** The President noted that there were no fewer than 19 references to the RAS in the report on the ‘Science Budgets’ of the IUSS Committee, a report which was unusually critical of the

management of the STFC. While he had been reluctant to add coals to the fire by issuing a press release he invited Council to advise Professor Fabian of the line he should take in the meeting with Ian Pearson to which he had been invited on May 12<sup>th</sup> – immediately after his assumption of the Presidency. After a full discussion, by a show of hands, 12 voted for the proposition that the minister should be informed that, in the opinion of the Council of the RAS, the CEO of STFC had lost the confidence of the astronomy community; 1 voted against and Professor Edmunds, a member of the STFC Council, abstained.

## **5. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

**5.1** The Policy Officer outlined the scope of the submission the Society wished to make to the Wakeham Review of the Health of Physics viz that public funding of astronomy research in the UK was a good investment since it generated economic impact in terms of skilled manpower and commercial enterprises and that, by comparison with analogues, was not over-generous. In addition astronomy attracted young people into science which was a government priority. The deadline for submission was 23 May but it was agreed that there would need to be email iteration if the Society wished to make the case for re-structuring STFC when the President gave oral evidence to the Review in June. He mentioned that David Heathcoat-Amory MP, and a Fellow of the Society, had agreed to ask a parliamentary question on the funding of astronomy and space science in OECD countries.

**5.2** The Policy Officer reported that to date he had received only 11 returns of the questionnaire survey of Astronomy degree courses including statistics on job first destinations of graduates which it was hoped to include in the Wakeham submission. The President urged Council to encourage their own institutions to comply since otherwise the results would be of limited value.

**5.3** The Chair of the Higher Education Committee, Professor Hough, reported that following consultation, involving the RAS, HEFCE had agreed to modify the replacement system for the Research Assessment Exercise which determines universities' research funding. Two modifications were being made to the plans for implementing the so-called Research Excellence Framework (REF). Firstly, the timetable for designing the new framework will be extended by 12 months to allow sufficient time for the development of this more flexible approach to the funding and assessment of research. Secondly, within the REF's overarching framework, there will no longer be such a clear distinction between the arrangements for science-based subjects and those for all other subjects. For all subjects the assessment will include some combination of metrics-based indicators, including bibliometrics where appropriate, as well as input from expert panels. Council noted with satisfaction that these changes, in large part, were in accord with the RAS submission.

## **6. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE**

**6.1** In asking Council to formally approve the Annual Report for 2007 the President noted the considerable range of activities in which the Society had been involved, in which all members of Council, he felt, could take pride. Council approved the report and the President signed it in their presence.

**6.2** Council noted the report of the Honorary Auditors and in particular welcomed the proposal for a strategy planning away day. It was agreed to arrange a residential one day event in September 2008.

**6.3** The Treasurer reported the outcome of the recent meeting of the Finance Committee and in particular, following the recommendation of the professional auditors, that the costs of the Burlington House refurbishment project should be depreciated at the rate of 5% pa by accumulating a Building Fund from which the Society would meet internal and external maintenance charges and future refurbishments. In addition it was expected that the Fund would grow to a sufficient size over the length of the 80 year lease to position the Society to deal with the situation it might face in 2085. This was approved as was the re-appointment of Dr Barber for a second term on the Finance Committee.

**6.4** The Treasurer went on to outline the Risk Analysis which Council is required to review annually. In response to a query he explained that the current publication contract for the Society's journals expires in 2012 and that there would be an open tender. Regarding 'open access' publishing both GJI and MNRAS now offered author-pay options, though take up was negligible

**6.5** Council welcomed the report on the 2008 NAM and asked the Executive Secretary to formally thank the Belfast organisers for delivering a successful event, though it was disappointing that so few women had taken leading roles.

**6.6** Council considered the replies received from the solid Earth geophysicists (SEG) to the President's letter requesting views on how the Society could better serve their interests. The responses highlighted the absence of representation on Council which appeared to be the root problem behind the feeling that besides GJI (and, to some extent, A&G) the RAS offered little to the SEG community. This had been compounded by the Society's focus on STFC since the last CSR. Some, a small number, had wondered if it was possible to accommodate the interests of professional astronomers and SEG in the same organisation. The President suggested that, rather than changing the bye-laws to enshrine a SEG presence on Council, Council might nominate a SEG candidate for election since the current allocation of 'G' places tended to be filled by the more numerous planetary and solar scientists who had more in common with 'A' colleagues than with SEG. He also welcomed the suggestion from the chair of the Membership Committee that it should co-opt a SEG representative and invited the group that was about to 'brainstorm' the future of 'A&G' to consider the possibility of splitting the journal into separate 'A' and SEG magazines. It was also suggested that the role of the British Geophysical Association should be strengthened and that more attention should be paid to the decisions of the Natural Environment Research Council which affected RAS fellows. It was hoped that the meeting with representatives of that community with the President and officers on May 30 would result in a positive outcome. However, while it would be a matter for great regret, and would complicate the Society's ownership of GJI, in the final analysis the decision to remain, or otherwise, in the RAS was for individual members of the SEG community to take.

**6.7** The Chair of the Women in Astronomy and Geophysics Committee, Dr Walker, highlighted the section of her report which discussed the possibility of the RAS providing fellowships to help women to stay in astronomy and geophysics e.g. 'follow-me' fellowships (where the grant holder moves physical location but retains research collaboration with the original group) and part-time fellowships (where the grant holder is officially paid to work no more than 50% of the time). The President requested Dr Walker to bring a concrete proposal to the next Council meeting.

## **7. INTERNATIONAL**

**7.1** The chair of the International Committee, Professor Cruise, outlined progress to date on the establishment of the Committee. Since an important aspect of the Committee's work would be to represent their interests, invitations to join the Committee had been sent to a number of overseas based fellows. It was hoped that the Committee would comprise 3 overseas and 3 UK based members, in addition to Professors Cruise and Gibson. Following the inaugural meeting of the Committee it was hoped to produce a work plan for the next 12 months.

## **8. AWARDS**

**8.1** In the absence of Professor Howarth the item on the 'A' Awards Committee was deferred until July, when it will be considered with the proposals for the 'G' Awards Committee to be submitted by Professor Bailey

**8.2** The final report of the Sir Norman Lockyer Fellow, Dr Roberto Trotta, was received with expressions of admiration for his achievements.

## **9. OTHER**

**9.1** Council approved the following candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/04/08 and posted on the RAS web site.

Bailey	Mandy
Bain	Hazel
Bannister	Malcolm John
Bibby	Joanne
Bland-Hawthorn	Joss
Borlase	Carole
Bowyer	Jude
Butler	John Christopher
Cabral	Ana Isabel Duarte
Candian	Alessandra
Carter	David
Casey	Morag
Cornwall	David
Crocker	Alison
Das	Shamita
Davies	Benjamin
Davies	Matthew
Davis	Richard J.
Dorrian	Gareth
Everett	Martin
Giunta	Alessandra
Gledhill	Timothy
Grady	Keith
Grafton	Teresa
Gray	Jennifer
Gonsalves	Wayne Jose
Guio	Patrick

Hager	Dietmar
Hillary	Phil
Henriegel	Robyn
Hopwood	Rosalind
Hughes	Mark Andrew
Hughes	Thomas
Houghton	Ryan
Hudson	Dyne
Imber	Suzanne
Kapinska	Anna Danuta
Karczewski	Oskar
Kassin	Susan
Keir	Derek
Kellett	Stephanie
Kerins	Eamonn
Khan	Khalid Amin
Khochfar	Sadegh
Kotulla	Ralf
Krajnovic	Davor
Kunz	Martin
Long	David
Lowe	Krispian
Mahajan	Smriti
Maloney	Shane
Marshall	Elizabeth
Martin	William E.
McNay	David
Meru	Farzana
Mueller	Andre
Norton	Andrew
Ortega	Fernando Fabian Rosales
Percival	Will
Randall-Carrick	Joseph James
Rekola	Rami
Roberts	Ian
Rozitis	Benjamin
Rubio da Costa	Fatima
Scheidegger	Simon
Sibbens	Lisette
Stock	David
Stringer	Martin
Stroud	Vanessa
Styles	Kirsty
Tibbs	Christopher
Tjulin	Anders Edvin
Van Zyl Smit	Jacobus
Van Spaandonk	Licke
White	Oliver
Whittaker	Ian
Woodcock	Jon

**9.2** The Minutes of the ordinary meeting of 14<sup>th</sup> March 2008 were approved and signed.

**AOB**

**10.1** The President thanked the members of Council who, like him, were retiring at the AGM later that day viz Professors Davies, Harrison, Robson and Dr Mitton

**10.2** Before declaring the meeting closed the President invited members of Council to inspect the recently completed room housing the Society's collection of rare books

Council rose at 1330

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A.C.Fabian  
President

17<sup>th</sup> July 2008