



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF COUNCIL MEETING at 1300 on 8 DECEMBER 2005 AT BURLINGTON HOUSE

1. PRESENT: Prof. K.A. Whaler (President), Dr R.C. Smith, Professor D.W. Hughes, Professor M.M. Grady, 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 M.A. Barstow, Professor R.L. Davies, Dr S.F. Green, Dr J. Mitton, Dr A.M.S. Richards, Mr I.W. Ridpath, Professor E.I. Robson, Professor M.J. Rycroft, Mr J.D. Shanklin and Dr I.P. Wright.

APOLOGIES: Professor D. Gubbins

IN ATTENDANCE: D. Elliott (Executive Secretary)

2. MINUTES

The minutes of meeting of 14 October 2005 were approved

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 RAS Report: *'Future of Planetary Sciences in the UK'*

The Geophysical Secretary drew attention to the reply received from Professor Alan Thorpe, Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council. Professor Thorpe noted that while NERC had a general interest in comparative planetology, it could not at present actively pursue any activities in this area. He added that while solar variability and its impact on the earth's climate had been discussed as part of its science strategy it had not been identified as a top priority. Notwithstanding the non-committal tenor of the reply, Council was gratified that the RAS report had been discussed in detail at this senior level.

3.2 *International Review of Physics and Astronomy*

The President reported that the Review Team had been impressed with the improvements made since their last review in 2000. While the report was embargoed until January 27 2006, she disclosed that the overall conclusions were encouraging, though some areas of weakness remained.

3.3 UTC – abolition on leap seconds

The Geophysical Secretary confirmed that the International Telecommunications Union had postponed a decision pending further deliberations. The decision would be informed by evaluating the impact of the leap second, which would be added on 31 December 2005. Council approved the establishment of a working group to generate proposals for reaching a compromise solution which would meet the needs of astronomers and space scientists. Subject to Council's approval of them, they would then be disseminated to the wider, global community. The working group would be headed by the Geophysical Secretary and, ideally, would include Pat Wallace, Frank King and a representative from the COMET initiative in Oxford

3.4 RAS Diary

The Executive Secretary requested Council's approval to commission the 2007 Diary from 'Letts' on the same basis as the 2006 edition, since it would be necessary to prepare the proofs in the early part of 2006. Unit production prices would be some 2% higher (at £ 1.08 exclusive of distribution costs) assuming a print run of 4,000. Council agreed with a proposal of the Treasurer that the RAS Diary should be produced for a period of 5 years before being subject to a review by when the membership would be in a better position to give an opinion on its cost-effectiveness. However, in the meantime, quotations would be obtained for the cost of converting the 2008 Diary onto a 15 month calendar basis (starting in October 2007) to better match the needs of the membership working in UK higher education institutions. A decision to implement this would need to be taken by no later than May 2006. Dr Jacqueline Mitton had kindly offered to volunteer her editorial services again. In response to comments she invited members of Council to send her suggestions for inclusion of geophysical information (together with advice on sourcing it).

3.5 2009 International Year of Astronomy

The paper tabled by the Executive Secretary was noted

3.6 RAS report: 'The PhD and Careers in Astronomy in the UK'

The Executive Secretary summarised the response from the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. In particular he noted that PPARC: were reassured that the Report was neither as negative nor as critical as they had been led to believe from the press coverage in the 'Times Higher Educational Supplement'

- would have valued comments on the four year studentships to be introduced in 2006 viz whether there was a preference for longer length PhDs or an increase in student numbers (the increase in student numbers by 2007 would represent a 40% increase in total PPARC student resource, that is years of PhD and numbers of studentships, from the 2003 quota studentships allocations exercise)
- were confident that quality would be controlled by the fact that an upper second class degree would remain the minimum qualifying eligibility requirement for PPARC studentship support
- agreed that continued efforts are needed by academics and sponsors of PhDs to impress on those embarking on PhD study that a PhD provides an excellent training for employment in many areas and that a career in academia will be a realistic option for only a small number.

- suggested that the National Astronomy Meeting might be an ideal opportunity to invite a number of employers of astronomy PhDs to come along and talk to students about careers and job opportunities outside academia.
- were perturbed that some young astronomy researchers viewed as a problem the fact that roughly 40% of recruits to UK Universities come from overseas. In PPARC's judgement this was highly desirable and beneficial to the UK research base.
- were surprised at the negative views reported by students on the compulsory, transferable skills training components. PPARC added that significant levels of funding (order of £65M across Councils) went to Universities for implementation of broader skills training for PhDs and postdoctoral researchers as recommended by the Sir Gareth Roberts' 2002 Report 'SET for Success' and that Dr Janet Metcalfe, the co-ordinator of the UKGRAD, had offered to meet RAS and PPARC to explore how, together, astronomy students' perceptions of broader skills training might be changed
- while PPARC supported the idea of some form of accreditation process for the skills gained during a PhD, the initiative for development of such a process would have to come from Universities
- Finally, PPARC noted the Report's comments on the 'two body problem', the implications of the Bologna declaration on UK Universities and PhD programmes and the longer term impact of the 2002 fixed term employment directive on researcher careers. It agreed that these were challenging issues which would require continued collaborative effort from funding agencies, universities and professional bodies

Secretary Helen Walker reported that she had discussed the report at the PPARC 'Women in SET Focus Group'. Council was impressed by the attention which had been paid to the report by PPARC and the detailed response to which it had led. Following its examination by both the Higher Education and Membership Committees, Council would agree a formal reply at its February 2006 meeting

3.7 Open debate on Scientific Publications

The President drew attention to the debate scheduled to be held in Westminster Hall on December 15

4. BURLINGTON HOUSE

The Executive Secretary requested formal approval to enter into contracts for the refurbishment of Burlington House on the basis of the fees proposals received from 'Peregrine Byrant' and previously circulated viz.

- architectural services @12% of contract costs (estimated at £1.3million excluding VAT)
- structural engineering services @ 1.75% of contract costs
- quantity surveying services @ 3.35% of contract costs
- mechanical and electrical services @ 10.5% of contract costs

It was noted that this would bring the estimated total cost closer to £1.7 million . This was approved.

5. AWARDS

5.1 The President's clarified the role of Council which was to agree, or otherwise, that the recommendations of the awards committees met the relevant criteria, She also proposed that the generic comments made by the committees should be taken together following consideration of the award recommendations

5.2 *Report of the 2006 "A" Awards Committee*

Vice-President Robert Smith spoke to the 'A' Awards Committee's report. Following discussion, all of its recommendations, including proposed reserve candidates, were approved except for one. This was for a large research team where by a majority of 11 to 4 (with 2 abstentions and 2 non-votes) Council concluded that it was not appropriate that one or two individuals could be the named recipients of the award on behalf of the entire team. A distinction was drawn between recognising a scholar who had assembled and led a research team and large-scale projects with many leading players.

Accordingly, Council authorised the President to announce the following at the Ordinary Meeting on December 9 viz.

Gold Medal - Professor Simon White

Herschel Medal- Professor Govind Swarup

Jackson-Gwilt medal - Dr Keith Taylor

Fowler Award for Astronomy- Dr Serena Viti

(Pending his acceptance of the offer, the identity of the proposed George Darwin Lecturer, Dr Michael Werner, would be withheld)

In addition the following were to be made Associates of the Society:

Professor Ewine van Dishoeck; Dr Françoise Genova and Professor James Liebert

5.3 *Report of the 2006 "G Awards Committee*

Vice-President, Monica Grady, spoke to the 'G' Awards Committee's report. All of its recommendations were approved except that the candidate for the Award for Services to Geophysics, in view of the scope of his achievements, also should be recognised for his services to Astronomy.

Accordingly, Council authorised the President to announce the following at the Ordinary Meeting on December 9 viz.

Gold Medal - Professor Stan Cowley

Chapman Medal - Professor Steve Schwartz

Fowler Award for Geophysics - Dr Clare Parnell

Award for Service to Geophysics and Astronomy- Dr Brian Marsden

(Pending her acceptance of the offer, the identity of the proposed Harold Jeffreys Lecturer, Dr Athena Coustenis, would be withheld)

In addition the following were to be made Associates of the Society:

Professors Oddbjorn Engvold, Tuija Pulkkinen and Sami Solanki

5.4 At this point Council considered the other recommendations of the award committees viz.

- that consideration be given to introducing a Group Achievement Award to recognise achievement by large consortia. While noting that existing awards are capable of being group based Council approved the establishment of a working party to look into this in more detail. It would consist of the current chairs of the awards committees, the 2 Vice-Presidents who will chair the 2006 awards committees plus the Senior Secretary and the Treasurer
- that the Jackson-Gwilt Medal should be awarded annually and that its rubric should be amended such that it would read; 'the Jackson-Gwilt Medal shall be awarded for the invention, improvement, or development of instrumentation or techniques...' ie deleting 'astronomical' in front of 'instrumentation'. Council noted that, as with the previous suggestion, any changes would require an amendment to the bye-laws and therefore be subject to approval at an AGM. It was agreed that this suggestion too would be remitted to the working party for further consideration
- that, in the interests of better communications with the membership and to raise awareness of the awards, a standard letter, in the name of the Senior Secretary, should be sent to thank all fellows who had made nominations while pointing out that unsuccessful nominations would be automatically carried forward
- that, to encompass nominees whose achievements straddled both 'A' and 'G', the committee chairs should confer at an early stage and decide under which category they would be considered (it was suggested that in most cases, research primarily relevant to topics outside the solar system should be considered by the 'A' committee, while studies of solar-system bodies should be considered by the 'G' committee. Solar studies represented a special case; 'the Sun as the Sun', normally, would be appropriate to the 'G' committee, while 'the Sun as a star' would be viewed as 'A' science).
- that the rubric of the RAS Awards for Service to Astronomy and Geophysics should be amended to read *from* ... 'individuals who, through outstanding or exceptional work, have promoted, facilitated or encouraged the sciences of astronomy or geophysics and developed their role in the life of the nation *to* ... 'individuals who, through outstanding or exceptional work, encompassing international work that has been of service to the UK community, have promoted, facilitated or encouraged the sciences of astronomy or geophysics' . Following discussion this was not felt to be necessary since the current text was judged sufficiently broad.
- and finally, while paying tribute to the exemplary administrative assistance provided by Judith Hodges, that consideration should be given to advancing the timetable for the submission of nominations .This would allow more 'breathing space' to meet the December deadline, a requirement if medallists were to receive their awards at the subsequent NAM . It was suggested that nomination forms could be included in the delegates packs at the forthcoming NAM and that the cut-off date might be end-June. This too was remitted to the working party for further consideration

6. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

6.1 Governance

The Geophysical Secretary spoke to a previously distributed paper outlining the case for reviewing the structure, composition and election of Council. In discussion, most time was taken up considering the various options presented in the paper for creating

topic based groups and linking them to Council. There was broad support for the principle of topic groups, not least since this was seen as a way of eroding the increasingly arbitrary 'A' and 'G' dichotomy, but there was concern that any changes should not disturb the basis on which members of Council viewed their roles, which was to represent the whole of the community and not just a part of it. There was some support for the creation of a body analogous to the Science Committee of the Geological Society which provided a forum for topic groups at a level once removed from Council. Concern was also expressed that by incorporating existing groups such as MIST, UKSP, Planetary Forum, Astrophysical Chemistry, Astrobiology Forum, Association of Astronomy Education et al (assuming, a large assumption, they were willing to be incorporated into the RAS) important areas at the centre of the discipline such as cosmology, might be unprivileged.

There was general support for creating an executive group by expanding the composition and remit of officers to include the immediate past and designate Presidents, the senior Vice-Presidents and possibly another member of Council chosen at random.

Finally, the proposition of electronic voting for Council positions was welcomed though it was important that some scrutineers should be involved in the scheme design.

Council mandated the Geophysical Secretary, through officers, to lead on all three proposals and at a suitable time to seek wider input from the membership through 'A&G' and the RAS web site. It noted that an immediate step was to consult some of the existing bodies which might be offered incorporation into the Society, not least to judge its acceptability and feasibility. Before proposing revisions to the Charter and Bye-laws, which require a 2/3 majority in both Council and at a general meeting of members, it was essential to win a broad consensus.

6.2 Membership Grades

The Treasurer spoke to a previously distributed paper outlining the case for reviewing the present system of membership grades and differential contribution rates. There was a case for more clearly distinguishing between professional and amateur, UK and overseas based, student and senior fellows. Were the RAS to do so it would be following a pattern used in many other learned societies including the Institute of Physics and the American Astronomical Society. Council agreed that it was vital that the core, professional, community should regard the Society as its 'natural home'. If the all-inclusive 'fellow' nomenclature deterred part of it from joining what was seen as an undifferentiated 'broad church', there was a case for re-examining the current arrangements. Accordingly the Membership Committee was asked to investigate options and to bring proposals to a future meeting of Council. (Note: the next meeting of the committee is scheduled for 19 January 2006 and, ideally, comments and suggestions should reach its chair before then)

6.3 Education Committee

Deferred

6.4 *Higher Education Committee*

Deferred

6.5 *Finance Committee*

Deferred

6.6 *MNRAS Editorial Meeting*

Deferred

6.7 *'Web casting' RAS meeting*

The Executive Secretary informed Council that it was planned to use 'Media on Demand', an experienced company, to web cast the January 2006 scientific meetings as a service to the members who were unable to attend them. The lectures would remain accessible for a period of 3 months. In the light of their technical quality and the take-up by the membership (and the wider community) a decision would be taken to place a contract for the remainder of the meetings programme. There would be some investment costs including the hire or purchase of a movie camera but the potential benefits of being able to share one of the Society's most valued activities with a much larger audience seemed to justify them. Council very much agreed with this and gave it enthusiastic support

7. REVIEWS

7.1 *Geophysics Education*

The President spoke to the previously distributed paper. She was somewhat concerned about the direction being taken in the report and by some of the recommendations especially that the... 'RAS and Geological Society should consider the immediate appointment of a schools liaison office to promote linkages between schools and relevant University departments throughout the country'. The case for doing this was not fully established in the Executive Summary and if this recommendation were to appear in the final report it would need to be supported by much more evidence. The proposal for promoting geophysics as a career in schools and universities needed to be linked to the Science Council's careers in science web site initiative, which is to be developed with the encouragements of the Government. Finally, the proposal that... 'Government should act to protect existing University courses from further reduction until education in the subject is vibrant, the research base strong, and demands of employers are met' needed to take into account the HEFCE led 'strategically important' subjects initiative.

Accordingly, Council requested the President to write to the principal author of the report, Professor Aftab Khan, expressing these concerns and suggesting that the report would be improved were it to include more focussed proposals, together with the criteria against which their success could be judged.

8. OTHER

8.1 *Candidates for Election*

Candidates for Election – Fellows listed in OR/11/05

Council approved the following elections to fellowship:

Bentley	Samuel
Billingham	Laurence
Bloomfield	D. Shaun
Bolton	Paul
Boyce	David
Bunker	Andrew
Charitos	Panagiotis
Clark	Iain John
Collison	Glyn Alexander
Cunningham	Elizabeth
Evans	Mona
Fletcher	Andrew
Galand	Marina
Gibson	Brad
Green	James
Hosmer	Mark
Jose	Tesmi
Konstantopoulos	Iraklis
Ludbrook	Geoffrey Derek
Lystrup	Makenzie
Masood	Waqas
McAndrews	Hazel
Mills	Ann
Mitra Kraev	Urmila
Nissanke	Samaya
North	Matthew W.H.
Patrick	Glenn
Pressling	Nicola
Smith	Rebecca
Wright	Nicholas
Young	Roland

8.2 The Minutes of the Monthly A&G (Ordinary) Meeting for 14 October and 11 November 2005 were approved with one correction (the misspelling of Professor George Isaacs in the Minutes of the Monthly A&G (Ordinary) Meeting of 14 October which should read Professor George **Isaak**)

8.3 NAM 2006

A request from Professor Robert Warwick, Chair of the Local Organising Committee of the 2006 NAM, for a subvention of £10,000 from the RAS, was tabled. In supporting this request, the same amount which was provided to the organisers of the 2005 NAM, the Treasurer explained that half of it was to enable fees to be kept lower than would otherwise be the case and half to allow for more high profile speakers to be invited. Council approved this request.

9. AOB

It was agreed that the suggestion of a memorial service in St James's Church, Piccadilly for deceased fellows be put on the agenda of the next meeting of Council.

Council rose at 1730

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K.A. Whaler
President

9th February 2005