



*Advancing  
Astronomy and  
Geophysics*

## ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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### MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING 7 DECEMBER 2006 HELD AT 1300 IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY BURLINGTON HOUSE

**1. PRESENT:** Professor M. Rowan-Robinson (President), Professor R.L. Davies, Professor D. Gubbins, Professor D.W. Hughes and Professor E.R. Priest (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Professor I.D. Howarth (Secretary), Dr A.J. Ball, Professor M.A. Barstow, Professor J.H. Hough, Dr J. Mitton, Professor E.I. Robson, Professor M.J. Rycroft and Professor I.P. Wright

**APOLOGIES:** Dr M.A. Hapgood, H.J. Walker, Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor A.M. Cruise, Mr I.W. Ridpath, Dr L Fletcher, Professor T.W. Hartquist

**IN ATTENDANCE:** D Elliott, R Massey (who was welcomed to his first meeting) and J King (for item 8.1)

#### **2. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of 12 October 2006 were approved and signed with one amendment viz. the addition to paragraph 6.3 of ... 'the Institute of Physics and other appropriate bodies'

#### **3. MATTERS ARISING**

##### **3.1 International Perceptions of UK Research in Physics and Astronomy Report.**

Council considered a paper from the Geophysical Secretary which noted that the Report had stated that the short duration of UK PhD training was undermining the ability of UK PhD graduates to compete with their international counterparts for postdoctoral fellowships and recommended that the UK should commission an in-depth review of its graduate level education, incorporating comparisons with its leading scientific competitors. The report also noted that career management for UK Post Doctoral Research Assistants (PDRA) continued to be unsatisfactory. Following the review it was agreed that the Institute of Physics (IoP) and the Society should commission a full study. Prior to that the IoP would conduct a pilot study. However, there was concern that the study could give priority to the PDRA issue, which the IoP considered more important. It was decided to write to the IoP to express this concern

and to emphasise that the Society wished to play a full part in setting the terms of reference and scope of the study.

### **3.2 New 'G' Award for Instrumentation**

In the absence of the Geophysical Secretary this item was postponed

### **3.3 'Cultural Campus'**

The Executive Secretary reported that the first of what is hoped would be a series of inter-disciplinary 'Burlington House Lectures' was scheduled for March 1 2007, at the Geological Society.

### **3.3 Creationism**

The President expressed concern that the 'Truth in Science' organisation had distributed materials to schools (though the government subsequently had advised against their use in science lessons) and added that he had been tempted to write to the press to correct misleading allegations about the age of the solar system. Council agreed that, providing care was taken to avoid debating with creationist organisations, he should feel free to do so. The President stated that the Membership Committee had agreed to examine the Society's 'route 2' procedures, to ensure that potential fellows were fully committed to the 'universal ethical code for scientists' before their applications were approved for recommendation to Council. Their privately held views and opinions, of course, were of no concern.

### **3.3 RAS Logo**

The Executive Secretary reported that various design options were being considered but none, to date, were thought suitable to bring to Council's attention.

### **3.3 Electronic Voting**

The Senior Secretary reported that he had tested the proposed system and found it to be robust. Subject to further testing by members of Council fellows would be given the option of electronic voting in the 2007 elections. It was noted that the same technology would make it possible for the membership to vote on proposed policy positions, thereby giving them greater authority.

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

### **4.1 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR)**

The President reported his meeting with Ilona Blue, Head of Science and Innovation at the Treasury and therefore responsible for liaising with and monitoring the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI). He had made the case for sustained funding of astronomy research and observed that the Warry Committee proposal that **all** grant applications should demonstrate potential economic benefit was fatuous. On the other hand supporting an active astronomy research community helped attract students into the physical sciences, the *sine qua non* for a successful national economy. The Treasury official confirmed that the CSR would be 'very tight' and that the government looked to science to contribute to wealth creation and technology transfer.

The President went on to outline the points he planned to make in his meeting with Sir Keith O'Nions, Director General OSI in early January 2007, the purpose of which

was to make the case for funding blue-skies research in astronomy. He would do this by demonstrating, with statistics supplied by the Policy Officer, that astronomy units sustain the viability of university physics departments. In addition he would stress the need to protect grants from the effects of currency and GDP fluctuations on the level of UK contributions to international facilities and above all the necessity that the science community should determine the strategy for the new Science and Technology Facilities Council. Council noted that the recent 'Case4Space' publication provided useful ammunition.

Turning to parliamentary tactics, the President explained that by having MPs interested in astronomy, or in constituencies with professional astronomy communities, ask Parliamentary Questions (PQs), which had to be accorded priority by officials, their awareness, and that of their ministers', of the importance of astronomy, could be raised significantly. The Policy Officer would distribute to fellows in around 50 constituencies 'model' PQs, to elucidate information on the funding of UK astronomy, with the request that they 'customised' and pass them to their local MP.

#### **4.2 UK Space Policy**

The President reported that he, and Professor Barstow, had been invited to make a presentation at one of the two seminars, which preceded the Science & Technology Committee's enquiry into UK Space Policy. This had summarised the RAS submission but included, in response to a question, a statement on the Society's position on Human Space Exploration (HSE) viz that contrary to recent statements by the Head of NASA, the RAS had not urged the UK Government to reverse its long held policy on HSE. Rather, following the RAS Review of the Scientific Case for HSE, its position remained that there needed to be a wider debate on the issue.

In discussion it was agreed that this was unsatisfactory and would leave the Society on the sidelines while HMG considered NASA's invitation to participate in future manned missions to the Moon and Mars, in connection with which there were technological and educational attractions. The worst outcome would be a CSR, which skewed the OSI budget towards HSE at the cost of research to which the community accorded higher priority. Accordingly it was decided to formulate a position on HSE and seek the agreement of the membership to it by electronic vote.

**Postscript:** *Following the meeting it was agreed that this statement would be put to the membership:*

'The RAS strongly endorses the scientific benefits of space missions, which have transformed our knowledge of the Earth, the solar system and the universe over the past 50 years.

The RAS holds to the view that the prime driver in selection of scientific space missions, within an inevitably limited budget, should be the quality of the science.

The RAS recognizes that there may be some scientific goals that can only be achieved within a human spaceflight programme. However human spaceflight is likely to be feasible only within a greatly expanded space programme.

The RAS also recognizes that the space programme is a powerful attractor of school children and students towards STEM subjects, and that the space industry is an important sector of the UK economy. Educational, economic and technological arguments might support a UK involvement in human spaceflight. However this would require very substantial separate funding, additional to the science budget'.

#### **4.3 Parliamentary Astronomy Committee**

Finally, the President reported on his meeting with the Chair of the Parliamentary Astronomy Committee, David Heathcoat-Amory MP FRAS. While it seemed as if the revived Committee's interests would lie in areas more relevant to amateur astronomy, Mr Heathcoat-Amory had offered to facilitate meetings with Ministers in the DTI and Department for Education and Skills.

### **5. BURLINGTON HOUSE**

The Executive Secretary reported that the removal to Hallam St had been successfully managed by the Membership Secretary, Ron Wiltshire, and invited Council to formally record its thanks to him. This was done by acclaim. The Executive Secretary went on to describe the work in train or planned to take place before Christmas in Burlington House. The major concern was the delay in securing the necessary permissions from the Landlord and the Local Authority which had resulted in the start date being put back 2 weeks, at a cost of some £3000 to the Society. In neither case were issues of any substance involved and the Executive Secretary remained confident that the planned timetable would be followed.

Finally, he asked Council to take a decision on the proposed installation in the new Fellows Room of an artwork, which would display images from 24 all-sky cameras. Council agreed that this would be an interesting and unusual asset, but repeated that all associated costs would have to be covered from sources to be identified and secured by the artist, Lise Autogena, and her supporters.

### **6. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE**

#### **6.1 Elections to Council 2007**

The Senior Secretary spoke to the previously distributed paper and invited Council to endorse its recommendation that the following names should appear on the ballot as Council nominees viz as Vice-Presidents: Mark Bailey, Richard Harrison and Ian Howarth; and as Secretary: Ian Crawford.

The Senior Secretary explained that, if elected, Richard Harrison would serve for one year only as he would be replacing Professor Gubbins, who planned to resign in 2007, after serving 2 of his 3 years on Council. This was agreeable to Professor Harrison. On the other hand were a solid earth geophysicist to be elected as a Councillor in 2007 this would open up the possibility of translating him or her to the vacant Vice-Presidency the following year, and thus ensure a 'balanced' team.

Finally, following convention, following the 2007 AGM, Dr Hapgood, would become the Senior Secretary and the incoming Secretary would assume the title of Geophysical Secretary.

The Senior Secretary volunteered to withdraw to allow discussion but this proved to be unnecessary, since there was no dissent from the proposals.

## **6.1 Meetings**

The Senior Secretary summarised his previously distributed paper which recorded the results from the survey of members' preferences regarding the location, scheduling and duration of RAS meetings. In short there was little demand for change from the present one-day, Friday Meeting in London. However, Council favoured experimenting with an extra meeting outside of London, in June, and possibly coupling it to a public lecture. At this point it was noted that the Membership Committee, in January, proposed to examine the issue of out of London meetings. Accordingly, further discussion was postponed.

## **7. COMMITTEES**

### **7.1 'G' Awards Committee**

Vice-President Eric Priest introduced the recommendations of the 'G' Awards Committee viz

Gold Medal – Nigel Weiss

Price Medal – Andrew Jackson

Fowler Prize- Duncan Mackay

Award for Service – Aftab Khan

Harold Jeffreys Lecturer- Alan Hood

Associates - Laike Asfar, Marcel Goossens and Jim Klimchuk

These were approved.

Professor Priest went on to observe that the Committee had been encouraged that 13 new nominations were received and that, in most cases, there had been strong competition between the candidates. Even so he recommended that next year Council, and the Committee, should be more pro-active in suggesting candidates and that the application procedures should be more prescriptive, to encourage greater consistency in the level of information provided by nominees. Finally, there was an inconclusive discussion on whether nominees deemed to fall below the threshold for an award, should remain under consideration for the following year (as is present practice), on the grounds that another committee might take a different view, or should be withdrawn from further consideration to save nugatory effort the following year.

### **7.2 'A' Awards Committee**

Vice-President David Hughes introduced the recommendations of the 'A' Awards Committee viz

Gold Medal -Len Culhane

Eddington Medal- Igor Novikov

Fowler Award - Graham Smith

Awards for Services to Astronomy: No recommendation

George Darwin Lecturer - Reinhardt Genzel

Associates - Brian Boyle, Virpi Niemela and Roberto Terlevich

These were approved.

Professor Hughes went on to observe that Fellows still failed to grasp that the Fowler Award was for younger members of the community who could have their career prospects enhanced by it. Further that the Committee had failed to find any candidate suitable for the Award for Services to Astronomy, given the criterion of exceptional achievement over and above normal job requirements.

### **7.3 Finance Committee**

The Treasurer spoke to a previously distributed paper. He drew attention to the merger of the Society's publisher, Blackwell, with John Wiley, which was not expected to have an adverse impact on RAS journals. He also requested Council's agreement to set in train a process to identify and appoint a new investment manager in place of HSBC, following the negative report on its performance commissioned from Jewson Associates. This was approved.

#### **7.3.1 Library Conservation Fund**

The Treasurer described the extremely generous donation that Ian Ridpath wished to make to the Society, in order to establish a Fund to finance the conservation of older books and archives. The initial sum of some £25,000 would generate an income of approximately £1000 pa, which would double the current provision. With the proviso that the fund should be known as the 'Ian Ridpath Fund for Conservation', rather than the 'Ian Ridpath Conservation Fund', Council approved and welcomed this initiative by one of their peers.

#### **7.3.2 Designated Funds**

The Treasurer spoke to a previously distributed paper, which dealt with the 2 parts of the General Fund, which were 'designated' for particular purposes. The first was Repairs and Maintenance Reserve Fund designed to spread the cost over several years of repairs and maintenance to the Society's apartments. As at 31 December 2005 this fund stood at £54k. The second was the Printing and Publication Reserve Fund, which had been established to identify the contribution of the publishing activity of the Society. As at 31 December 2005 this Fund stood at £3,569,000. The undesignated part of the General Fund was just £1,569,000.

It was obvious, the Treasurer explained, that the Repairs and Maintenance Fund was inadequate to carry out the current £2.5 million refurbishment of Burlington House, which would need to be funded from the Printing and Publication Reserve Fund. This would make the rationale for maintaining the Printing and Publication Reserve Fund even less obvious than it is already. Accordingly he proposed that the Printing and Publication Reserve Fund should be abolished and merged into the General Fund but that the Repairs and Maintenance Reserve Fund should be renamed the Building Fund, and that the Finance Committee should determine its level of funds, such that it would be able to cover internal and external maintenance costs and, were it ever to be necessary, pay for the purchase of alternative accommodation.

This was approved.

### **7.3.3. Book Series**

This item was postponed

## **8. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

### **8.1 Education Strategy**

The Chair of Education Committee, Julien King, spoke to a previously distributed paper, which outlined, and costed, initiatives to enhance the Society's engagement in school education and public outreach. The most important of them was the proposal to enlist the skills of the Education Committee and the professional and teacher fellowship in the Society, to 'kite-mark' existing educational resources, and produce additional ones where needed, to support the teaching of the (considerable amount of) astronomical and geophysical content specified in the qualifications offered in England at key stages 2-5 (and their equivalent elsewhere in the UK).

Following some discussion on the relative merits of teacher in-service training, perhaps using the network of Science Learning Centres, it was concluded that the RAS could most usefully contribute by assisting schools meet the costs incurred by pupils attending lectures and other events at neighbouring universities.

The Education Committee was encouraged to consider expanding its schools competition to exploit the interest, which the International Year of Astronomy in 2009 would create.

Council supported the proposal of the President to arrange a top - level meeting with the IoP to discuss education strategy since it was clear that more could be achieved by co-operating and subsequently by talking jointly to PPARC (and its successor).

Finally, it was agreed that the Policy Officer, drawing on Alan Wells' work in Leicester, and Scotland (the Scottish Space School), would prepare terms of reference for a major longitudinal study into the impact of astronomy on secondary school pupils, to demonstrate, or otherwise, the degree to which it influenced their subsequent subject choices. This would test and, hopefully, verify the claim that there was a positive correlation between being exposed to astronomy and a subsequent decision to study science at 'A' level' or Scottish Highers.

Council thanked Julien King for the way in which he had energised the Education Committee and warmly endorsed the paper noting that its proposals would cost some £23,000 in the first year excluding the longitudinal study

### **8.2 Submission to the RCUK Consultation on Peer Review**

The Chair of Higher Education Committee, Professor Hough, spoke to a previously distributed paper, based on a teleconference with some members of the Committee. He amplified it with information gained from attendance at a meeting in the IoP with representatives from RCUK. The RCUK consultation on changes to the peer review system used to assess proposals, it emerged, had been driven by the Treasury concerned at the costs, estimated at some £200 million p.a., it entailed particularly when set against the low, and reducing, success rate attending applications.

It was agreed that the RAS submission should oppose any move towards 'block grants', which disguised individuals' achievements and placed intolerable strains on departmental heads who would be required to make Solomonic judgements between their colleagues' competing claims. On the other hand the submission should make a positive case for the retention and wider use by other research councils of the 'Rolling Grants' awarded by PPARC.

Following revisions to the draft it was decided to post it on the RAS web site and invite comments from members before seeking sign off from Council (by email) in time to meet the submission deadline of 19 January 2007

### **8.3 International Year of Astronomy 2009**

The UK 'Single Point of Contact' with the IAU, Professor Ian Robson, had to leave before his previously distributed paper was discussed. As requested, its contents were noted by Council, which welcomed and supported the actions described in it.

## **9. OTHER**

### **9.1 Candidates for Election**

*Candidates for Election:* Council approved the following Candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/11/06 & OR/12/06 and posted on the RAS web site.

Bagetakos	Ionnis
Baker	Deborah
Barros-Pinto	Jose Elias
Beckman	George Edward John
Boulres	Peter
Briggs	Simon John
Chantavat	Teeraparb
Chifor	Cristina
Clarke	Kay
Conlon	Paul A.
Craigon	Alison
Davidson	Jemma
Deeks	Joseph Samuel
Duthie	Roger
Eminian	Celine
Evans	Rhodri
Fernandes	Catarina Dolores Aires
Fernandes	Shakeel Manuel
Goodall	Paul
Godhania	Sunil
Graham	Caroline
Henley	Edmund
Hollerbach	Rainer
Ioannidis	Georgios
Jannetta	Adrian
Kains	Noe
Kelly	James
Keogh	Dominic Robert



Kirton	Fiona
Lake	Matthew
Lyons	Karl
Magorrian	John
Masters	Adam
McCall	Aaron
Monaghan	Euan
Morris	Andrew
Neff	James E.
Patel	Mitesh
Pearse	Scott
Pearson	Jaz
Perez	Sebastian
Pickard	Laura Rhaan
Schofield	James
Scott	Thomas
Smith	Keith
Steppe	Robert
Thornton	Lynsey
Vasta	Magda
Waldman	Ingo
Yiu	Ho-Ching Iris

**9.2** The Minutes of the Monthly A&G (Open) Meetings for 13 October and 10 November 2006 were approved and signed

**10. AOB**

**10.1** It was agreed to send a letter of thanks to the Royal Society of Chemistry for so generously allowing the Society to meet in their Council Room

**10.2** Council approved the appointment of Professor Mike Edmunds to the Higher Education Committee

**10.3** Professor Gubbins expressed concern that the additional £75 million, which HEFCE proposed to distribute to support physics, would exclude geophysics since it was taught outside physics departments. The President agreed to sign a letter to HEFCE if Professor Gubbins provided him with a draft

**10.4** It was reported that a letter inviting Lord Sainsbury to attend dinner at the RAS Club, where a suitable presentation to honour his services to UK science might be made, had so far been unanswered

Council rose at 1700

.....  
M. Rowan-Robinson  
President

8<sup>th</sup> February 2007