



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 7 FEBRUARY 2008 AT 1300 IN THE RAS COUNCIL ROOM

1. PRESENT: Professor M. Rowan-Robinson (President), Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor R.L. Davies, Professor R.A. Harrison, Professor I.D. Howarth (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr M.A. Hapgood and Dr H. J. Walker (secretaries), Dr A.J. Ball, Professor M.A. Barstow, Professor A.M. Cruise, Professor M.G. Edmunds, Dr L. Fletcher, Professor B.K. Gibson, Dr J. Greaves, Professor J.H. Hough, Dr V. Nakariakov, Professor E.I. Robson, and Dr J.A. Wild.

APOLOGIES: Dr I Crawford (Secretary) and Dr J Mitton.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 13 December 2007 were approved and signed.

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Eric Northrop Bequest. The Treasurer reported that the 10 inch telescope had gone to Vectis (the Isle of Wight Astronomy Society) and the Dome to a public observatory in Reepham, Norfolk and the remaining items had been taken into the RAS's collection.

3.2 UCAS applications for astronomy degrees. The Policy Officer reported that the experience of Birmingham and Manchester Universities would be investigated in some depth to determine whether and how to take this issue further.

3.3 STFC Budget. The Policy Officer reported that the crisis provoked by STFC's budget settlement had attracted an encouraging amount of parliamentary attention. In addition to 4 PQs there had been an adjournment debate, a debate on science where concerns about the impact on Daresbury and Jodrell Bank were voiced as well as the review by the IUS Committee to which the President had given oral evidence.

4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

4.1.1 The President reviewed developments since the last Council meeting viz the

- RAS press release condemning the threatened cuts outlined in STFC's Delivery Plan, which had triggered much of the subsequent media interest, and welcoming the Wakeham Review
- informal meeting in Burlington House between STFC's CEO, Professor Keith Mason and an *ad hoc* group of senior astronomers (including 5 members of Council)
- joint IoP/RAS submission to, and appearance before, the IUS Committee (whose main concern was the Delivery Plan's impact on jobs). He went on to say that there an opportunity for the government to alleviate the situation by identifying additional funds before 20 February 2008, when the DG of the Research Councils, Sir Keith O'Nions and the Minister of Science, Ian Pearson, appear before the IUS committee. In connection with this the President added that Sir Keith O'Nions had expressed the private view that the Secretary of State, John Denham, was sympathetic to case for funding basic science and that the Society should avoid public utterances which could limit his manoeuvrability
- email message to the fellowship outlining most of the above and urging patience. This had provoked some extremely strong reactions, and one resignation from the Society. In the light of this the President had canvassed Council to gauge support for the Society taking up a less accommodating position; specifically by calling for the resignation of Professor Mason. This had not been conclusive
- RAS submission of names to join the specialists who would constitute the Wakeham Review i.e. Professors Roger Blandford (who subsequently was forced to withdraw his name owing to non-availability), Carlos Frenck and Eric Priest. The President added that the RAS, as one of the 'stakeholders', would be asked to submit written evidence to the Review during the course of March 2008 (if possible this would be ready for review at the next meeting of Council) and oral evidence in June. He noted that he would ask the Presidents of some European Astronomy Societies to write to Wakeham since it would be salutary for his committee to compare the levels of public support for astronomy in analogue countries.
- RAS offer to mediate in the stand-off between the Gemini Board and STFC
- his attendance at Imperial College of a meeting of senior physicists with the Chair of the STFC, Peter Warry who rebutted calls for reorganisation and defended its decisions
- finally, the President informed Council that he had been invited to meet Sir Keith O'Onions the next day, as a result of sending the following letter:

'It was good to talk to you at the IoP Awards Dinner recently. You urged me to try to keep the astronomy community calm at the present time and I have in fact sent out a letter to them last week saying what's going on and urging patience.

However I sense a very great anger amongst the younger members of the community, for whom the cuts do mean reduced career opportunities (especially the 25% decline in grants over the CSR period). You may already have seen statements from the Solar-Terrestrial-Physics community, who feel their area of science is being closed down abruptly. The Gemini

Observatory user community in the UK are also on the brink of a similar outburst and only holding back on my advice.

My question is: is there any realistic possibility of help from DIUS either in the short term, before the outcome of the STFC Programmatic Review is announced in March, or when the Wakeham Review, which we are enthusiastically cooperating with, reports in September?

The areas where help from DIUS could get the community out of this disaster frame of mind are:

- (1) grants – the community needs to see the profile levelling out. This needs about £5m in year 3 for astronomy (and probably a similar figure for particle physics)*
- (2) Gemini – we need to see a sensible transition to a lower share in Gemini, which for the UK would be mainly focussed on Gemini North. It's crazy to withdraw abruptly and pay £8m in penalties for nothing.*
- (3) Ground-based STP – we need some transitional arrangements. A research community cannot be closed down without warning.*

The standard ministerial response that it's up to STFC to sort out its priorities will not cut much ice, I'm afraid. It may well be that STFC failed to warn DIUS adequately of the implications of the CSR settlement for astronomy and particle physics. But given the settlement I'm not sure that STFC had much choice about cutting astronomy and particle physics without renegeing on commitments to run Diamond and Isis and to develop the campuses.

I'd be very happy to meet to talk about this further. Having urged the community to support the merger of PPARC and CCLRC, partly on the basis of your assurances that we would be protected in STFC, I am very distressed at the distraught and angry messages I get every day from young researchers. Like you I would have liked (and would still like) this to be a story about strong Government support for high quality science'

4.1.2 Council thanked the President for the time and effort he had invested in tackling this problem and deplored the insulting language which had been used by some members of the community who had had some disagreements with him on matters of political strategy. It was noted that there had been progress on resolving the *impasse* with the Gemini Board (and that continued UK access to both telescopes would be maintained while negotiations were resumed). While this was welcomed it was agreed that, with the possible exception of Solar Terrestrial Physics where an entire area of activity was under threat, the Society must avoid championing particular projects or resources, or of seeming to be opposed to any and all changes. Rather it needed to be speaking for the whole community by focusing on process – in particular to restore its confidence in STFC's decision making procedures. Accordingly it was agreed to send the following message to the leadership of STFC, copied to its Science Board and to the Fellowship (but not the press). In the hope that it would be viewed constructively and elicit a positive and not a defensive response the President said he would speak to Professor Mason before sending it.

Mindful of very strong feelings in the entire astronomical community, RAS Council expresses a lack of confidence in STFC's handling of the current funding crisis:

- (1) *In its actions since it was formed, STFC has failed to pay sufficient attention to the part of its mission associated with the delivery of first class science in astronomy, particle physics and nuclear physics.*
- (2) *In making its bid to CSR2007, little emphasis was placed on the importance of these areas for UK science and for UK physics in particular. The DIUS does not seem to have been made sufficiently aware of the potential damage to the UK's international science reputation and to UK Physics departments, despite the fact that the Government has made Physics a high-priority in its long-term economic policy. Astronomy and space science play a key role in attracting school-children to science and in drawing university students into physics and there is immense benefit to the UK economy of our skilled Physics graduates. There is now a real danger that the recent improvement in Physics enrolment will be reversed*
- (3) *The STFC's Delivery Plan pays lip-service to the need to foster the UK academic community, who play the key role in delivery of all of STFC's outputs – first class science, facility design and usage, and knowledge exchange, but has shown no evidence in its public statements or actions that it recognizes this duty. The 25% decline in grants across the CSR period, with no sign of any intention or even desire to level this out in later years, has filled the community with deep pessimism and anger.*
- (4) *STFC has failed miserably to communicate with the community. The experience of the Community prior to the formation of STFC has been good communication and a sense of engagement in decisions.*
- (5) *STFC claims that its Delivery Plan has been and is being arrived at through a process of Peer Review. Unfortunately, despite no doubt very hard work of those involved in this process on PPAN, PALS and Science Board, the community has no confidence in this process and is unlikely to accept the outcome as fair. It was a catastrophic error not to set up an advisory structure below PPAN. The requirement of confidentiality for members of Council, the Science Board, and PPAN and PALS, goes far beyond any legal requirements.*
- (6) *STFC needs to develop with the community a clear science strategy, so that both the community and those on STFC panels can make operational decisions with precision and clarity.*
- (7) *In dealings with international partners, STFC needs to take advantage of the contacts and diplomatic skills of members of the community. A take-it-or-leave-it approach to an international partnership will never succeed.*

4.2 European Astronomical Society. Postponed

5. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

5.1 IYA 2009

Professor Robson reported that the global 'Cornerstone Projects' had been agreed but that funding for them had been unsuccessful, so far. He noted that while IYA 2009 would be officially opened in Paris in mid-January 2009, activities would be launched from local midnight across the globe. The UK coordinator, Steve Owens, previously of the Glasgow Science Centre, was now in post. He would be assisting in the raising of funds and arranging delivery of a number of events including 2 'Moon Watch' weeks (March 31st through April 5th; Oct 25th through Nov 1st); a celebration of Thomas Harriot at Syon House and an ambitious plan to provide secondary schools with a telescope and tripod (and an accompanying instructional DVD and web site). Professor Robson turned to RAS funding of IYA activities and noted that this could be either a 'bottom-up', or 'top-down' process. The former would support applications received in response to a call for proposals; the latter would be

restricted to a limited number of events selected by the Society, such as a sub-set of the ‘Cornerstone Projects’.

The Treasurer suggested to Council that were the RAS to set aside £150,000 (in addition to the £40,000 already agreed to contribute to the costs of the UK Coordinator) to support activities this would be in line with the Society’s policy to increase its visibility through outreach activities, the sums would be consistent with the budgets arranged for IYA2009 of some other countries, including France, and the total would be affordable from the General Reserve.

This was agreed together with the decision that it should be used on a combination of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ activities (the latter’s criteria to be explicitly different from those used by the SFTC’s ‘Science in Society’ programme, which it was noted, had not ring fenced funds for IYA 2009 -though there was some hope that an additional budget would be forthcoming following consideration by STFC.

5.2 Review of physics PhD/PDRA careers

The Policy Officer introduced the draft report prepared by an IoP consultant, to which the RAS had made a modest financial contribution, to investigate the competitiveness of physics postgraduates and post-docs produced in the UK, as compared with those trained in the USA and Europe. The poor data from Europe meant that the Review dwelt on UK-USA comparisons only and even here there was concern about its thoroughness and reliability. Council expressed its disappointment and suggested that, unless there was a marked improvement in the final version, it should be, justly, ignored.

5.3 Sainsbury Review

The Policy Officer noted that the influence of this HM Treasury commissioned Review, with its emphasis on knowledge exchange and economic impact, and the almost total lack of mention of STFC, was very obvious in the subsequent CSR. Welcoming the Review’s recommendations for school science (including science clubs) Council agreed the President should write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to highlight the importance of astronomy in attracting school pupils into science.

5.4 BNSC Working Group on Space Exploration Report

Council endorsed the response produced by Professors Barstow, Cruise and Harrison and Dr Ball with the following modifications:

- the deletion of the statement that the Report ‘*offers an opportunity for the Society to join the debate on space exploration alongside other stakeholders*’ was inaccurate (since the Society’s involvement in this debate was long standing)
- the replacement of ‘*The RAS wholeheartedly supports this recommendation, which should facilitate opportunities to pursue world-class science*’ by ‘*The RAS wholeheartedly supports this recommendation, providing it facilitates opportunities to pursue world-class science.*’
- the addition of a sentence in the preamble emphasising the need for *additional* funding and the requirement for *scientific excellence* in allocating it

It was agreed that the response should be sent to the Chair of the Working Group, Professor Close, and to the Director of BNSC

Secretary A

Prof. M.A. Barstow

‘Council’

A

Dr R.J. Barber

Dr P.K. Browning

Dr I.F. Corbett

Dr R. Ivison

Dr R.C. Smith

Prof. I.D. Howarth

Dr I.W.A. Browne

Prof. R.L. Davies

Prof. D.A. Williams

Dr K. Romer

Dr J.C. Zarnecki

Prof. A.W. Hood

Prof. M.G. Edmunds

Prof. M. Rowan-Robinson

Dr S.J. Oliver

G

Dr M. Anand

Prof. M.J. Burchell

Prof. R.Erdélyi (a.k.a.

R. von Fáy-Siebenbürgen)

Dr A.J. Ball

Prof. M.D. Smith

Prof. M.E.. Bailey

Prof. M.M. Grady

Mr A.T. Kearsley

Prof. B. Roberts

The President noted that Professor Fabian, upon his election, would stand down as Editor in Chief of Monthly Notices. Council requested the Treasurer, as Chair of the Publications Management Committee, to establish a search committee to identify a new Editor in Chief for the approval of Council. It particularly requested that this should involve an open and competitive process to ensure the widest possible field of candidates was considered.

7.2 International Committee

The Executive Secretary spoke to a previously distributed paper. He noted that Council was keen that the Society should play a more active international role. Unlike some other learned societies the RAS no longer has an officer tasked with international affairs nor a committee with this sole responsibility. This despite the large fraction of its membership based overseas. It was agreed that an International Committee should be established with the following, provisional, terms of reference:

- 1. Develop relations with overseas national societies e.g. (and subject to in-depth investigation) by offering discounted access to each other's membership, journals, meetings and facilities*
- 2. Develop relations with international organisations e.g. through encouraging and supporting fellows to play leading roles in the EAS, IAU and EGU et al and report to Council on their activities*
- 3. Support capacity development in developing countries e.g. through encouraging and supporting fellows to play leading roles in IAU Commission 46 (Astronomy Education and Development)*
- 4. Support the establishment (where viable) of international sections e.g. by providing speakers for meetings and international representatives e.g. for disseminating and feeding back information*
- 5. Liaise with the IAU Secretariat especially in the run –up to General Assemblies*
- 6. Monitor the overseas based membership of the RAS and propose strategies for maintaining/growing it*

It was further agreed that the Committee should consist of a Chairman, who must be on Council, and up to six members (at least one from the Membership Committee), plus co-optees including, if possible, a member resident overseas, and that it should have recourse to a notional budget of £10,000 pa (expenditure of which would be subject to the approval of the Treasurer and on which a full report would be presented to Council annually).

Professor Cruise volunteered to act as Chair, and Professor Gibson offered himself as the representative of the Membership Committee. Both proposals were warmly welcomed.

7.3 RAS NAM 2008 budget

The Treasurer reviewed the budget forecast prepared by the NAM organisers and in particular their request for the RAS to make provision for a £5,000 contingency in addition to a grant of £10,000. He noted that the RAS contribution to NAMs had been increased some years ago from £5,000 to £10,000 to provide more science in the meeting, the increase used usually to enable more scientists to be invited to give key-note presentations. However £5,000 contingency provided to the 2007 NAM was exceptional and 'one-off'. It had been given because of the late cancellation of the NAM scheduled to be held in Amsterdam and the consequent inability of the Preston organisers to reserve university accommodation, thereby incurring some compensating expenditure and a higher level of budgetary uncertainty. However the Treasurer advised that, as a general rule, if another party provides contingency in someone else's budget it puts them in danger of 'moral hazard' of failing to properly budget against over-expenditure or under-collection. He noted also, however, that the Society had not increased its grant to NAMs for a few years and it would be right to do so, to take account of inflation and the importance of NAMs to the programme of the Society. Accordingly Council agreed a contribution to the 2008 NAM of £12,000 but refused to enter into arrangements for a contingency.

7.4 RAS salaries - cost of living increases

The President said that the proposal was in line with the Council's recent automatic precedents, but that he would ask the affected Trustees and employees to withdraw if there was any point that the Council wished to discuss. Without further comment, Council approved an increase of 4% with effect from January 1st 2008.

7.5 Revision to Bye-laws

Withdrawn

8. PUBLICATIONS

8.1 MNRAS Editor-in-Chief's annual report

Council noted with satisfaction that this had been another good year and thanked the Editor in Chief for overseeing this continued success. It was observed that the impact factor had somewhat declined, but so too had that of competitor journals and this was presumably something systematic in the statistics.

8.2 GJI Editor-in-Chief's annual report

Council noted with satisfaction that this had been another good year and thanked the Editor in Chief for overseeing this continued success. It noted that the impact factor had risen considerably, which could have been related to an increased rejection rate of submitted papers and speed of throughput.

8.3 A&G Editor's annual report

Council noted with satisfaction that this had been another good year and thanked the Editor.

8.4 RAS- Springer Book Series

The Treasurer informed Council that Dr Simon Mitton had agreed to replace Dr Sue Bowler as Commissioning Editor, following the latter's wish to concentrate on editing 'A&G'. Dr Mitton had indicated he would actively seek out scientific monographs for the series.

9. OTHER

9.1 Council approved the following candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/01/2008 and OR/02/2008 and posted on the RAS web site.

Bird	Simeon
Blundell	Katherine
Carey	William
Feroz	Farhan
Geen	Sam
Goodsell	Stephen
Harper	Glyn Derek
Hartmann	Markus
Joannou	Paul
Malandraki	Olga E.
Scanlon	Paul
Spall	Nick
Young	Thomas B.

9.2 The minutes of the A&G meeting of 14th December 2007 and 11th January 2008 were approved and signed.

10. AOB

10.1 The President referred to a letter he had received from Professor David Gubbins expressing concern at the under-representation of Solid Earth Geophysicists on Council and in the activities of the Society. He reported that he would invite Professor Gubbins, Professor Whaler, who was associated with the letter, and possibly some younger Solid Earth Geophysicists to meet him and officers to discuss this complaint and seek a solution to it.

10.2 Pension Valuation 2008

Tabling a paper prepared on the basis of a recently received report, the Treasurer reported that, following the most recent triennial valuation, the Society's Defined Benefit Pension Scheme (for staff appointed before 2001) was in deficit. The deficit was expected, but its size of £172k was larger than had shown up in annual FRS17 valuations. The trustees of the scheme were required by law to implement a Recovery Plan, taking into account the interests both of the employees and of the employer, and had proposed the following:

- To increase the employer's contribution to the Scheme from 19.3% to 26.9% of salaries.
- To make a capital payment of £172k by the required date of 31 March 2008.

Given the size of the sums involved, the time available to implement a solution and the short notice Council had been given to consider the Recovery Plan, it was agreed to return this item to the agenda of the March meeting for a decision.

10.3 The Executive Secretary reported that John Randall, who had worked in the editorial office since 1989, had unexpectedly died. Some 12 colleagues would attend his funeral in Birmingham. Council expressed their sorrow at this tragic loss and asked that their condolences were conveyed to his family.

The meeting rose at 1655.

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M. Rowan-Robinson
President

13th March 2008