



*Advancing  
Astronomy and  
Geophysics*

# ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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## DRAFT

### MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 18 JULY 2008 AT 1030 IN THE RAS COUNCIL ROOM

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

**PRESENT:** Professor A.C. Fabian (President), Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor M.A. Hapgood, (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr H.J. Walker, Professor M.A. Barstow and Dr I.A. Crawford (secretaries), Dr A.J. Ball, Dr R.J. Barber, Dr P.K. Browning, Dr I.F. Corbett, Professor M.G. Edmunds, Dr L. Fletcher, Professor B.K. Gibson, Dr J. Greaves, Professor J.H. Hough, Professor R. Ivison, Professor V. Nakariakov, and Dr J.A. Wild.

**IN ATTENDANCE:** David Elliott and Robert Massey

**APOLOGIES:** Professor A.M. Cruise and Professor I.D. Howarth (Vice Presidents), Dr R.J. Barber, Dr P.K. Browning, Professor M.G. Edmunds and Professor B.K. Gibson.

1.2 Dr Corbett and Professor Ivison, attending their first Council meeting, made brief introductions.

#### 2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of 9 May 2008 were approved and signed.

#### 3. MATTERS ARISING

**3.1** Survey of Astronomy Courses. The Policy Officer reported that some universities including Manchester, Birmingham, Bradford, Central Lancashire and Leeds had still failed to respond to the request for information, without which it will be difficult to produce reliable baseline figures against which future trends can be measured.

**3.2** Solid Earth Geophysicists (SEG). The Geophysical Secretary reported that following a meeting on 30 May with representatives of the SEG community, RAS officers and representatives of the British Geophysical Association (BGA) had met to identify ways in which the RAS could better support the latter in advancing solid earth geophysics. It was felt that if, rather than merely being another 'scientific group' within the RAS, the BGA were to be formally integrated into the RAS Committee structure a number of advantages would result. Such a move would better recognize the special historical role of SEG within the RAS,

and the importance of GJI to the Society. Particular advantages would include financial support for BGA committee meetings (which was identified as a key reason for their poor attendance), availability of the RAS Office to help with secretarial and logistical matters, better connections with the RAS Council (another issue), and the opportunity to propose to Council that the RAS funds particular activities (e.g. an annual geophysics meeting). It was recognized that some changes would need to be made to the BGA constitution to accommodate this change, and that consultation with the Geological Society of London (GSL) would be required. Council welcomed this development which, if adopted by the officers of the BGA and agreed with the GSL, could be ratified at the October meeting.

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

The President reported on a number of meetings held since May, viz

- Minister of Science Ian Pearson (accompanied by Paul Williams, Director Research Councils DIUS)
- Paul Williams (again)
- Chair of the STFC Science Board Peter Knight
- Alun Evans, Director-General, Science and Research Group, DIUS (accompanied by Paul Williams)
- Chair of the Review into the Health of Physics, Bill Wakeham
- CEO STFC Keith Mason and Chief Operating Officer STFC Richard Wade.

Looking to the future the President believed that the outcome of the organisational review of STFC could be very significant. The RAS would be invited to make a direct submission to the review team (in September) and prior to that he would initiate an e-mail discussion with Council to establish the Society's position. He added that he had been given indications that there may be some alleviation to the cuts in STFC grants through mid-year re-allocations from the budgets of other research councils. Finally he informed Council that Ian Pearson had accepted his invitation to attend the Burlington House Societies' reception on 29 July.

#### **5. STFC**

Professor Keith Mason (CEO of the Science and Technology Facilities Council STFC) gave a verbal report to Council updating the presentation he made at the NAM in April. He outlined how the situation had improved since then and how the funding problems had arisen:

- DIUS had agreed to re-phase the budget allocation so that not all the savings were loaded on to the first year of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) round (2008-9)
- The reduction in STFC staff would now be through natural wastage rather than compulsory redundancy
- Over 2008-11, the programme would have the same volume of activity as in 2005-8 (although this would be on a downward trend)
- The legacy of CCLRC and exposure to international subscriptions were partly responsible for the funding problem. In addition the costs of the Shared Services Centre were greater than anticipated
- Neither DIUS nor STFC intentionally created the shortfall

- All of the ‘uplift’ in funding related to FEC and non-cash costs – so it was actually a flat cash settlement
- The Programmatic Review would have happened irrespective of the CSR and had been improved by the consultation process.

Members of Council raised a number of points in an extended discussion. Keith Mason’s responses are in italics:

- Was the settlement a surprise?  
*Communication between DIUS and STFC during the CSR could have been better. While STFC had flagged up the impact of a budgetary shortfall, DIUS officials may not have fully appreciated their scale.*
- Will future decisions be made after consultation?  
*Yes, but consultations only make real sense once proposals are in place.*
- Priorities from before seem to have disappeared in the Delivery Plan  
*This is a document for DIUS rather than the science community – so does not include all the detail.*
- Where is the STFC science vision?  
*The draft Science and Technology Plan will be out for consultation in the autumn. New advisory panels will look at the 10 year vision.*
- Why focus on projects rather than objects (e.g. specific nebulae, planets etc)  
*The Programmatic Review will be melded with other inputs to produce the strategy.*
- The balance between facilities and exploitation (grants) seems way out of kilter.  
*There may have been too much protection of grants in the past.*
- Did merging CCLRC and PPARC combine two overheated programmes and lead to the shortfall?  
*Community expectations did not fit in with CSR. For example the running costs of Diamond and the upgrade of the LHC were not provided for in the budget. When the impact of FEC and inflation were taken on board, the settlement meant £80m of savings. STFC could also not over commit to programmes in year 1 as this would have led to serious budgetary problems downstream.*
- Many feel STFC is run in a very autocratic way – why not, for example, have an astronomy division advised by senior active researchers which could tension priorities within its field. Currently STFC has to tension astronomy against a large range of competing claims?  
*The formal situation may seem autocratic but STFC is the least autocratic of all the research councils. STFC has a Science Board, the other research councils don’t. An astronomy division is an option but ‘science in silos’ could have the effect of marginalising astronomy when HMG’s priorities stress applied and inter-disciplinary sciences. In addition the outcomes of peer review would carry more weight with a wider public if they included scientists from disciplines other than astronomy.*
- STFC is acquiring a reputation for ignoring recommendations from science community e.g. several Future Vision reports finished months ago, including the report on exo-planet work have yet to be published  
*Expectations should not be too high. Funding new programmes inevitably means scaling back others. The Future Vision reports should be published ASAP*
- How will the Programmatic Review affect the next (2010) allocations?

*Scientists on lower-ranked projects are not 'doomed' necessarily but know they need to do better next time if they are to secure continued funding.*

- STFC's problem is that it has to balance top down (HMG) and bottom up (community) pressures.

*This is the job of the Science Board. Agreed that as much as possible of the decision making process should be transparent and open – though with the caveat that the community should avoid unnecessary polarising of issues given that there will always be more projects worthy of funding than can be financed. That said, STFC had not taken decisions hastily e.g. the misunderstanding about Gemini was the result of a leak from the Gemini board (though UK involvement had been an issue ever since we joined ESO).*

- But should the question not be 'what science can we do?' through our involvement in international facilities.

*We should not be locked into unproductive facilities. However international commitments are commitments. This affects decisions affecting the withdrawal from EISCAT.*

- Only one ad hoc panel (ground based astronomy) had not had its advice accepted by PPAN.

*That was because its aspirations exceeded the budget; decisions were ducked.*

- What about small projects (e.g. Bison) previously funded from rolling grants, now in Programmatic Review?

*Scientists can reapply if the project is recoverable – but Bison was considered in the Review at the request of a peer review panel.*

- Why is MoonLITE treated differently?

*It is not a project yet – just an outline concept without budget indicators. The Square Kilometre Array (SKA) is the same.*

- Consultation over the Organisational Review of STFC had been very poor.

*The Organisational Review follows Cabinet Office procedures which actually don't require any outside consultation! STFC did not intend this to be secretive.*

- Would you welcome community comments on the new advisory panels, e.g. far-and near-universe?

*Yes, send them to John Womersley. But note that PPARC also proposed a near universe committee but dropped the idea because the topics to be covered were too broad.*

- How can the community influence the next CSR?

*This is very important. DIUS will bid to the Treasury for its budget settlement against competing policy areas liked defence, health, crime prevention etc. Once that is agreed the research councils make their respective cases to DIUS (then the RAS community make its case to STFC). The community can help create a positive 'climate' during this protracted process, particularly if it can demonstrate how astronomy uplifts the UK skills base. As a result of the public campaign since November 2007 the stock of astronomers with Government currently is not high.*

- Should we invite the Science Minister to key astronomy projects e.g. the observatories on Hawaii?

*Yes – but, given their distance from the UK, Ministers find it hard to accept. It might be possible when VISTA opens. The key priority is to make the macroeconomic case*

*for astronomy. We need to talk to policymakers, opposition parties and business and persuade the media to report positive stories.*

- Does the £236m announced via the Large Facilities Capital Fund make a difference?  
*Yes – these are earmarked funds for basic science projects including the SKA. This investment creates a more positive mood and should be talked up.*
- Is FEC funding actually being used for FEC?  
*It's probably too early to tell but at the moment the spending of FEC funding seems patchy.*
- If despite best endeavours the next CSR is unfavourable STFC's communications with the community must be better than they have been in the last year.  
*We will need to jointly manage the press effectively to achieve this.*

## **6. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

**6.1** 'The economic benefits of fundamental research in physics'. The Executive Secretary confirmed that, following email agreement by Council, the RAS would contribute £10K towards the c.£100K cost of this study being sponsored by the Institute of Physics, STFC and EPSRC. Its purpose is to assist in making the case for investment in the physical sciences in the next CSR by demonstrating the value of existing, current and future fundamental physics research to UK economic growth. The study, which is still being scoped and which will be undertaken by 'Oxford Economics', will measure the resources currently committed to physics research in the UK (research budgets, number of researchers, PhD students etc); the direct results of physics research (number of publications, citations, patents etc) and the longer term broader benefits of the research (by quantifying the outcomes for a sample of physics research projects in order to demonstrate the potential outcomes from all physics research). The study will include interviews with companies for which past physics research is critical. The Executive Secretary added that he had experienced difficulty persuading the other sponsors that geophysics should be included in the study since their view was that this was applied rather than fundamental research. Finally, it was agreed that Vice-President Professor Hapgood would join the Policy Officer in representing the RAS on the steering group overseeing the study.

**6.2** Strategic Away Day. The Executive Secretary confirmed that Cumberland Lodge had been reserved for a planning session commencing at 1800 on Monday 29 September and ending at 1700 on Tuesday 30 September @ £220 per person for accommodation and food. Its purpose would be to provide an opportunity for developing ideas in a less constrained forum than the usual Council meeting with a view to shaping the direction of the Society over the next few years. He outlined a number of possible topics on which the 25 attendees might want to focus but urged Council members to contact him with their priorities, as well as to volunteer to lead sessions and to suggest outside speakers for the after-dinner discussion.

## **7. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE**

**7.1** The report of the Membership Committee was noted

**7.2** 'Friends of the RAS'. In the absence of the Membership Committee Chair the Executive Secretary introduced the previously distributed paper outlining the rationale for creating this new category of membership. Following the success of the monthly lunchtime public lectures held between January–June 2008 it was clear there was an appetite for the Society's sciences

among the general public. This could be exploited to build up wider support for astronomy and geophysics; in addition it would further demonstrate the Society's public-interest concern (a requirement of the 2006 Charity Act) and produce a modest income stream. 'Friends' would be people with an interest in scientific topics who enjoyed social interactions with similarly minded people. They would not, probably, be active amateur astronomers, members of astronomical societies and serious readers of popular astronomy magazines for which other societies including the British Astronomical Association and the Society for Popular Astronomy already cater. Initial recruitment would be aimed at attendees at lunchtime lectures (contact details of 180 were already on file), people on Cunard cruises, through the arrangement under which the RAS provided guest lecturers, and visitors to the Royal Academy.

The benefits of being a 'Friend' could include:

- free/priority entry to lunch-time lectures, for which a small charge may be made to non-members in the future
- use of the Society's premises for private events
- on-borrowing access to the library
- attendance at 'Friends' only social events, lectures and meetings
- participation on outings to places of interest (observatories, Greenwich etc)
- the RAS diary
- an annual newsletter and access to a ( simple) web site
- the opportunity to subscribe to *A&G* at a discounted rate (though, as indicated, uptake might be minimal).

The Treasurer commented that the proposal was soundly based and looked to the future to expand the ways in which the Society fulfilled charitable objectives. In its realisation the finances were key and from the outset the implementation should cover its costs. The subscription rates should reflect the value of the Society relative to other comparable organisations. Council gave the proposal its enthusiastic support and agreed that the 'Friends' should be established to coincide with the start of the International Year of Astronomy with an initial annual fee of £35 (with *A&G* available for an extra £29).

**7.3** Council approved (or in the case of DGG appointees to the GJI Editorial Board, noted) the appointment /renewal of the following committee members/journal editors:

**Astronomical Heritage Committee**

M. Bailey

M. Edmunds

A. Boksenberg

**Membership Committee**

R Holme

**Education Committee**

Francisco Diego

**Finance Committee**

A.J. Willis

**Library Committee**

S. Mitton

M. Hurn

C. Owen

## **MNRAS Editorial Board**

D. Worrall

Note: A King has agreed to be Deputy Editor in Chief

## **GJI Editorial Board**

M. Cocco

S. Goes

A. J. Haines

F. Krueger

J. Renner

O. Ritter

J.O.A. Robertsson

J. Virieux

**7.4** The Treasurer introduced the report of the Finance Committee and in particular asked Council to approve an increase in principle (from 2× to 4× times annual salary) of the Life Assurance Cover for employees who were members of the Society's Pension Scheme. This would bring it into line with industry standards and might encourage more staff to join the Stakeholder Pension Scheme. The net cost of the premiums would be about £6000 (compared to £3125 p.a. in 2008). This was approved.

**7.5** The revised TORS for Finance Committee were approved.

## **8. INTERNATIONAL**

**8.1** The progress report concerning the creation of the International Committee was noted.

## **9. AWARDS**

**9.1** Council approved the composition of the 'A' and 'G' Awards Committees as proposed by their respective chairs, Professors Howarth and Bailey.

## **10. PUBLICATIONS**

**10.1** Council approved the particular prices to be charged for Journal Subscriptions in 2009. The reason for setting the prices as late as July (or August) was to minimise currency risk by selling currency forward. Council 'approval' at this stage was necessarily at best a formality and at worst untimely. The Treasurer therefore suggested that, in future, Council delegated this particular decision to the Treasurer and Executive Secretary whilst maintaining its authority over the journal subscriptions through its supervision of the prices set in accordance with principles proposed by the Publications Management Committee and approved at the next (usually March) Council meeting. This was agreed.

**10.2** The report of the MNRAS Editorial Board was noted. The President praised the new Editorial Office Manager, Dr Kim Clube, for ensuring a smooth transition following the unexpected death of her predecessor.

## **11. OTHER**

**11.1** Council approved the following candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/05/08; OR/06/08 and posted on the RAS web site.

Abel	Paul G.
Achilleos	Nick
Adair	John S.
Austin	Michael Roy
Bluck	Asa
Chen	Christopher
Clapham	David
Cooper	Andrew
Davies	Christopher
Egleton	John Edward
Fenech	Danielle
Fildes	Gary
Folkes	Lloyd Stuart
Fyfe	Duncan
Goulding	Andrew
Hargrave	Peter
Harwood	Jeremy
Hill	Jason
Jackson	Neal
Katamzi	Zama Thobeka
Kemper	Ciska
Kerr	John Richard
MacRae	Pauline S.
McDonald	David
Peacock	John Andrew
Quinn	John Joseph
Ramsey	Norman
Reis	Rubens
Sakai	Satoru
Seaman	Robert
Smith	Rachel
Vickers	Hannah
Walton	John Victor
Williams	David Thomas
Williams	Sheridan

## **12. AOB**

**12.1** Professor Hough reported that the University of Hertfordshire wanted to title the 2009 NAM the 'European Week of Astronomy and Space Science' (EWASS) to reflect the involvement of the European Astronomical Society and the European Space Agency. With the provisos that the name 'RAS National Astronomy Meeting (NAM)' was appropriately publicised to avoid sowing confusion in the UK community and that the usual title would revert in 2010, this was agreed.

**12.2** The President asked Council to email suggestions for the 2008 Whitrow Lecturer (covering some aspect of the philosophy of cosmology) to the Executive Secretary.



**12.3** The President reported that an item on the International Year of Astronomy would be brought to Council in October.

The meeting rose at 1400

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A.C. Fabian  
President

9<sup>th</sup> October 2008