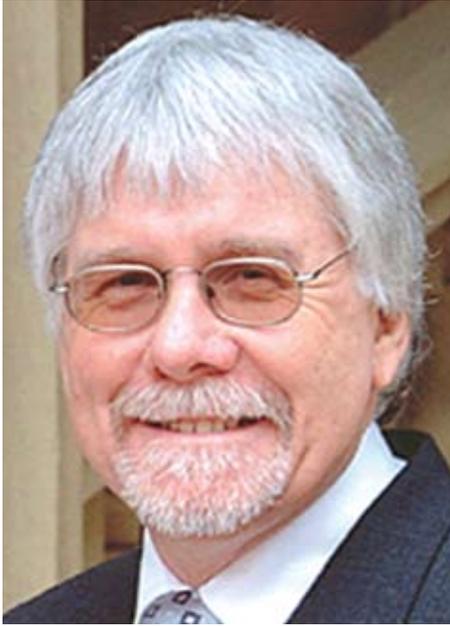


President's Message



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Dear Fellow Planetarians

Well, the time has finally arrived, and I have now picked up the reins of the IPS presidency following Susan Button's two-year term of office. I have a hard act to follow, and so I formally take this chance to thank Susan on behalf of all of us in the IPS family for the great job which she has done for the past four years, and also I hope for the next two as past president.

The office of IPS president is a long commitment with two years as president-elect, two as president, and two as past president: a six-year sentence, sorry, I mean term! We should be grateful to those founding IPS members who drafted this eminently sensible system, which preserves the collective wisdom of the IPS officers and eases newly elected people into their offices with the benefit of their predecessors still being in office.

The IPS is very well served by Lee Ann Henning, our excellent executive secretary and Shawn Laatsch, who safeguards our finances and membership matters. My thanks to both of them in advance, as I will be relying on them heavily, following the example of many of our past presidents. The IPS officers are in constant touch through email, physical meetings at venues across the planet, and also by Skype. There is a lot of organising done behind the scenes to make all of our meetings run smoothly.

By now you will have all heard that Dave Weinrich is our new president-elect and I thank all of you who took part in the democratic process. Our collective thanks also is due to Steve Mitch, who organised the ballot procedures and supervised the integrity of the voting process. Welcome aboard President-Elect Dave! We also bid farewell from the IPS officers to our outgoing president, Martin George, who now slips gently into the pool of past presidents. He is joining a jewelled shoal of big fish in the past presidential pool: they are really like emeritus professors in the western university system.

A Shoal of Talent

I don't know if you are all aware of our mechanisms for using this shoal of past presidential talent, but in my experience, it comprises a formidable group of wise heads which is capable of being mobilized for urgent stop-gap missions when necessary. I thank all of you for much wise advice and for acting as sounding boards for ideas and keeping the current cadre of IPS officers on the straight and narrow. In fact, our IPS committee system and council of national affiliate members also acts as a repository of history and knowledge.

So I also offer my thanks to all of you who take an active part in the running of the International Planetarium Society and urge you all to consider more active participation by running for the vacant officer posts that arise. Not only is it good practice to use the IPS membership's assembled wisdom, but also it is self-evident that many of you are hiding your lights under the bushel. Become more active! If you can offer broad planetarium experience and common sense, you will be a worthy candidate.

I had the pleasure of meeting many of you at the IPS conference in Chicago last summer. Do you remember those far-off times? From the U.S. perspective fuel was very expensive; being used to exorbitant UK prices, for me US fuel charges were bargain basement, and I got two US dollars for my pounds! How swiftly things have changed! The cataclysmic changes that have rocked the financial fabric of our

world system really seem to have hit like an unexpected meteorite coming out of the concealment of the sun.

I do not wish to sound overly pessimistic, but I do get the impression that our "finance experts" are just as much at sea as the rest of us. I hope for all of our sakes that it will be as short a time as possible before peoples' confidence in the banking system is restored so that we can get back to business as usual.

It does rankle when the inevitable fraudsters are flushed out by a crash and they appear to be experiencing very little retribution, especially when the mind-boggling scale of their deceit is exposed.

Optimistic for the Young People

I am optimistic that this global downturn in the world's economy may persuade our brightest young people that their aspiration to become highly paid financiers and bankers is replaced by a resurgence of youthful interest in scientific, mathematical and engineering careers. These, at least, will contribute something to the planet's economy rather than using tortuous statistics and dodgy financial instruments to create small percentages on very large sums of money.

The public perception in the UK seems to be that the culture of greed and avarice has caught up with the people who exploited it. That useful German word *schadenfreude* (gloating at someone else's bad luck) probably best expresses the feeling of the UK man in the street when his opinion is sought about the credit crunch and out-of-control financial systems. I expect that this is a worldwide phenomenon, and is locally translating into very public derision and scorn for the bankers.

I think that these difficult times worldwide prompt us to make sure that the international IPS membership should take time to encourage local politicians to realise that times of recession are positively the best times to invest heavily in education. Looking forward to a better future means that we must invest in training scientists and engineers to make the future work. A scientifically literate population is one which will accept that life is inherently risky, but risk can deliver great prizes, if it is understood and managed well. We ought not to risk our children's future by under-investing in their essential education.

Can you imagine returning to a life without the ubiquitous internet, mobile phones, satellite television, and GPS systems? The instant access to the internet's electronic information system that is currently possible in almost every large city on the planet is a stunning technological achievement.

*(Please see **President** on page 48)*

(President, from page 29)

So not only will we want this to continue, but also we will seek to expand the coverage, for the internet links to become faster and also for the equipment to become much easier to use. This is the science fiction of my youth coming to pass. I do believe that the easy acceptance of last century's science fiction writers about the development of space travel to other worlds showed their faith in our collective ability to solve some very difficult problems. The future which they envisaged is technically impossible right now, but in 100 years, who can say?

It is a salutary experience when you get to my age to see in the Belfast transport museum things that I used (large thermionic valve amplifiers and radios, punch card machines and humungous computers), drove (early Honda motorcycles) or coveted (E-type Jaguar car). By 2019 humans are likely to have our current personal external electronic equipment built in as augmentations of their own nervous system, still the fastest organic computer system that we understand. So I can also write science fiction.

Trained Minds Make Possibilities

At Armagh we explain to our young visitors that absolutely nothing should be written off as impossible and that today's impossibilities are destined to become tomorrow's commonplace. But none of this will happen without trained young minds looking at problems in a new way, or suddenly seeing (Eureka!) that there may be a better way to do an old task: developing faster or smarter ways of doing things needs prepared minds. A scientific training is an excellent start for such innovation. So tell the politicians and goad them into action.

I also want to wish everyone reading this issue of our magazine a very busy and Happy New International Year of Astronomy. I really hope that it provides you with opportunities to stimulate the interest of the public and your local funding bodies in our fast evolving planetarium industry; we are very well placed to exploit this festive event. It will provide us all with a year-long challenge to make astronomy and space exploration come alive as an exciting topic of interest for the public. We know that the night skies provide endless fascination and mystery for humans everywhere.

The recent lengthy period of clear, cold, frosty weather in Ireland has provided an unparalleled opportunity to observe the solar system planets and the moon. The planets Venus and Jupiter have made a splendid early evening spectacle and careful observation also revealed Mercury and Neptune and even Uranus if you used a big enough lens. These

long cold winter nights have allowed us rare December glimpses of our close neighbours in space.

Finally, I want to mention how profoundly depressing it is to see the TV coverage of the unfolding tragedies of Mumbai and Gaza, showing the extent to which we can justify killing each other over differences of worldview. I sent a message of encouragement to our Indian colleagues and hope that the education which we all espouse soon will allow us to deny the truth of "one man's meat being

another man's poison" as being a matter of education allowing us to see things from different viewpoints.

Our diversity provides great strength. The ability to see another's point of view, and to welcome and tolerate it as part of our human diversity, is infinitely preferable to the innate limbic brain reactions that still drive so much of our interaction with our "enemies." They usually turn out to be our neighbours with a different set of values. I hope that our IPS family can promote this position of tolerance. ☆



The Chinese IYA opening ceremony at the Beijing Planetarium. Photo by Guo Xia.

(International, from page 40)

I have also heard from Chee-Kuen Yip, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Macau in November 2007. You may recall that in the March 2008 issue of *Planetarian* I wrote about their exciting new planetarium project. It is a first for Macau and this year they expect to bring the project to completion, with the opening of the new planetarium to take place in late 2009. I am planning to pay them another visit during this year and will be pleased to report on their progress.

I was very excited recently to receive news from a planetarium in Cuba. A staff member who saw my article on Serbian planetariums had noticed some interesting parallels between the facilities in Serbia and her own country. In 2004, I visited Cuba and was disappointed to learn that the planetarium in Havana was no longer operating. I am looking forward to learning more about the current Cuban situation; to date, I have had some difficulties in establishing reliable e-mail contact, but I hope to have more news soon!

The Committee is, as always, very keen to be involved in issues to do with language. On that note, Agnes Acker has reminded me to mention that the ALMA show entitled *The Quest for Cosmic Origins*, produced by the As-

sociation des Planetariums de Langue Francaise (APLF), the ESO, and Mirage 3D, will be available in 7 languages: French, English, German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, and Chilean.

The Committee is currently working on procedures to assist planetariums under threat of closure, in whatever way is possible. We all know that, from time to time, some of us run a planetarium that faces an uncertain future, and I look forward to the IPS being able to offer even more help, advice and support to such people.

To this end, if you have experienced such a difficulty, especially one of which we may not be aware, I should be very pleased to hear from you to learn of the problems you faced, and how you solved (or attempted to solve) them. Please do get in touch!

Finally, the Committee has been asked by the IPS Officers to work on guidelines for IPS Conference scholarships. It is pleasing that several people benefited from scholarships awarded to attend the Chicago IPS conference, and we look forward to this initiative continuing. This task will be completed soon and will be ready for the Council Meeting in France in July. ☆