

IAU General Secretary 1997–2000

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Abstract. The IAU is like an old house: Each of the IAU General Secretaries brings her/his individual skills, trying to fix it up. After the collective efforts of several General Secretaries, the house is hopefully kept in reasonable overall shape. But each General Secretary is also in principle responsible for everything, which means that priorities for the way you spend your time must be set – remembering that surprises may occur at any moment.

In my case, I'd like to single out five major initiatives taken during my term, which have probably proved useful in the longer term.

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1. Introduction

The IAU is like an old house, and each new General Secretary arrives with her/his own toolbox, skills and wishes. Naturally, there is always some housekeeping to be done, like the *Transactions* of one GA and the preparations for the next. I also found the Secretariat and furniture to be in generally poor condition after many years, so I decided to repaint and renew it immediately. And after ~25 years of service, I thought the *Information Bulletin* needed a thorough facelift; the (much newer) web site as well. But these tasks were in the category of routine details.

The real surprises all originated with the Solar System community. The IAU involvement with NEOs is treated in detail below, but the fuss a year later over what to call Pluto – a ‘real’ planet or minor one – took me completely by surprise! I would never have imagined that so much public emotion could arise from what to me was a mere question of nomenclature – not of scientific fact, like the NEOs. But a single press release laid the matter to rest until 2006, when we at least knew what we were talking about(!).

2. Major initiatives

Any selection of major and minor initiatives is bound to be subjective. Here, for what they are worth, are my own favourites:

- *Rules for scientific meetings.* The rules then dealt with the proper handling of chalk and typewriters, but did not explain what constitutes a successful meeting proposal. Worse, they tacitly assumed that all astronomers were male. Fortunately, they also said, “the GS shall publish Rules for Scientific Meetings”, so I just ‘encouraged’ an explicit female participation among SOCs, session chairs and keynote speakers. This was the beginning of a long evolution within the IAU.

- *An IAU policy on Near Earth Objects.* None existed before the “1997 FX11 affair” in March 1997. Was the impact hazard a real risk, about which something should be done, and if so, what was the practical strategy and cost; or was it pure speculation, as some said? The “affair” highlighted the urgent need for a definite IAU position on NEOs.

- *Proper Terms of Reference for the IAU Minor Planet Centre (MPC)*. The “1997 FX11 affair” also highlighted a need to clarify the relations between the MPC, which was financially and politically equivalent to the rest of the IAU, and the IAU itself. The final agreement also defined an open data policy, so that qualified orbit computers world-wide would have free access to the MPC data bank of existing, earlier observations.

- *Streamlining the IAU education-like activities*. Before 2000, the activities were scattered among several IAU Commissions and Working Groups; coordinating these initiatives as well as the corresponding resources was needed. The activities were collected in 2000 in Commission 46 and a number of ‘Program Groups’, but I failed to recognize that a core of professionals is also needed. This realisation led eventually to the 2009 IAU Strategic Plan.

- *The collaboration with the Gruber Foundation to jointly award the Gruber Cosmology Prize and Fellowships*. This had been explored by an intermediary earlier, but in a clumsy manner and with no result. Yet I had this feeling that “here’s good will going to waste”, and through many hours of direct negotiation with the Grubers an agreement was reached. For me, the key point was that the IAU could not take a back seat to others in scientific matters. Also, I would much rather spend money on young people than on old. Fortunately, the Grubers were generous enough to include the fellowships in the final agreement that we reached. I have since learned that my recalcitrance paved the way for similar agreements in other disciplines.

3. Long-term effects

While each of these initiatives occurred on the spur of the moment, with the benefit of about twenty years of hindsight, many do appear to have had some long-term beneficial results, as recorded in the book by Andersen *et al.* (2019). A quarter of a century later, women – even female IAU Presidents! – are familiar sights at IAU meetings. The NEO issue did take twenty years to mature, but NEO surveys are now intensifying, and the NEO impact hazard is on the Agenda of NASA, the US Congress and the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. The IAU *has* changed – which is all to the good.

In contrast, what still pains me is the “Monique Orine affair”, which must have started during my term. Maybe Monique’s acts were a disguised cry for help – who knows? The details will now never be fully clarified, but the question nonetheless remains in my mind.

References

Andersen, J., Baneke, D., & Madsen, C., 2019, *The International Astronomical Union: Uniting the Community for 100 Years*, Springer International Publishers