



# President's column

**Peter Hall**

## **The past and the future**

This is my first column as the Society's President, and I want to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Michael Cowling, for the wisdom and energy that he has used to guide the Society during the last two years. I've learned a great deal at Michael's hand during my all-too-brief period as Incoming President. If I can supply a reasonable approximation to his skill during my own term, I shall feel pleased.

With characteristic foresight, Michael began a number of important initiatives during his two-year term. Where these have not yet come to fruition, I'll continue them. I'll discuss one of them below — the combined issue of the health of our journals and the Society's income. I'll take up other matters, and new initiatives, in future columns.

I wish also to pay tribute to the services that Jan Thomas made to Society, before stepping down in September as our Executive Officer. She worked tirelessly to publicise our achievements, and to lobby both federal and state governments for support for mathematics. The Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute, and the International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics, are just two of the major initiatives that she carried to fruition.

As we embark on our 51st year we can look back on many achievements, and glories, in Australian mathematics. These are discussed in depth in Graham Cohen's remarkable history, *Counting Australia In*, published to coincide with the Society's first half-century. I urge all members of the Society to purchase a copy! An order form can be found at the web page: <http://www.austms.org.au/Counting>.

Graham's astonishingly detailed book is still warm from the presses. Indeed, our most recent achievement, and our grandest — Terry Tao's Fields Medal, awarded in August — is included. It is particularly appropriate that Terry's extraordinary achievements were honoured on the cusp of our semi-centennial; they show what we are capable of, and suggest directions for our future.

However, not all the challenges that lie ahead are so uplifting. Across the country, many of our colleagues are facing very difficult working conditions, caused by poor funding environments for the mathematical sciences. Some of our colleagues are uncertain about their futures, and this concerns me greatly. The ARC research review of the mathematical sciences will be launched by the end of the year, and at that point we'll have to redouble our efforts to boost the fortunes of mathematics in Australia. There will be more about this in later columns, I'm sure.

## **Our journals, and the Society's income**

At the Annual General Meeting in Sydney in September our Treasurer reported on the challenges facing us in connection with our journals. These were once significant sources of income for the Society, but in recent times the sign of that income has reversed. The Treasurer noted that, during the last year, some of the drains on our resources could fairly be viewed as unique. However, in the difficult times that lie ahead we can expect further financial obstacles.

In scholarly terms, too, our journals are losing ground. To address these issues the

Society has put together a “Publications Committee”, or working party, chaired by Michael Cowling. In the first instance the committee will consider whether it is in the Society’s interests to use a not-for-profit publisher, for example one of the UK university presses or a mathematical society much larger than our own, to help us reduce production costs and get our journals into more libraries than at present. It is expected that the committee will make recommendations by February next year. I anticipate that the committee will then turn its mind to other issues that impact on the strength and vitality of our publishing enterprises, and will become something of a “think tank” for this side of our activities.

Indeed, the challenges currently faced by our journals are certain to be joined by others in the years ahead. For example, we are finding it increasingly difficult to locate the editors and other assistants that the Society needs to keep its publishing activities afloat. I’m sure the reasons are obvious to all of us: Especially in our universities, our members are facing unprecedented demands on their

time and energy. They are experiencing increasing difficulty finding opportunities, in their hectic working schedules, for providing general support to the discipline. The severe pressures on Australian universities and government laboratories today are impacting not just on us as individuals, but on the professional societies that play a vital role in providing peer support for the nation’s scientists and scholars.

As a result, the time may come when we’ll have to financially assist our editors and their assistants for work which, in the past, we all took for granted as part of the many volunteer efforts that mathematicians make for their profession. Of course, we shan’t pay wages to our editors, but we may have to provide money for relief from teaching or other duties. For all these reasons, I’d like to mention a suggestion that was raised at the AGM in September: that we consider an above-inflation increase in the Society’s annual subscription. How necessary, and how high, any increase might be will depend to some extent on our success in keeping the costs of our journals under control, and increasing their profiles.