



President's Column

Peter Taylor*

In my previous column, published in the March issue of the *Gazette*, I had a large number of exciting recent activities to report. The last couple of months have been a complete contrast: the items of business that have been on my plate, and those of other members of the AustMS Council and Steering Committee, have been much more in the nature of 'behind-the-scenes' administration, and certainly not likely to make very interesting reading material for the President's column. So, I have decided to put some thoughts on paper about a general issue that has arisen in the course of this behind-the-scenes administration.

There are quite a few people who occupy positions in the AustMS that are reasonably demanding in terms of the energy and time commitment required. Notable examples are our journal editors and conference organisers, but there are people undertaking other such tasks as well. The contribution of these people often becomes most apparent when they step down from the role and it becomes an urgent problem to find someone to take over. Our experience is that this process can often be difficult. In recognition of this, a few years ago the AustMS set up the Nominations and Publications Committee, with the express objective of encouraging people to nominate for elected positions or to put themselves forward for positions to which appointments are made.

In any conversation about finding someone to fill one of these positions, the inevitable question arises: 'what is in it for the person whom we might ask to do it?'. It would be dishonest to pretend that this is not a difficult question, which is becoming more difficult for academic mathematicians, because university leadership does not seem to value work in the service of an academic's professional discipline as much as it used to. The above-mentioned question is, perhaps, even more difficult to answer for a non-academic mathematician, whose employers have historically been less likely to support activities undertaken in the service to the profession.

In almost all cases, there is a large measure of altruism driving the various people who contribute to the AustMS. Most do it 'on their own time' because they genuinely care about the mathematical sciences in this country and want to contribute as much as they can. However, I'd suggest that, even in these cases, there needs to be a very clear positive answer to the question posed above for the person's contribution to be sustainable over a long period of time.

The AustMS constitution specifically prohibits the Society paying any remuneration other than out-of-pocket expenses to anyone who is a member of the Council (which, for example, includes all the journal editors). Thus, the option of paying

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people to take on these positions is not available, even if the AustMS could afford it. That being said, it has been recent practice for the AustMS to provide funding that can be used for teaching relief or other activities to academic staff who take on significant editorial responsibilities. Travel and other expenses incurred in performing the role can also be covered.

So what are the positives for a mathematician at any stage of their career — from being a student to being retired — to put themselves forward for a significant position in the AustMS?

First, notwithstanding my comments above about the changing priorities of university leadership, I would argue that having occupied a position of significance in the AustMS still constitutes a large tick on a curriculum vitae. Consequent concrete rewards in terms of appointment or promotion can follow. I'm possibly a little biased in this, but 'service to the profession' counts for a lot with me when I am sitting on an appointment or promotions committee. It indicates to me that a person has a broad outlook, is connected with their colleagues, and, in general, is a 'contributor'.

I would also argue that, at least for academic mathematicians, it should be the goal of all of us to be significant players in our disciplinary communities, both nationally and internationally. Getting involved with the AustMS in an official capacity is a good way of participating in Australian mathematical life and having a say in decisions that are made.

Finally, there are the personal benefits that come from working with mathematicians from around the country. For me, this is the biggest plus. I've met mathematicians who are inspiring. I've met mathematicians who have become friends. I've met others who I agree with on matters of policy. I've even met a few who I find frustrating. Looking at it overall, this engagement is a part of my life that I would not want to have missed. The pluses of networking with like-minded people are well recognised in other walks of life, and they apply in the mathematical community as well.

I'll finish off with a plea for volunteers. The current members of the Nominations and Publications Committee are Michael Murray from The University of Adelaide, Jacqui Rammage from the University of Wollongong, Peter Forrester from The University of Melbourne and the AustMS Secretary Peter Stacey who is retired from La Trobe University. I am sure that they would very much appreciate hearing from anyone who would like to put themselves or a colleague forward for a position in the AustMS. Alternatively, anyone interested can contact me directly.



Peter Taylor became the inaugural Professor of Operations Research at the University of Melbourne in 2003 and held the position of Head of Department from 2005 to 2010. His research interests lie in the field of applied probability, with particular emphasis on applications in telecommunications, biological modelling and healthcare. Recently he has become interested in the interaction of stochastic modelling with optimisation and optimal control under conditions of uncertainty.