

**Minutes of the ASSA Council Meeting held at 20h00 on November 01, 2005
in the
SAAO Lecture Hall.**

1 Welcome

The chair, Ms Pat Booth, welcomed everybody, thanked them for coming and asked all present to stand in silence for a minute to acknowledge the passing of Peter van Blommestein. The meeting started after this. The Chair, Ms Pat Booth then handed out a new agenda, saying that there was an important issue that needed addressing.

2 Register

This was passed around and signed. The following were present:

Cliff Turk, Ian Glass, Pat Booth, Dave Laney , Keith Gottschalk, Dudley Field and Case Rijdsdijk.

3 Apologies

Maciej Soltynski, Andrew McConnel, Chris de Coning and out of town members.

4 Minutes of the Previous meeting – August 31, 2005

Proposed by Cliff Turk
Seconded by Ian Glass

5 Centres

5.1 Keith Gottschalk's letter in the last Cape Observer has raised the ire of several members and the chair said that this issue was contentious and needed addressing.

C Turk said that he had had negative feedback from several members. In the subsequent discussion several points were raised:

5.1.1 Council matters are not for publication by centres

5.1.2 Ian Glass said that the ASSA had never been political and asked that his letter be read out. The secretary, C Rijdsdijk, then read out the letter he had received from Ian Glass. There was general consensus with the items raised. Further to this Ian Glass asked that his letter be re-circulated. This letter follows:

Comment on article by Prof Gottschalk in the November 2005 Cape Observer

I believe that Astronomical Society of SOUTHERN Africa is a body that brings together those interested in the science of astronomy. It has the good fortune to be privately funded and therefore has been minimally affected by the political agendas of the past or present regimes.

Most of SA's institutions are more or less reliant on government money and have been forced over the years, in all sorts of ways, to dance to various political tunes. In my opinion, the prevailing atmosphere is turning scientists and other academics into apparatchiks who feel they will advance their careers through peripheral activities such as education, supervision of black students, publicity generation etc instead of by pursuing fundamental research, which should be their main (though not their sole)aim.

The fact that we have little interest from black people and some minority groups reflects their cultural interests and is typical of many activities other than astronomy. Race has never been an issue with us one way or the other. One can expect that this situation will change as the population as a whole grows more mathematically and otherwise literate.

I do feel that more people could be members of the Society and also that it is a pity that many of the professionals have not chosen to join us and to work through us more. This is partly a result of pressures placed on the professionals and partly due to personality issues in a small community. The Society could play a useful role in professional astronomy, in my opinion, by promoting annual conferences at the research level. At present, these have been channeled in the direction of the Institute of Physics, but I feel the atmosphere at their conferences is too formal: not as good as purely astronomical conferences tend to be. Any change in this direction would require the support of the main academics and observatory directors.

ASSA is a voluntary body and has in my opinion been highly successful in encouraging its members interests in many different areas. I think for example of the truly excellent work Auke Slotegraaf has done for MNASSA and the Sky Guides. The latter had a circulation of over 3000 last year and must have been a major factor in encouraging interest in astronomy in southern Africa. I also think of the ASSA symposiums that have been held over the last few years, which have reinforced and encouraged many individuals' efforts.

ASSA and its Centres have been and are being supported by many dedicated individuals and I think that the remarks in Gottschalk's article are very insulting to these. The fact that Peter van Blommestein happened to be dying at the time of the Council meeting referred to is particularly unfortunate. I also agree that the failure to nominate this year's committee in a proper and timeous way was very regrettable. It is a fact of life that a lot of younger people are working, busy and perhaps away or otherwise unable to attend as regularly as might be desired. We are dependent on retired people who are often, in fact, very competent.

Of course, in any association, interests change and people come and go. Therefore, I am not concerned that certain Observing Sections prosper and others become moribund. I think this to be reasonable and I feel that old sections could be discontinued and new ones started as the need arises. There is no point in keeping any particular section going if the interest has evaporated. We see the same trend in the regional Centres. These wax and wane according to the charisma of their committees and we have seen many dramatic variations in their sizes over the years.

We cannot be compared to the Botanical Society or the Aquarium, which have large-scale facilities to maintain and which are therefore driven by the need to actively court popularity with the government as well as the general population. The number of astronomical society members is not very great in any country although a lot of people are vaguely interested in the subject. Astronomy is a very specialized interest everywhere. It can also be pointed out that the SAAO and HartRAO run extensive and expensive outreach campaigns already; the planetarium also. These have not caused an increase in the numbers of serious amateurs. On the positive side, the number of scholarships available (including one from ASSA), as well as the NASSP programme of the universities (with considerable input from the state observatories) has caused the numbers of astronomy honor and graduate students to increase considerably.

I think we could continue to approach the government agencies for support for special activities, such as the current African Astronomical History Symposium, but we should not allow ourselves to become dependent on this drug, which has unwanted side-effects. It will be a sad day when our dedicated voluntary officers have to be replaced by paid staff.

I think the Society should continue to encourage any individual with enthusiasm for any aspect of astronomy. Some of us may get on each others' nerves from time to time, but we should try to keep our cool in the overall interest of what we are doing.

5.1.3 The letter by K Gottschalk was available to the Cape Centre, the ASSA and the SAAO: what about the other centres?

K Gottschalk said that his response would be forthcoming and that he had had positive response from the professional astronomers at SAAO and only picked up negative response a day or so before the meeting. The President said that she would respond the K Gottschalk's letter.

C Turk proposed that council adopt a motion expressing concern that statements, such as those expressed by K Gottschalk, negatively affect the ASSA. This was seconded by Ms P Booth.

5.2 The matter of the large mirror that was being purchased by the Harare centre: Ms P Booth said that it was in fact a problem for the Harare centre not the ASSA Council.

6 Matters Arising

6.1 C de Coning had suggested in response to M Soltynski's original proposal that he and A Slotegraaf had set-up a website to initiate a discussion on the way forward for the ASSA. Any member of the ASSA was welcome to submit ideas which would eventually be collated by them for discussion at a future council meeting.

6.2 Certificates. A sample would become available before the year end.

6.3 Sky Guide – there had been some hiccups, but everything was well on the way and should be available for distribution end November early December.

6.4 Additional item. The electronic version of MNASSA would save money and diversify and increase readership. This is to be discussed by the editorial board and council before any action was taken.

7 Nomination to Council membership

With Magda Streicher becoming a Vice president, a vacancy exists on Council. Ms P Booth proposed that Braam van Zyl become a member of council. This was seconded by I Glass.

8 Other Astronomy Groups

C Rijdsdijk read out a letter from a Wolfe de Lange who had started an astronomy group in the southern peninsula. His membership was in excess of 160 and went on to mention several issues, mainly pertaining to my column in a magazine called "Full Circle". I have responded politely. The point is though that it proves that there are people out there who enjoy astronomy and the ASSA should be able to recruit more members. I Glass pointed out that such organizations come and go and depend to a large extent on the character driving it. C Rijdsdijk agreed and felt that one should look at membership there in a year or so.

9 NSTF

In response to requests from the National Science and Technology Forum, NSTF, for the ASSA to become a member, council felt that there was really no point in this. The secretary would inform the NSTF of council's decision.

10 History Symposium progress

Things were coming on well. 65 people had registered and the full programme and abstracts were available on the website.

11 2006 Symposium

This would be held in September 2006. The intention was to invite the president and the section directors of ASSA to speak at the symposium. There was some discussion on ASSA support via the Trust.

12 Financial Matters

The treasurer, C Turk said that the ASSA was in good health, as was the scholarship fund. The question was raised whether or not the fund should be publicized with the NASSP students: no decision. MNASSA was still a problem and running at a loss.

13 Resignation

A Slotegraaf had informed council that he would not be able to continue as editor of the Sky Guide, nor would he be able to give any substantial assistance to his successor. He had also resigned as webmaster, effective from December 31, 2005 and again he was unable to give any substantial support to whoever took over as webmaster. It was mentioned that the software purchased to help A Slotegraaf with the editing of the Sky Guide be passed onto his successor.

14 Correspondence

- 14.1 A letter from Enviropedia asking if ASSA wanted to change its profile in their magazine. Negative response.
- 14.2 Wolfgang Lange – dealt with (see #8)
- 14.3 Science Unlimited. This was an invitation to attend and exhibit at their exhibition next year in JHB. Invitation declined.

15 New Members

The membership, D Field, that there were 8 new members who would be mentioned in MNASSA in the normal way. Membership at present was:

Members	211
Full	103
Honorary	10
Limited	90
New	8

16 AOB.

- 16.1 K Gottschalk asked if it was not possible to have tele-conferences for meetings. It was decided that the costs are too prohibitive.
- 16.2 C Turk proposed T Cooper as an honorary member, sec. by P Booth.

17 Next meeting

This would be on January 24, 2006 at the same place and time as usual.