



The Need for Change

Bernard Carr

ONE OF MY duties as chairman is to write an annual report for distribution at the Annual Gathering. Last month's Gathering therefore gave me a valuable opportunity to look back on some of the highlights of my first year in office. Since only a small fraction of members attend the Gathering, I would like to take this opportunity to disseminate some points made in my annual report more widely. This editorial will therefore be more parochial than usual, with less emphasis on broader issues of SMN interest.

The first day of the Gathering was quite eventful since it coincided with the closure of the *News of the World* after 168 years and the launch of the last space shuttle after 30 years. Our Board meeting was even put on hold, so that we could witness the latter! These events brought to mind two important truths: first, all institutions are subject to change and eventual dissolution; second, most human endeavours depend on money in some way. Both these truths may be relevant to the SMN and they provide the connecting theme for this editorial. By a quirk of the English language, the term "change" also has monetary connotations, so my title might be regarded as a *double entendre*.

Change of either kind has both positive and negative aspects. It might be argued that non-monetary change is part of the purpose of life, since it is the basis of both personal and global evolution (eg. the *New Renaissance* movement). On the other hand, some changes are clearly destructive (eg. global warming) and often it's hard to tell whether the ultimate consequences of a change are good or bad. Change of the monetary kind is also important because – however idealistic one's aims – they usually require funding. Bob Geldof's song "Change the World" – written to raise funds for Ethiopia in 1985 – nicely illustrates this point. But money also has a corrupting influence, as illustrated by the *News of the World* saga and the recent banker-driven financial crisis.

As an example of change with both sad and happy aspects, I should report some alterations in the composition of our Board of Directors. Last March Gerri McManus and Athar Yawar retired from the Board and I would like to thank them for their contributions during their time as Directors. Gerri's marketing initiatives and Athar's involvement in organizing youth events were particularly appreciated. Both will continue to contribute to the SMN as ordinary members and Gerri will still be running the Guildford group. In their place we were fortunate to coopt Ioannis Syrigos in November and Edi Bilmoria in June. Ioannis has taken over the management of our website, which has now become one of the most important domains and is crucial for many of our future plans. Edi will take over the education role, a position which has been vacant for the last few years but which is

also pivotal since we are an educational charity. More details about Edi can be found in the news section but he is highly qualified to undertake this task through his work for the Theosophical Society.

Another change to the Board is that we are streamlining its maximum size from 12 to 10. This does not reflect any reduction in our efforts but merely the realization that much of the work for the Network can be now accomplished outside the Board. There is a wealth of talent among the membership and – as announced in the last issue of the *Review* – Olly Robinson is creating a pool of volunteers whose particular skills can be drawn upon when the opportunity arises. Membership of the SMN should not be merely passive and we are anxious to involve members in our work as much as possible. This is also why Jacqui Nielsen is putting effort into extending the network of Local Groups.

Another development will be less welcome and relates to monetary change. We have reluctantly decided that we must increase our subscription fees. Each year we have an operating loss of about £40K. Although this shortfall is covered by a subsidy from our Trustees, this far exceeds the income from investments, so we are eating into our capital and this situation cannot continue indefinitely. There are four possible cures and I will consider each of them in order to explain why the last one is necessary.

Fund-raising. In the past year I've circulated letters inviting both donations and legacies. Due to the generosity of our members, this has resulted in donations totalling £6K and a substantial bequest. We were particularly touched to discover that one recently deceased member had requested donations to the SMN rather than flowers at his funeral. However, we much prefer our members alive and I don't want to be remembered as the chairman who was always asking for money.

Increased membership. Our membership seems to have stabilised at nearly 1500, although the number of electronic members continues to rise and is currently around 10%. Various outreach activities – such as the *Cosmos and Consciousness* group on Facebook with nearly 900 members – may increase this figure. Another outreach achievement is the production by Amit Biswas of an outstanding publicity video, based on interviews with our members, which vividly conveys the SMN vision. This was shown for the first time at the Annual Gathering and is also available on YouTube. Despite these successes, our membership would have to double to cover our deficit and this seems unrealistic.

Increased profits from events. The high quality of our events, a result of the ceaseless efforts of the Programme Committee under the indefatigable chairmanship of Claudia Nielsen, is not always reflected in the attendance figures

and that is what determines profits. We have therefore put effort into targeting organisations with allied interests with promotional material and it is gratifying that this year's Mystics & Scientists saw the largest attendance for many years. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that our deficit will ever be covered by profits from events (last year they brought in just £9K). Indeed, since only a small fraction of members attend such events, this might be deemed inappropriate anyway.

Increased subscriptions. Despite ever-present inflation, subscriptions have not risen for ten years. If we increased them enough to get back to the equivalent of the previous rate, we would risk losing so many members that nothing would be gained. Nevertheless, the insufficiency of the other cures requires at least some increase. We have therefore decided on a rise of 20%, still well below inflation since the last increase, and we trust members will not be deterred by this. There are some practical challenges in implementing these changes and Charla Devereux will be writing to people about this.

There is one more hope of raising income, although its importance goes well beyond its financial aspects. We are considering the possibility of running an on-line MSc on *Consciousness and Transpersonal Studies*. This would be directed by Prof. Les Lancaster, who used to run such a course at Liverpool John Moores University before his retirement and is keen to use our educational resources and burgeoning website facilities to continue to do so. It is envisaged that the course would be accredited by LJMU but under the control of the SMN. The primary aim would be to raise our educational profile, but the resulting revenue would also be a welcome by-product. A working party has been set up to study the financial viability of this proposal and we are currently undertaking market research to determine how many students it would attract. In order to give SMN members first option of a place on the course, it will soon be possible to pre-register on our website as an expression of interest.

To end on a rather different note, let me return to the topic of the space shuttle with which I began. The main purpose of the shuttle was to build the International Space Station. It took 135 missions and involved transporting 355 people from 16 countries into orbit, but ISS is now complete, a testimony to the power of science and technology. It strikes me that in some ways the purpose of the SMN is to build an International *Inner* Space Station, testimony perhaps to the power of the spirit. This should cost less than the \$150 billion required for the ISS but we still face the challenge of how to build it and transport people there affordably. Space limitations preclude me from exploring this rather fanciful analogy any further!