

President's Report to the SEB Annual General Meeting - Glasgow, 2011

How things have changed! Four years ago, when I became vice-president of SEB, we had an office on the South Coast of England in Southampton, interest was nearing 10% on our quickly growing investments and provided a useful amount of revenue, we had an Executive Officer, and we wondered whether education and public affairs was important. In the wider world, banks were stable pillars of society; Governments (just like charities) didn't plan to spend more than they received in income; being a Learned Society and contributing to development of an academic field, and indeed education itself, were widely lauded aims for charitable organizations.

How things haven't changed! Four years ago, when I became vice-president of SEB, we were wondering whether Journals were still going to provide the bulk of our revenue. Wasn't everything going to be freely posted on the web and accessible to all? Surely, conferences were a dying breed, with all the travel difficulties and costs: having fast internet not only in our labs but at home too, we would all be taking part over the ether. We, like other Learned Societies, were considering how our limited resources could possibly give useful support to a huge subject with many diverse members. And we were asking, why aren't governments taking scientific advice seriously? Universities and students were wondering about the effects of student fees in the UK (becoming £3000/year in 2005).

I am happy to say that the Society has continued to develop in many complementary directions over the last year. In this report, I will be going through some of the points I have raised above with a particular focus on the last year of our operations, and I am very pleased to say that all the evidence points to your Society being very successful in meeting all the challenges alluded to above. We are now well established at Charles Darwin House in London, and the move has enabled us to work more with other organizations and be at the centre of the UK Biological Sciences network of learned Societies. As well as the central office facilities, members have the opportunity to have meeting facilities in central London.

Our Treasurer will be reporting separately about the healthy state of our finances. The substantial investment in Charles Darwin House has proved very successful, and all office space not used by us and our co-owning societies is now let out, and our property in Southampton is also producing income. Our investments are healthy and give us an appropriate reserve to continue operations in any circumstances. However, with the Charity Commissioners looking for risk-management, where use of professional advisors would be one criterion, we changed from successful in-house management of the investments (which saw us through the worst of the declines in share values) to an underperforming major company of investment managers. As the accounts show, our income, helped enormously

by the success of our academic Journals in plant sciences, has remained comfortably above expenditure.

During the year, we have continued to develop the way that Council works, and all the four Sections have now reviewed their strategic plans with Council during this year. As will be clear from their reports, this has led to some important and dynamic changes in the groups in many of the sections, which will enable them to be active and build communities in the most important areas of current experimental biology. This is part of the transition where the SEB has become much more professional in its outlook and operations over the last decade. We are delivering consistently high-quality meetings on diverse topics - the annual meeting, two symposia and several joint meetings - have an active career programme, and excellent publications, but are looking how all aspects can be improved and increased where appropriate, as well as looking at possible new activities. The Council of the Society meets four times per year, and oversees all aspects of its development and operations, working with the professional employees at the headquarters in London and in the Lancaster office. I am very happy to thank all the Council Members, and particularly our three Independent Members, for their enormous contributions to the development of the Society this year and over my period as Vice-President and President.

There are many challenges ahead for SEB, which can be addressed from the secure foundation of our membership, staff and financial footing. Our main conference is terrific, with many opportunities for networking. Many people have the opportunity to present their first talks there, and meet their future employers, helped by the structure and breadth with many smaller, specialized sessions. Nevertheless, I feel that the 500 to 800 people we attract, to a conference subsidized by something like £60,000 is very low. How is it that profit-making conferences can attract 1000's of people? Our membership is growing slowly, with recruitment campaigns and deep discounts for conference registration to encourage renewal. I think it is important that we increase our membership globally, to ensure that we speak for all experimental biologists. On the communications front, our Journals go from success to success, particularly in plant science from biotechnology to molecular. The re-born book series is making a good start. Perhaps we do not make full use of the capabilities of the web for advancing and disseminating information in our field at all levels. We are increasingly working with other Societies in the UK and internationally, and also developing and influencing policy through agreements with (and co-funding of) Society of Biology, Campaign for Science and Engineering, European Plant Science Organization and other organizations to advance these aims which affect all aspects of experimental biology. Hopefully these partnerships will help give all of biology, and particularly experimental biology, the prominence it deserves and requires in all of society.

Three important members of staff left us during the year: Chris Trimmer, who worked with us for some 13 years, filling the newly-created position of Chief Executive Officer. Her skills in carrying us forward, and in her final year managing the move from Southampton, have

helped make the Society what it is today. Heather Budd left her position as Finance Officer, a key role with our ever-increasing turnover and diverse expenditure profiles. Finally, although with us for barely a year, Ellie Carr was important in her role with publications, getting the new book series off to an excellent start. We wish all well in their new positions and roles. On a sad note, I am sorry to report the death, at age 99, of Honorary Member Professor Leslie Audus, a pioneer in the discovery and study of plant growth substances and ~~Editor of Journal of Experimental Biology~~ Former Editor of The Journal of Experimental Botany.

We are particularly happy to have welcomed Paul Hutchinson as our new CEO at the start of 2011. He has taken up the role with vigour and much success, building on his outstanding experience in other charities, not least our partner in Charles Darwin House, the British Ecological Society. As part of the cohabitation in Charles Darwin House, part of the role of the Finance Officer has been divested to the Biochemical Society where we benefit from the oversight and accountability that brings, with their senior accountants.

I look forward to seeing more the development of the Society, and taking part as an active participant in future meetings, as an ordinary member in future years. At this Annual Meeting, I hand over the position of President to the capable hands of Professor Keith Lindsey, with support from our first International vice-President, Professor Tony Farrell (University of British Columbia).

Professor Pat (JS) Heslop-Harrison

Honorary President.