

Chapter 38: To the US National Radio Astronomy Observatory, 1961

Joe Pawsey and the Founding of Australian Radio Astronomy- Early Discoveries, from the Sun to the Cosmos

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ESM_38.2.pdf: Controversy IAU, Berkeley 1961

At the IAU on 15 August 1961, Adlai Stevenson asserted¹:

Scientifically and technically, the world has already become a single community—yet in our ethical response to this fact, and in our political institutions, we governments and citizens are lagging dangerously far behind you, the scientists ... We are forever running today to catch up tomorrow with what [science] made necessary yesterday. This gap must be closed—this disruption and dangerous lag between scientific discovery and the political adaption to it ... Technology will not wait for an answer. In just a few years there will be rocket boosters, in more than one country, big enough to launch whole teams of men to the nearest planets. Shall this too be a race for military or psychological advantage at huge and wasteful expense? Or shall it be the occasion for team work, ignoring ideological lines? We haven't much time left in which to decide—it's a fork in the road which will soon be passed ... Just last week I was happy to read the remarks of the eminent Soviet astronomer A. A. Mikhailov [1888-1983], at a meeting in Pasadena on the astronomy of the space age: "Science is international ... My hope is for the US and Russia to share in space projects and in many other fields of human endeavour." I am glad Professor Mikhailov is here this morning, because I would like to tell him how much I agree with him! ... Indeed, I rather wish that all of us who deal in human affairs could be astronomers for a while. Sir James Jeans called astronomy "the most poetic of the sciences". Perhaps if we all practiced it we would be filled with wonder and excitement of discovery, with a sense of elemental majesty and beauty, with our little quarrels in better perspective and would thus be purged of our pride and prejudice, and all the base motives which complicate and endanger our lives.

Marine wrote that the talk was not without irony. As an illustration that the world was becoming a more open society, Stevenson "cited the American-Soviet agreement on a Moscow-New York air route—an agreement which, six days later, President Kennedy decided not to sign".

¹ Source – Marine, *IAU News Bulletin IAU GA XI* August 1961 and the full text of the Stevenson speech in *IAU Proceedings of the Eleventh General Assembly*, Berkeley 1961, published 1962 page 13.

Not surprising, the *Soviet Astronomy* report was somewhat critical of the opening speech of Ambassador Stevenson: "... [This was] a long speech of broadly political character." The [Soviet] summary was naturally positive about the description of the hope that Professor Mikhailov had expressed "that the United States and the Soviet Union would participate jointly in projects for the conquest of space and in other areas of scientific activity."

Marine, in the October 1961 article, also described the major political controversy of the Berkeley IAU, a reflection of cold war tensions. He wrote:

The International Astronomical Union has stayed as far out of politics, probably, as any international organization can. There is no scientific-political split in astronomy analogous to the famous Mendelist-Lysenkoist controversy ... The astronomers found the shadow unavoidable, and under the circumstances which suggest that any international scientific organization may ... have to look politics directly in the eye.

The issue was the invitation given by the IAU in September 1959 to Taiwan to join the IAU as an adhering country, not as the "Chinese" representative since the People's Republic of China was already a member and Taiwan did not seek to replace the PRC in the IAU. Not surprisingly, the PRC withdrew from the IAU², with no representative in Berkeley. On the same day that Stevenson spoke, both the Czech and USSR delegations had proposed resolutions rescinding the September 1959 invitation to Taiwan. The USSR proposal stated that the admission of Taiwan "has already brought harm to the interests and prestige of the [IAU] and that international cooperation of astronomers". The proposal failed 24 to 5, with four nations not voting. Marine wrote: "... [H]owever open the society of scientists may seem in theory, the society of politicians casts a determined and unavoidable shadow." As a response to the vote by the IAU in Berkeley, the president, J.H. Oort, sent a telegram to the Chinese astronomical community expressing regret at their absence at the General Assembly.

² China would re-join the IAU in 1976 at the Montreal IAU. (See Blaauw, 1994.)