

INTERNATIONAL ASTRONOMER PHIL CHARLES MEETS THE IRE OF THE NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION

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Recent weeks have seen an embarrassing display of heavy-handed National Research Foundation (NRF) management in connection with the Square Kilometer Array (SKA) project – a new \$2 billion radio astronomy facility to be financed from international resources. South Africa's bid to host this new prestigious project involves Phil Charles through his role as director of the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) and the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT). Charles has an impeccable track record and is widely respected in the international scientific community.

In a move of unprecedented gravity, and to the consternation of SAAO staff, Phil Charles was recently suspended from duty for undisclosed reasons pending an internal inquiry. At the internal disciplinary hearing he was accused of sharing secret information with colleagues and openly discussing the ramifications of NRF policy regarding the location of the technical operations headquarters for MeerKAT (South Africa's prototype project to underpin its bid for the SKA), as well as the downgrading of the top SAAO post to a managerial position. One wonders why changes to the running of an international facility should be a secret and not the subject of open debate with those actually doing the astronomy. Essentially, the conflict pegged Charles's vast experience in the running of international facilities against the NRF's desire to subjugate scientific priorities to its own administrative control. To the great relief of the local and international astronomical community Charles has now been absolved of all charges.

A simplistic view of the matter would be that the NRF had been the unfortunate victim of overzealous forces in its administration and would now re-engage on the road of reason and argument. Not so! To the surprise and dismay of astronomers and the South African scientific community, it transpired that the NRF did not accept the outcome of its own hearing. The NRF press release of 12 March 2010 reads that the contents of the report are being studied, with the view of dealing with any issue requiring further attention. The NRF has subsequently labelled the disciplinary hearing of Professor Charles as 'a corrective process'. The specific request of the Minister of Science and Technology to defuse the conflict and go for a speedy and amicable solution was not heeded by the NRF, nor were supporting letters from the Astronomical Society of South Africa and from the Royal Society of South Africa. Such incredible intransigence begs the question: what is wrong with the NRF?

Historically, the organisation evolved from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research as the main state sponsor of research in the form of grants. This function was later decoupled and allocated to the Foundation for Research Development. This became the NRF, with additional responsibilities for a conglomerate of research institutions, of which the SAAO is one. NRF grantees at universities have frequently complained about lack of consultation, insensitivity to the ramifications of new NRF policy and a burgeoning bureaucracy. Changes in NRF policy are usually not given adequate time and are introduced without much understanding of the inertia and commitments of a running programme. In fact, road shows of the NRF Executive with researchers at the universities are usually arranged in great haste and are not conducive to much debate. Essentially, the NRF lays down the law. That the NRF does not jointly plan the way forward with stakeholders and that policy changes tend to come late, usually in the form of decisions already taken, was a major criticism listed in the NRF review of 2005. Regrettably, research administrators at universities have been largely compliant and adopted the principle of 'not biting the hand that feeds them', leaving researchers to the Darwinian realities of survival. NRF directives given *ex cathedra* – as witnessed in the Charles affair – are thus not new. If one were to search for an explanation for the incredible professional ignorance displayed in the Charles affair, one must come to the conclusion that solid track records and experience in the practicalities of research are rare commodities in the corridors of the NRF.

The Charles affair has precipitated widespread protest and indignation in the local and international press and, in the words of John Skinner, President of the Royal Society of South Africa, places 'a grave question mark against South Africa's international scientific reputation'. He also raised the concern that South Africa's national scientific facilities may become subject to a form of totalitarian control. Chair of the SALT Science Working Group, University of Wisconsin astronomer, Matthew Bershady, has said that the situation has seriously compromised the country's chances of winning the SKA bid, while Robert Williams, president of the International Astronomical Union, felt that the Charles affair demonstrates a total lack of justice within the NRF. I counted 15 published submissions and comments in support of Charles, but could not find a single line of reason supporting the stance of the NRF.

The latest developments in the SAAO affair are that the Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Naledi Pandor, met with the Chair of the Board of the NRF, Professor Belinda Bozzoli, to clarify ambiguities concerning Charles's reinstatement and the possibility of any subsequent moves against him. The Minister was then finally assured that the NRF accepts the verdict of the independent chair and will not contest the conclusion of the disciplinary hearing. In a recent address at the Higher Education South Africa (HESA) conference in Pretoria the Minister specifically referred to scientists which win massive project funding from abroad. ■

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