Drayson review supports better money management for STFC

Science minister Lord Drayson has delivered the conclusions of the review of STFC funding arrangements he initiated after the announcement of the Science and Technology Facilities Council’s programme of research last year. He acknowledged the impact of exchange-rate fluctuations on the Council’s ability to fund research, and pledged better management of pressures arising from international subscriptions together with longer-term planning and budgeting for large domestic facilities.

Lord Drayson and Prof. Michael Sterling, STFC Council Chairman, sought and received advice from a wide range of interested groups, as well as from influential individuals. There was broad agreement that reducing the pressures from the international subscriptions and UK-based facility operations would substantially remove the risk that unpleasant surprises in these areas would lead to disproportionate pressure on the STFC’s grants portfolio. Adverse exchange rates alone have required £40m of extra support for STFC in the past two years. “The better management of international subscriptions through measures to manage exchange rates, and longer-term planning and budgeting for large domestic facilities will allow STFC’s grant-giving functions to be managed with a higher degree of predictability,” said Drayson. “The community has come out strongly in support of grants remaining with STFC to deliver investment continuity from facility design through to exploitation, and I accept this argument. These measures will allow the Council to pursue the programme it set out in December within its budget.”

Best E-ELT site identified

The Council of the European Southern Observatory has identified the best site for the European Extremely Large Telescope. It has selected Armazones, near Paranal in Chile, as offering the best balance of sky quality overall, with substantially improved sky quality overall, with substantially better management of international subscriptions and UK-based facility operations would substantially remove the risk that unpleasant surprises in these areas would lead to disproportionate pressure on the STFC’s grants portfolio. Adverse exchange rates alone have required £40m of extra support for STFC in the past two years. “The better management of international subscriptions through measures to manage exchange rates, and longer-term planning and budgeting for large domestic facilities will allow STFC’s grant-giving functions to be managed with a higher degree of predictability,” said Drayson. “The community has come out strongly in support of grants remaining with STFC to deliver investment continuity from facility design through to exploitation, and I accept this argument. These measures will allow the Council to pursue the programme it set out in December within its budget.”

Comet Tebbutt’s ‘meteor showers’

From: Alastair McBeath

I was somewhat disheartened to find, in the midst of Ragbir Bhathal’s otherwise fascinating portrait of Australian astronomer John Tebbutt (Bhathal 2010), the unrefereed comment that when the Earth passed through the tail of Tebbutt’s Comet of 1861 (C/1861 J1, on 30 June 1861), “there were spectacular meteor showers in Europe” (p.23). After first discovering a similar event, Bhathal’s subsequent point (loc. cit.), that Earth’s tail-passage of Tebbutt’s Comet was seen in America as an omen for “the coming carnage of the Civil War”, intrigued me. I was not aware it was specifically this event which was perceived as a portent, though it is true both comets Tebbutt and Swift-Tuttle were associated with battles in the first two years of that war (cf. Olson 1985 p99–100). On reflection of this, it occurred to me that some misinterpretation of the real link between the later Great War Comet of 1862 (Swift-Tuttle) and the Perseids, could have resulted in back-projecting the connection to the earlier, and more visually impressive, Great War Comet of 1861 (Tebbutt), because of the latter’s known tail-passage by the Earth. When this may have happened prior to 1998 is unclear, as for anyone unfamiliar with the interaction dynamics between a meteoroid stream and the Earth needed to produce a visually definable meteor shower, it might seem more feasible to expect to see such meteors when the Earth passed through the parent-comet’s tail than at any other time. The complexities involved would typically that this is not so, however.

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References

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