

# President's Progress

It's now almost a month since I succeeded Sir Gordon Conway as President of the Society. Not perhaps enough time to feel comfortably in the saddle, but enough to sense the priorities and challenges for the months ahead.

More than anything, I've been struck by the amount of work the Society does. From talking to members of staff at Lowther Lodge and from my first Council meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, I realise how much there is to do in the day to day running of the Society, including finance, exhibitions, talks, hiring of the premises, archiving, maintenance of the library, the collection and the buildings as well as catering and hospitality.

Then there are the core activities to be guided and steered along. These include an ever-expanding Grants programme to help those who want to travel the world; education work to stimulate interest in Geography at school; expedition support for potential young leaders; investment in research and higher education; events for enthusiasts in London and the regions; the administration of, and communication with the 15,000 members and Fellows, whose subscriptions, donations and legacies make up more than a third of our income, and of course, the nurturing of links with our Corporate sponsors and our participation in policy and public engagement affairs. The size and scale of the Society's activities is both awesome and inspiring. It shows what a reputation we have, it shows how much we are listened to and it shows the amount of responsibility that goes with being the largest learned society for geography in the world. I hope to offer all the support I can to the Director and staff who shoulder this responsibility.

What I myself can bring to the Society is a particular interest in the human side of geography. My background is that of a traveller and my work depended very much on personal contact with people from all over the world. I firmly believe that what unites us is far greater than that which divides us and increasing our knowledge of how others live, think and behave is vital to the future security of us all. It is also very much an area in which the geographer can give a lead.

I shall try my best to engage the Society with those of similar interests and beliefs wherever they are in the world. To that end I have invited along a young Somali refugee to talk to me at a public event at Lowther Lodge sometime later in the year. All being well this will be the first of a number of informal sessions in which I encourage us to look at ourselves from someone else's perspective. One thing I've learnt in my work over the years has been the importance of communication – of listening and learning – and, with a membership of many different shades and persuasions, I consider this a very high priority for any President of the Society. The success of a Society is, I believe, not to encourage robotic conformity or aimless disunity. We need to be a collection of enterprising individuals who know how important geography is, and who are dedicated to promoting and enjoying its benefits. Vital to this process is the feeling of belonging and sharing, and I hope that all members and Fellows will see Lowther Lodge as a place where they are always welcome, whilst those who live out of London will, through our journals, our regional activities, and the ever-expanding information on our web-site, never feel out of reach of the Society.

As many of you will shortly find out when you receive details of the President's Appeal, I'm slightly obsessed with Lowther Lodge. I've long considered it, in terms of its location and the quality of its architecture, to be a prime asset of the Society, inextricably tied up with our identity for almost a hundred years. I consider it a matter of importance that a Society such as ours should have a home it can be proud of and which members and Fellows will want to visit. Recent additions like the Exhibition area and the Foyle Reading Room and renovations like the Ondaatje Theatre have

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shown that, in the hands of sensitive architects, Lowther Lodge can move very successfully with the times, and I am confident that the new Members' Room will be a big attraction, offering up to date facilities without compromising the unique interior. The restoration of the fabric of the North Face is part of the same appeal and when completed, will restore the unjustly neglected Hyde Park face of the Lodge to its former glory.

All this will cost money and fundraising in the current economic climate is one of our big challenges. All I would say is that we cannot rest on any laurels or depend on any up-turns. If the Society really believes in the best for Geography we have no option but to maintain the impetus of the last few years, which has seen the Society expand and flourish. To this end the generosity and goodwill of members and Fellows and the recruitment of new members has never been as important. There are certainly grounds for optimism. The Monday night lectures are hugely popular, with top names signing up for the next season. Equally popular has been the second year of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges programme and the extension of our lecture programme to Clothworkers' Hall in the City of London.

As befits Darwin's anniversary year, the evolution of the Society continues in 2009, with a review of our research programmes getting underway this autumn, and a comprehensive strategy review starting in 2010. There is no sign of the Society standing still, indeed sometimes I feel I'm running alongside a galloping horse, waiting to leap on. Thankfully, I've inherited from my predecessor a Society that is not only vigorously active but a staff who are dedicated and incredibly hard-working. The subjects that geography can deal with, from global warming to pandemics and from international security to the politics of food and water are abundant. With a hopefully growing membership attracted by our initiatives and our leadership the future for the Royal Geographical Society looks as exciting as it should be.

Michael Palin, London, June 29<sup>th</sup> 2009