



Manchester Statistical Society President's Report for the 187th Session 2019 – 2020

I am delighted to report that our 187th Session has consistently drawn audiences of fifty or more and we have been fortunate to have had a programme that included speakers of both national and international renown. I can take no credit for the programme: my predecessor, Bishop David Walker, aided by his Personal Assistant, Linzi Watts, in liaison with our Honorary Secretary, Dr Baron Isherwood invited most of our speakers. Baron then wrote to other potential speakers and was able to fill the remaining gaps to produce the final impressive programme.

The success of our meetings has been, in no small part, due to the dedication of Dr Robert Bragg, Honorary Meetings Secretary. He has not only put speakers at their ease, by arranging their hotel accommodation, but also ensured that speakers and members arrived at a venue that was well prepared to receive them. As members will know, Bob Bragg also runs the Dinner Club by taking bookings and making catering arrangements for the suppers that so many of us value after the meetings. Setting aside one occasion on which serving was sluggish, the meals and service have been of an excellent quality.

Thanks also go to those members who have been 'meeters & greeters', a role that is particularly important in welcoming visitors, guests, and new members. I also thank the six members who gave the responses and votes of thanks to our speakers. Their contributions were important for stimulating the questions and discussions that were an essential part of our proceedings.

Members may have noticed Dr John Rigby discreetly placing a voice recorder near the speaker as each presentation begins. These recordings are transcribed and become the basis for the papers that form the *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society*. In earlier times those who spoke to the Society would have submitted their papers in advance. Nowadays we cannot expect this and so it falls to the Honorary Editor, John Rigby, in liaison with speakers, to adapt the transcripts into publishable papers. The next volume of the *Transactions* is expected in the summer. John also operates the Society's Twitter feed which, with our website, are the basis of our online presence.

The website is the responsibility of Guy Marshall, who updates its content regularly with news about speakers and talks. In recent years, Guy has redesigned and remounted our website using Google's web services, which he cleverly noticed were free to charities such as ours. It gives our contact details, instructions on applying for membership and provides the platform for applicants to our Champion Awards.

The awards are paid out of the income generated by the legacy of Sir Harry Campion. Responsibility for overseeing the Campion investment portfolio falls to our Honorary Treasurer, Philip Hulme. Philip has served in this central role for many years, keeping our finances in order and reporting annually to the Charity Commission. Philip is also our Membership Secretary and has overseen a steady flow of new members that has maintained our number above one hundred.

The Champion Awards committee, chaired by Professor David Colman, works to stimulate applications and identifies high-quality research for funding. The awards are necessarily modest, in comparison with major research grants, but they are an important part of our charitable function.

Finally I wish to thank for their advice and support the members of Council, which includes those mentioned above, elected members, vice-presidents and those of my predecessors who are able to serve.

The Programme of Ordinary Meetings

We have been fortunate to have had six splendid speakers at our Ordinary Meetings. Three excellent talks were from Manchester: Mr Ian Hopkins, the Chief Constable, explained the challenges of policing Greater Manchester and, from the University of Manchester, Professors Stefan Bouzarovski and Sarah Lindley, spoke about fuel poverty and inequality but also about the benefits of the green and open spaces in Greater Manchester.

The remaining three speakers were outstanding: Professor Sir Bernard Silverman allowed us to see into the workings of government when he spoke of his experience as a Chief Scientific Advisor to the Home Office. Edward Mason, Head of Responsible Investment for the Church Commissioners of England, offered another privileged perspective, from his experience of persuading international companies to behave ethically. Finally, we had Professor Sir Paul Collier, currently at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government and formerly Chief Economist at the World Bank. Speaking without notes or slides, he argued that capitalism will work for the benefit of society only if it is underpinned by reciprocal obligations within communities, and he set out his analysis of the critical factors required for successful city regions such as Greater Manchester.

Final thoughts

As I write this report, the news is dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the crisis we are now unable to hold an Annual Dinner and we cannot gather for our AGM. Experts are now in favour and there is a constant stream of statistical evidence including that given in daily press briefings by our government. But the heroes of this silent war are doctors, nurses, carers, and the workers who provide the essential yet unnoticed services that are essential to our lives.

I happen to be reading *The Black Swan* by N. N. Taleb. Taleb's black swan is a metaphor: we think and act as if all swans are white and yet black swans exist and are not an endangered species. He uses the metaphor to illustrate the idea that one's natural human behaviour is to discount, ignore or forget infrequent extreme events, even though our reaction to such events has fundamentally altered the path of our economy and society throughout history. The present 'black swan' epidemic was visible to see and yet the country was unprepared for its arrival. But we need not look for scapegoats, whether in China or Britain, since few of us can claim to be prepared for black swans in our lives.

Instead, perhaps we should take comfort from the communitarian spirit that was the basis for the founding of the Manchester Statistical Society and that comes to the fore when people are confronted with a common danger. I look forward with hope to the end of the crisis, hoping also that it will be a spur to develop the kind of communities that acknowledge the need for reciprocal obligations as envisaged by Sir Paul Collier.

I wish all members the strength to confront the present challenges and, for those that fall ill, I pray they will have a speedy recovery.

Fred Wheeler
President

April, 2020