

# Daring more Harnack

Max Planck President Martin Stratmann about his first year in office

**In this interview, Martin Stratmann looks back on the highlights of his first year in office, identifies the lessons learned from the past and talks about his aims to ensure the future development of the Max Planck Society even in times of reduced increases in funding.**

**Mr Stratmann, you've been in office for almost a year now. In retrospect, what was the most important event in 2014?**

Without doubt it was the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for Stefan Hell. I was personally thrilled for him, and it's also extremely important for the Max Planck Society. After all, we draw sustenance – not exclusively but certainly also – from Nobel Prizes. As one of the highest distinctions in science, the Nobel Prize commands widespread public attention. And it also shows where true excellence lies.

**2014 also witnessed controversial debates, for example on the subject of animal experiments ...**

It wasn't just a debate; it was a well-orchestrated campaign by animal protection activists who attempt to discredit animal research with emotionally evocative images. Partially manipulated footage from the primate laboratory of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen was shown by a private TV broadcaster and led to a flood of abusive emails ranging from insults to death threats. The Institute's director Nikos Logothetis did no longer want to expose himself to this wave of hatred and therefore decided to end his primate research, which we greatly regret. His decision, however, has also triggered a wave of solidarity of scientists from around the world. The Max Planck Society will continue its animal and primate research where it is scientifically necessary.

**What other conclusions have you drawn?**

We cannot allow legally legitimate and internationally recognized research being undermined by questionable campaigns

using unfair practices. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that we must convince society of the value of this type of research, or we will lose its support. As a result, we will communicate our research and its concerns even more strongly in the future. We must make it clear, for example, that in brain research no progress can be achieved, especially in the treatment of very complex brain diseases, without research involving primates. We want to work on increasing the visibility of this research in 2015. Also, we will have to improve our internal organization, so that we will be able to confront any similar campaigns in a more decisive manner – and that requires a very good and consistent organisation of our institutes and the Administrative Headquarters.

**The motto for your term of office is "Daring more Harnack". How do the objectives of the founding father of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society fit into the present millennium?**

Some principles and tenets are timeless. And that is true of a lot of what Adolf von Harnack wrote in his memorandum over a century ago: in research, you have to concentrate on truly outstanding thinkers and enable them to achieve their goals. This is as important now as it was back then. However, "Daring more Harnack" also means moving with the times in general and developing structurally. Over a century ago it was innovative to hand the reins of an institute to a single Director. Today, we know that success is usually a joint effort. An outstanding Max Planck Institute would be inconceivable without qualified doctoral students, post-docs and Group Leaders. We must also create excellent conditions for them.

**The reorganisation of the promotion of junior scientists is in keeping with this aim. Did you have to do a lot of persuading to achieve this? After all, an additional 50 million euros will be invested every year.**

I think introducing something new always involves a struggle. But I must say that a large majority of the Directors actively supported this package. We called on the help of a Working Group headed by Vice President Bill Hansson. The group issued unanimous recommendations, which I then implemented as President. The Max Planck Society is aware of how important junior scientists are for its own future and that money invested in junior scientists is money well spent.

**The PhDnet spokesperson, the MPG's doctoral student representative, speaks of a "historical step" ...**

Because now all doctoral students are treated equally. In future, they will be given a funding contract which, upon attaining their doctorate, will provide them with financial security for three years including an option for renewal, and at the same time allow them the research freedom of a grant. Our continuing improvement of scientific training is no less crucial for junior scientists. Therefore, new guidelines for supporting doctoral students provide for mentorship during their doctoral work. And we are currently working on a programme to identify career paths for doctoral students and postdocs – both in research and elsewhere.

**You have referred to the junior scientist package as a major feat. How important was the support of the governing bodies and Administrative Headquarters for you in this process?**

Efforts to further develop the Max Planck Society must be led by science. The President must spearhead such endeavours, for which he requires the expert and committed support of the Administrative Headquarters. This proved to be very successful. The work of the governing bodies, however, was also decisive. The work of the Commission under Reinhard Jahn on the general reform of support for junior scientists created sound foundations for this purpose. We were also assisted by the fact that Bill Hansson headed the Work-

ing Group on the Funding of Junior Scientists. As a Swede, and therefore the first Vice President from abroad, he has a somewhat different perspective on our organisation. Those outside the national context see things more clearly than we in Germany sometimes do. This is also true of Angela Friederici. She is the first female Vice President of the MPG and, as a woman, her take on many issues regarding equal opportunities is shaped by her own experience. The views of an outstanding female scientist are enormously important for improving career opportunities for women.

**The Joint Initiative for Research and Innovation was also extended in 2014, providing a three percent annual budget increase between 2016 and 2020 but allowing less room for manoeuvrability than before. How will the Max Planck Society remain flexible under these conditions?**

We should hold firm: even on the international stage, we are still in a privileged situation. For many years we've enjoyed a guaranteed budget growth that gives us considerable security. It's true that the increases we'll receive up to the end of the decade will preserve the status quo but will not permit any growth. So any improvement must stem from what we already have. We will therefore increasingly use funds released by retirements to invest in new scientific fields at existing Institutes. Here, too, the motto applies: "Daring more Harnack," meaning that before making new appointments, we must look more closely at the interfaces between disciplines, the origin of science beyond the mainstream. Notable examples include the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics and the reorientation of our Institute in Jena into the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in 2014.

**You often refer to the European Research Area. Why is that so close to your heart?**

Firstly, the Max Planck Society is a key player on the European stage as the leading German science organisation. We recruit extensively from Europe, and our junior scientists often secure appointments in Europe. To enable cutting-edge research in Europe, European programmes are needed that are not based on sociopolitical criteria but solely on scientific excellence. Take, for example, the ERC grants, which are extremely important not only to us but also to Cambridge and Oxford Universities. However, we must realise that Europe is becoming increasingly divided – and this poses a threat to the promotion of excellence.

#### **Could you expand on that?**

We have regions in Europe that are preeminent in science, especially in the north and west. And then there are countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Southeast Europe which lack strong, efficient scientific structures. I therefore see a risk – as in the economic system – that European countries will develop at different speeds and that in the end, EU programmes that promote scientific excellence will fall by the wayside. To counter this, we have to fight for more excellence throughout Europe and at the same time ensure

that countries which don't yet have the required conditions are vigorously supported.

#### **Teaming for Excellence was specifically developed as a funding line by the EU with support from the Max Planck Society and other research institutions for that purpose ...**

This instrument, which draws on funds from the EU research budget and explicitly also from the EU's structural funds, is a good lever. Four of our Institutes and their partners in Poland, Bulgaria and Cyprus were successful with three project proposals in the first round. We have to wait and see who will ultimately receive the accolade as a Centre of Excellence. Irrespective of this, we'll collaborate closely with those countries. Scientific excellence is an economic driver. And we ourselves benefit. We gain partners who help us to stay on top. We win friends who send doctoral students to Germany. And business and industry benefits when junior scientists trained here return to their homelands to pursue a career there - and remember that some of their best years were spent in Germany.

**Interview: C. Beck / J. Eschert**