

ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN TELESCOPE BOARD

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Dr Andrew Southcott MP
Chair, Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
Parliament House
ACT 2600

Dear Dr Southcott

Re: *Supplementary Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia concerning the Anglo-Australian Optical Telescope*

Introduction

The Anglo-Australian Telescope Board (AATB) is an independent bi-national authority funded by the Governments of Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) that was constituted in Australia under the *Anglo-Australian Telescope Agreement Act 1970* to manage and operate the Anglo-Australian Telescope. The AATB operates as the Anglo-Australian Observatory (AAO). Its facilities consist of the 3.9-metre Anglo-Australian Telescope (AAT) and the 1.2-metre UK Schmidt Telescope (UKST) on Siding Spring Mountain, outside Coonabarabran, NSW, and a headquarters facility and instrumentation laboratory in the Sydney suburb of Epping.

The AAO enjoys a worldwide reputation for providing outstanding observing facilities to astronomers, for the high quality of its research, and for its design and construction of innovative telescope instrumentation. Based on the numbers of published research papers, the AAT is one of the most productive telescopes in the world. The high level of citations to these papers testifies to the impact of this research. The collaboration between Australia and the UK has been an important factor in Australia's internationally competitive performance in astronomy.

Supplementary Agreement

The original AAT Agreement provided for equal funding of the AAO by the Australian and British Governments and equal shares of telescope access for Australian and British astronomers. However, the symmetry of this arrangement no longer reflects the partners' desires: the UK wishes to reduce its investment in the AAO, while Australia may wish to maintain full access to the AAT for at least another decade. The UK has advised Australia that it intends to ramp down funding in the AAO over the next five years, with the expectation that it will withdraw from the partnership with effect from 1 July 2010. Ownership and responsibility for the Anglo-Australian Telescope and the AATB's other assets and liabilities will pass to Australia at that time.

The Supplementary Agreement is intended to provide for the effective operation of the Anglo-Australian Observatory during the transition period from full joint funding to sole

Australian ownership. It will allow the UK to reduce its funding for the AAO while Australia maintains a higher level of financial contribution, and for the AATB to develop and access other sources of funding. Australian astronomers will have greater access to observing time at the Anglo-Australian Observatory (AAO), commensurate with Australia's greater financial contribution relative to the UK.

The future of the AAO

The Supplementary Agreement provides Australia with time to determine its longer-term policy for the AAO, while continuing to benefit from the collaboration with the UK. The AATB and the Department of Education, Science and Training are preparing a review of the AAO to provide the Government with options for the Observatory's future in the period leading up to and beyond the expected end of the Agreement in 2010.

From the point of view of the Australian astronomical community, the intended future role of the AAO is defined as part of "New Horizons: A Decadal Plan for Australian Astronomy 2006-2015", which will be launched in October 2005. This strategic plan identifies opportunities and prioritises requirements for Australian astronomy, with the goal of maximising the benefit to the nation from astronomical education and research. The Decadal Plan includes the Australian astronomical community's vision for the AAO, which sees it evolving into Australia's national observatory for optical and infrared astronomy, supporting not only the AAT but also Australia's other national optical/infrared telescope facilities.

Conclusion

The AATB strongly supports the amendment to the AAT Agreement by way of the Supplementary Agreement. The latter provides a mechanism to allow both partners to achieve their goals, including an orderly withdrawal by the UK Government, and sufficient time for the Australian Government to plan for the future of the AAO.

The gradual withdrawal of the UK funding does provide the AATB with some challenges. However, the AATB is confident that it can ensure the continued scientific excellence of the AAO.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Pat Roche
Chair, Anglo-Australian Telescope Board
August 2005