

Editorial

by Domenico Rio (SNS Chairman) and Davide Castradori (SNS Secretary)

Dear Reader,

here we are, at our annual rendezvous to keep you informed on all the achievements and the problems encountered by our Subcommittee in the last year.

At the time Neogene Newsletter 5 was issued (October 1998), we had just closed the ballot within SNS concerning the Zanclean (and Pliocene) and Messinian GSSPs. As you remember, both of them enjoyed a large acceptance, although the Zanclean (and Pliocene) GSSP was the subject of a heated discussion among some of our members. We refer to our last editorial for a detailed account of the divergent positions held by different scientists.

As a matter of fact, however, both GSSPs had been largely approved by SNS and we therefore proceeded to submit them to ICS for the final acceptance.

The Zanclean (and Pliocene) proposal was submitted to ICS in November 1998. The postal ballot within ICS took place early in 1999 and resulted in the approval of the proposed GSSP (75% of positive votes). As you know, there is one last step a proposal should go through before becoming an official boundary of the Standard Chronostratigraphic Scale, that is the ratification by IUGS. Unfortunately, the next meeting of the IUGS Executive Committee will only be convened in January 2000 and this will keep us waiting for a few more months...

The Messinian proposal underwent some minor adjustments by the authors that caused a little delay in its submission to ICS (March 1999). The subsequent postal ballot led to the acceptance of the proposal by a 94% majority of ICS members. Even in this case, the ratification by the IUGS Executive Committee will only be obtained in January 2000.

At the time of the last editorial, the joint postal ballot within the SNS and the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) on the possible lowering of the Pliocene-Pleistocene boundary was taking place. Immediately afterwards, attempts were made by the SQS Chairman (Prof. Partridge) to cancel the ongoing vote and put it off for "several years" (sic). The main reasons for this request were a) the fact that the ICS Chairman had allowed a little extra-time to SNS to prepare a point-by-point reply to the arguments raised by SQS for the lowering of the boundary, and b) the fact that the memorandum prepared by SNS was, in his opinion, "in considerable measure, a diatribe in which value judgements, personal attacks and unfounded allegations abound".

This is our reply to Partridge's charges: a) The SNS board asked Prof. Remane to be allowed a little extra-time, after the receipt of the SQS memorandum, in order to prepare a reply that could focus in detail on the points raised in that document. It may be said that Prof. Remane would have better consulted Prof. Partridge before conceding that extra-time, and apparently he did not. However, we really believe that the decision of Prof. Remane was meant to improve the clearness of the documentation attached to the postal ballot, so that every voting member would have been provided with the most straightforward view of the pros and cons. Then, what's wrong with it? If this has indeed improved the completeness of the documentation and the degree of understanding of every member, what has Prof. Partridge to complain about? Isn't it in his own interest to have a most informed vote on the matter?

b) We acknowledge that some of the comments contained in our memorandum may have been a little hard. If anybody feels offended on the personal side, we beg his/her pardon. However, the sentence by Prof. Partridge "...The opening memorandum under the senior authorship of D. Rio, Chairman of SNS, is, in considerable measure, a diatribe in which value judgements, personal attacks and unfounded allegations abound..." is really unacceptable. We remind everybody that the mentioned opening memorandum (see Neog. Newsl. 5) is a 22-pages document, with more than forty scientific references, which analytically points out the key-aspects of the matter: the

correlation potential of the two possible alternatives and the basic chronostratigraphic principles to be taken into account. It is unbelievable that, due to a few harsh comments, the entire analytical document and the nine scientific papers attached to it are rejected by Prof. Partridge! In addition, we can't help remember how and when our bitter attitude towards the part of the scientific community asking for the lowering of the boundary began to grow. At the XIV INQUA Congress in Berlin (1995), Maria Bianca Cita (then the SNS Chairperson) and Davide Castradori prayed on their knees Dr. Richmond to be allowed to attend the famous meeting of SQS where they believed to vote the lowering of the boundary simply by raising a hand among themselves. They were denied that possibility, and bitterness began to take root.

Anyway, the postal ballot within SNS and SQS was carried out regularly and the proposal to lower the Pliocene-Pleistocene boundary was definitely rejected. You are referred to the enclosed document by the ICS Board for details on the rather complex counting of the votes and its final outcome.

We sincerely hope that the official postal ballot within the two Subcommissions, where the relevant arguments of both sides were presented in an exhaustive and clear manner, will hopefully put an end to all the controversies of the recent years.

We formally ask IUGS to use all its authority to ascertain that this and all formally agreed boundary definitions be respected by the scientific community.

All these matters having been settled, we turned to face the formidable task of elaborating an up-to-date Miocene Time Scale. This obviously requires a multidisciplinary approach, including magnetostratigraphy, biostratigraphy, isotopic stratigraphy and others, all of them framed in the astronomical time scale which is coming to existence in these days.

Needless to say, an absolutely necessary outcome of this effort should be the selection of appropriate boundary-stratotypes for the remaining Miocene Stages.

Therefore, we decided to set up an ad-hoc Working Group (WG) within our Subcommission and we warmly invited Prof. Shackleton to take its leadership.

The WG is in his infancy and we will keep you informed on any developments on the subject.

As the next IGC approaches (Rio de Janeiro, August 2000), SNS should face a substantial renewal for what concerns both the Board (Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson) and the membership.

Concerning the Board, an official ballot had to be carried out within the International Commission on Stratigraphy on one or more names suggested by SNS.

Thinking of a possible future Chairperson, our attention focused on Prof. W.J. Zachariasse of the University of Utrecht (The Netherlands), a leader of the very active "Utrecht team" in the last twenty years. His name was submitted to SNS voting member in a ballot circulated in May 1999, accepted by an overwhelming majority, and consequently submitted to ICS.

Concerning the Vice-Chairperson, no candidate was available before the ballot of last May. Therefore, we asked the voting members to suggest a name to be submitted to ICS. There were several names proposed and we submitted to ICS that of Davide Castradori, the only one receiving three votes.

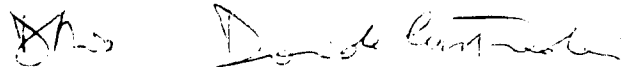
The renewal of the membership is probably a more complicated task. As you may not know, the present Statutes of ICS clearly state that each Subcommission should be made up by 10 to 20 voting members, far less than the present 31 of SNS. In addition, the same Statutes suggest that at least 1/3 of the membership be renewed at the end of each four years term. Therefore, approximately one half (15 or 16) of the present voting members will have to retire and 4 or 5 new voting members should be appointed by August 2000.

Obviously, it was not easy for us to find an effective, but fully democratic and tactful, way to accomplish such a renewal. In the ballot of last May, we asked each voting member to express his/her feelings toward a possible retirement from SNS. Based on their answer, we selected, not

without difficulties, 15 members for possible retirement. Attached to this newsletter, voting and corresponding members will find a form to express their appreciation for the renewal outlined therein and to suggest names for the few places made available for new voting members. At the end of the process (spring 2000, at the latest) the composition of the new SNS will be circulated among the present Subcommittee.

That seems to be all for the moment. We will do our best to keep you informed on the developments of all the matters discussed above and of any possible other.

Domenico Rio and Davide Castradori

Handwritten signatures of Domenico Rio and Davide Castradori. The signature on the left is 'D. Rio' and the signature on the right is 'Davide Castradori'.