



43rd meeting of the European Brain and Behaviour Society –EBBS-

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Carmen Sandi (President), EBBS honorary member **Alan Cowey** and **Agnes Gruart** (organizer of the conference)

Dinner speech of Prof. Alan Cowey at the EBBS meeting 2011 in Seville

Dear president, members of EBBS, and friends:

There aren't many advantages in being old. But one of them is that is you know things that probably very few other people know on an occasion like this. There is this little time window between becoming old and knowing all of this and becoming even older and remembering nothing. I think, I am in that little window at the moment.

Societies like EBBS don't just happen overnight. Someone has to think about it. And this is how it happened:

In **1967**, the office of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the wonderful days when there was money to spend, thought: „How could we spend money to make our culture and our education and our science even better than it is?“ So, they identified one or two areas that would benefit from additional support and one of them was the relationship between our behaviour – which is often very bad indeed – and our brains and they thought it would be well worth expanding this field of how the brain controls behaviour? So they invited a few scientists to think about this. The people they asked were Hans Kuypers, back from the US and working in Rotterdam, one of the world's foremost experimental neuroanatomists, his colleague, Ries van Hof, who actually became President many years later, Konrad Akert from Zurich, a very distinguished neuroanatomist and neurophysiologist - he worked on frontal lobes - and Larry Weiskrantz from Oxford. And that was it. So they met and they expanded the number of people who they thought would make a good steering committee to set up a society. And that steering committee met in the summer of 1968 in Rotterdam in Hans Kuypers' office and there were present Konrad Akert, Marianne Frankenhäuser from Stockholm, Jacques Paillard from Marseille, Detlev Ploog from Munich, Jean Scherrer from Paris, and Larry Weiskrantz (and perhaps others). Weiskrantz had been the leader of the group to that point, so he needed some help and I had just become a colleague after returning from the US to Oxford to work with him. And he asked if I'd be interested in joining him, which I did.

The next year, there were many telephone conversations and letters sent round – by the way, there was no e-mail then, nothing like that, no Skype, no personal computers. It was all done the hard way; it took a long time. So the steering committee met in Rotterdam, and it said „Yes, we need a society and we'll invite up to 30 people to form the big steering wheel.“ And we met in 1969. That was fascinating because already there were tensions and one of the people we invited was Jan Bureš from Prague. He and his wife and co-worker Olga were very anti-Russian, anti-Stalinist, and wanted more freedom to interact with colleagues in the West, which was discouraged. They were not allowed to come as a pair, you couldn't do that then from certain Eastern European countries. Bureš spoke out about the need for a scientific society like the one that was being proposed and the need for freedom within Europe for scientists so that they would be able to travel freely. And there was a Russian representative – whose name I've forgotten – sitting writing all of this down and very shortly after that meeting Bureš lost his visa to travel freely. He couldn't any longer travel outside of Czechoslovakia and that was true for many years. He also lost some of his positions in the university. That's what life was like then in certain countries.

Well, this group decided that it would **start a society**, that we needed some rules, we needed a constitution, we needed a name, and we did all of that. The trouble was that it all had to be recorded. Now, what do middle-aged to elderly people, almost all of them men, do when they need a **secretary**? The answer is: they look round the room for the youngest, most junior person there and they say „Alan Cowey could do it!“ And I was the youngest person there and, of course, I completely lacked the courage to say „No, I can't. I don't want to do this!“ So I was never elected, I just became the secretary and I went back to Oxford with Larry.

So, what we did was the following: We needed a **set of rules**. But how did we get a big set of rules for a new society? Well, you will forgive the phrase: we stole them. About 10 years before that, the UK Experimental Psychology Society had been properly set up, the EPS, so we simply took their rules and re-wrote them so that they fitted Europe, not just the UK and it was Brain and Behaviour and not Experimental Psychology, but that's actually how we got our first set of rules. And if anyone sat down and compared two sets, which he won't of course, he would realize how similar they were. That's how we got the rules and everyone accepted them.

But we then needed a **name**. What on earth we can call this society? Well, I was taking notes at this time, so I actually wrote down the suggestions and I've got some here: The „European Association for Research in Brain and Behaviour“, which, if you use it as an acronym, is EARBB. So that was out really. Then we had the „Association for the Scientific Study of Brain and Behaviour“, which was ASSBaB. We couldn't have that. Then there was the „European Association for the Scientific Investigation of the Mind“, which was EASIM, no good. The „European Neuroscience Society“; yes, ENS, we thought of that. We also thought of the „European Neuroscience Association“, ENA. And finally we thought: „OK, if we just followed the example of OECD, we would call it the „European Brain and Behaviour Society“, EBBS. Academics, I have noticed in a long career, love to spend time discussing minutiae. We spent ages deciding what we would call the society and then we adjourned and we came back the next day and had a vote on it and EBBS got it. It wasn't unanimous but it got the most votes. That's why it's called EBBS. It had to be an acronym that was memorable and pronounceable, unlike some of these others.

But the other things we were going to discuss were: We are having an international society. Which **language** should we conduct the business in? Well, there were two views. One, favoured by many, was that everything should be in one language and probably that had to be English. The other view was that anyone should be allowed to give a paper in their own language if they chose and actually we voted for the second one. And one reason for that was that, again going back to politics, there were some countries where the government or the people providing funds for research and travel insisted that you had to speak in your mother tongue. So of course, all the French gave their papers in French. And we have General de Gaulle to thank for that. At the second annual meeting Oliver Zangwill, from Cambridge, who was there, solemnly listened to a paper in – I think - Norwegian and then afterwards said to me, „Alan, this is a really good Society. It enables us to freshen up our Norwegian.“ That lasted a few years but then died the death. The result was that we adopted English and that had two effects. One: It meant that scientists from continental mainland Europe all improved their English and it meant that the Brits, who were already terribly poor at languages, got much worse. I indeed blame EBBS for the fact that we don't speak other languages very well!

The next thing we had to decide was **where to meet**. Now, there was no cheap air-travel then. It was expensive to fly and many places didn't have an airport near and train-journeys took forever. One of my first journeys was to a workshop in Vienna and I travelled by train from Oxford to London, London to the Coast, took a boat, then went to Paris, changed trains and then got a sleeper to Vienna. It took 24 hours just to get there. Absolutely amazing. And most people from my country had to do it that way; we couldn't afford the flights. So, knowing this, we discussed whether to have the annual meeting in the same city each year and the idea was that we would pick somewhere in the middle and everybody thought Paris would be a wonderful idea, although it's not quite in the middle. The middle really would, I think, be somewhere in Southern Germany, like Munich, but trying to get agreement on an issue like that was absolutely beyond us, because the French liked the idea of Paris, the Italians liked the idea of Rome, we thought that London would be a good idea, but that was hopeless because England was terribly difficult. You had to get across the Channel. So we decided to stick with the original plan and have it in a different city each year. However, the committee, I think, very wisely, said „But let's hold it in beautiful places.“. That's really important. If you travel somewhere for a meeting like this one, there's no point in putting it in a smoky, old, unpleasant industrial city; put it in somewhere interesting. In fact, one of the members recalled Georg von Békésy, the Nobel Laureate for his work on the cochlea. Nearing the end of his career he received lots of invitations to speak and he only accepted those where it was in an interesting city or it had a symphony orchestra, or both. We also decided – the committee – that in addition to the annual meeting, we would have a workshop every year, in a different place each year, and it would be smaller and it would seize on a narrower aspect than is discussed at the annual meeting.

The next problem for the committee was how do you **define Europe**? This is the European Brain and Behaviour Society. It was very difficult to get agreement about that and the next idea was that you have to live in Europe to be a member. You could by invitation attend meetings but you then couldn't become a full member and lots of them, Israeli scientists, wanted to be members. So we had to decide whether Israel was in Europe or not. You imagine trying to decide whether it is or is not and if it is, is it all right for citizens from the Libanon and from Egypt to join? So, it was decided that we would try not to define Europe. We would make it as easy as possible for people in North Africa to come if they so wished. But actually, they couldn't become members then. They weren't allowed to be members. And that was true of Israel as well. That changed of course later.

So we had our **first meeting in 1969** after the steering committee had done its work and it was in Marseille. Jacques Paillard put it on, but a big problem arose, because IBRO then surfaced. They wrote to Larry Weiskrantz and more-or-less said „We don't think what you are doing is proper. You are trying to take over from us. We are IBRO, the International Brain Research Organization and you are setting up in opposition to us.“ And they really meant it. The EBBS committee and the IBRO committee met in Marseille and it was a rather acrimonious meeting. They argued that we were being unfair. We argued that we weren't trying to take over all research on the brain throughout the whole world. It was just Europe. That helped a bit. Also we weren't trying to provide things like grants in the way that IBRO did and promote conferences in different parts of the world like South Africa, but they still weren't very impressed. And then we were saved. And I am sure you don't know how we were saved. We were saved by the intervention of one man: Hans-Lukas Teuber. Hans-Lukas Teuber, who had gone from Germany to America before the second World War, had worked in Bellevue Medical Center. He was very, very eminent, very, very influential and a wonderful linguist and subsequently moved to become the new Head of Department of Psychology at MIT. And he was a member of the IBRO panel. He was also a close personal friend of Larry Weiskrantz. Thank goodness for this. And friendship counts! Teuber spoke in favour of what we were doing. This is an influential IBRO committee member saying „Yes, this is a fine idea. They are not in competition with us.“ Some of them didn't like it but they actually did accept it and all was pretty smooth going from then on.

So, we had our meeting and then, the steering committee, appointed itself as the real committee and I was still the secretary, never elected, by the way, and everyone said: „Larry Weiskrantz, you have to be the President because you have been leading us all this time!“ So it came to pass that by 1970 we had a proper committee, a President and me being secretary. And we had our **second annual meeting** naturally in Oxford, because that was Weiskrantz's university. That was the second meeting. Two things went wrong there:

We had planned to move into the new Psychology building and it wasn't ready. Buildings are never ready, are they, new buildings?! And actually, we had to go across the road to Chemistry, as there wasn't a single toilet in the building. You had to cross the road.

The second thing that went wrong: We had decided the previous year that there would be a tour, a nice trip, like the wonderful trip we had had the other evening to the Alcazar. And I had the job as the secretary of the committee to organize that and I thought „Oh, this is easy. Blenheim Palace is just down the road and you can book tours there. So I booked a tour, for I think about 50 people, and we got a coach to take us out and we arrived and then the guide was there to take us round, I think in two groups, round the palace. Blenheim Palace is a World Heritage Sight, it's a wonderful palace, but I myself had never been in Blenheim Palace, I had only been in Oxford two years; I'm a Cambridge man. And I went around with the group. Well, oh dear, oh dear! I had overlooked the fact that Blenheim Palace was created with money given by Queen Anne to the Duke of Marlborough for his magnificent victory at Blenheim and the whole thing is a triumph for British militarism in beating the French. The rooms are lined with the most gorgeous tapestries and the tapestries are devoted to British soldiers killing French soldiers, with cannon, with sword, by trampling on them on horseback and there were lots of French people on the tour. I was so embarrassed but afterwards, I think it was Mark Jeannerod, who was a friend, said to me „Strange tour, Alan, very strange!“ But I must say not

a single French person actually fell out with me. Although I don't think they approved of Blenheim Palace at all.

Well, I can move on quickly now. We have had many meetings since then. The first newsletter was in 1984. That was a new development. But before that, we had a workshop at University College London and it was organized by Ian Steele-Russell. Ian Steele-Russell then became President about two years later. The EBBS president at the time of this workshop, was Otto Creutzfeldt from Göttingen and a remarkable scene took place: The president proposed that we disband EBBS. „Disband it!“, he said. His view was that we don't need EBBS now, because we have got the European Neuroscience Association which has just begun, so we don't need both organizations. And he really meant it. The local organizer, Ian Russell, opposed that and it went to the vote and actually, the President lost the vote but it was close. It's not clear that he would have had the right to abolish EBBS, but at least, he could have then taken the vote to the annual meeting. So that was a close-run thing. Two years after that, Ian Steele-Russell was the president and he reminded everyone of what had happened two years earlier. Well, we've had many successful meetings since then, the Society has gone from strength to strength, but looking back, it's possible for someone who was there at the beginning to say **what's changed** in all that time.

Well, this has changed: We now have much more cognitive neuropsychology than we ever had then. There was very little cognitive neuropsychology with one exception. That was the use of animals on a study of brain damaged patients to get a handle on how the brain organized behaviour, i.e., it was brain lesions. Neurochemical brain lesions came in after that, which were increasingly refined. But that was the bread and butter of the Society. Since then, there has, for example, been a huge explosion in what we call post-genomics, branches of genetics, knock-out genes, inserted genes and looking to see how genes controlled behaviour. When the Society first started, there wasn't any of this and a large number of members believed that wasn't worth studying because, actually, with the exception of things like eye colour, and skin colour and hair colour, everything is controlled by the environment and the genes weren't very important with respect to behaviour. And of course that was the official line in Eastern Europe. You weren't allowed to be left-handed in the USSR at that time because that was a nuisance in industry because you have to make lathes that left-handers can use. So everybody had to be right-handed and the idea that actually some of us might be genetically left-handed was dismissed at that time then. It's a complete transformation. I now attend meetings, were things like autism spectrum disorder, attention- deficit, hyperkinetic disorder, ADHD, many pathological conditions, bipolar disorder, unipolar depression, are all now investigated by methods that were simply not available when the Society first started. So we now have kinds of papers that didn't exist then. With respect to techniques, of course, we now have MRI, positron emission tomography, even EEG with software that will enable us to carry out source localization, none of this existed several decades ago but it's all changed.

The other thing that's changed is that we all take posters for granted. There weren't any posters at the beginning in the first 15- 20 years of the Society. Everything was in the papers delivered, verbally. No posters. I have been unable to discover who actually invented the poster at a conference. And when they were first introduced many people scorned the poster. But that was nonsense. They transformed meetings because anybody can now give a poster without having to be a speaker. So the number of people presenting their science has probably gone up ten-, twenty-fold from what it was in the early days of EBBS.

I was interested in that connection to find that in Switzerland, there is now an Anti-Powerpoint Society to try and simplify the kind of Powerpoint-Presentations we see and to get rid of all the fancy colours which make it difficult to understand what's going on, the moving backgrounds, etc. I'm serious, it exists. Well, that's what's changed, the kind of thing that's changed. But the Society is healthier than it has ever been. We started with about 50 members and, as we now know, there are more than 500.

So, I'll end by asking **what hasn't changed?**:

I think, the promotion of young scientists hasn't changed. Even in 1969, at the first meeting, there were discussions about how to promote the science of young people, to make it easier for them to do it, to make it easier for them to communicate it and to make it easier for them to meet their peers. And to meet elderly people like me. The other is conviviality. EBBS has always been a friendly society and if it hadn't existed, I wouldn't have met people like Mark Jeannerod, Giovanni Berlucci or Carlo Marzi, who is standing there, who I remember meeting in 1970 in Oxford. And finally not just conviviality, but friendship: I've made a lot of friends through EBBS, as have many other people. And that's an established tradition. It's a wonderful society! So, Ladies and Gentlemen: Long may EBBS survive! Thank you!