

ATTILA PAVLATH:

A PRESIDENT WHO STAYS CLOSE TO THE MEMBERSHIP

BY RANDY WEDIN

With his term as president of the world's largest scientific organization drawing to a conclusion, Attila Pavlath reflects on his leadership style, challenges, and achievements—as well as the unfinished business he sees ahead for ACS.

THE SCENE:

August, 2001, the ACS national meeting in Chicago. Hundreds of ACS members crowd a hotel ballroom for the Presidential Event. Presidential Events are an important platform that ACS leaders use to advocate their vision for the future of the Society. And this one is no different.

Or is it?

On stage, ACS President Attila Pavlath has just created a new committee (“our 157th or 158th, but who’s counting,” he wisecracks). He has appointed Jane Q. Change, as the new Chair of the Committee of Changes. The young lady will have responsibility for thinking about and shaping the future of ACS. Ms. Change addresses the audience:

“I don’t think that I can solve it alone. Our, no, YOUR Society needs your help! Perhaps we don’t have a consensus on what to do, but I hope I can at least convince you that we can’t wait for years to begin. We must act quickly, and I’m asking for your cooperation.”

Jumping up from the audience, an older man (Dr. Status Quo, we later learn) moves toward the stage, proclaiming loudly, “Balderdash! Poppycock! He [Pavlath] is trying to change this and change that. I’ve had it up to my ears with his changes. I am not convinced that any major change is required.”

Ms. Change responds, “Today our members expect more from the Society than journals and meetings. They have a wide range of interests and needs. They want to know what the Society will do for them.”

Like any good chemist, Attila Pavlath likes to distill and purify—to get to the essence of a substance or a situation. And this scene, taken from *It’s Time for a Change*, a play written by Pavlath and presented at both ACS national meetings in 2001, provides a distillation of Pavlath’s ideology and leadership style.

Jane Q. Change articulates Pavlath’s philosophy later in the same scene in a reply to Dr. Status Quo.

“I don’t think that we have the time to look for the perfect solution. There never was any historical action which provided a perfect solution to all problems in any given area. If we can improve the situation, if we show to our members that we are earnestly looking for a solution, many of them will probably even help us.”

Throughout his long involvement in ACS governance, and especially during his term as President, Pavlath presented a vision of an American Chemical Society that listens carefully to its members and responds promptly with change.

As he neared the conclusion of his Presidency, Pavlath recently reflected for *Chemistry* readers on the accomplishments, frustrations, and ongoing challenges of his year as President. Two major accomplishments—one tangible and one intangible—stand out for Pavlath.

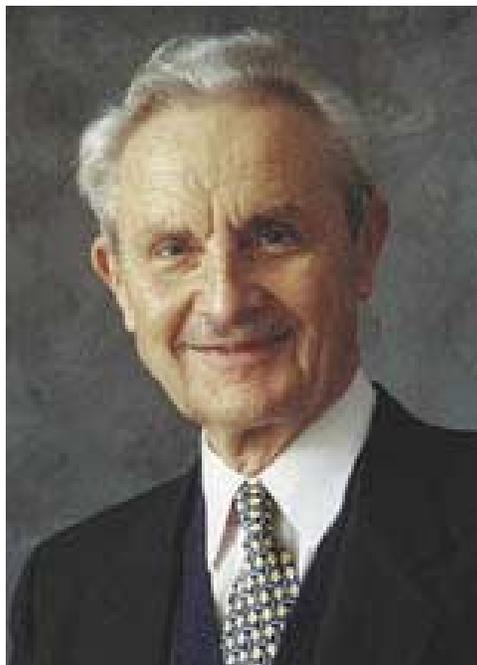
ELECTRONIC MEMBERSHIP POLL

The debate between Ms. Jane Q. Change and Dr. Status Quo is nothing new, according to Pavlath. In a half-century of reports and surveys (e.g., the Hancock report in 1947 and the A.D. Little report in 1973), ACS has been asking its members about their opinions, interests, and needs.

“Last year, in my first report to Council, I brought out to the podium a stack of surveys and reports. The stack was one foot high.” Unfortunately, Pavlath observed, these surveys were not seen as comprehensive, so people could argue about the meaning of the findings. “Therefore, many of the recommendations were never acted on, especially the most important recommendation. We knew it already in 1947—the members wanted more than publishing journals and organizing meetings. In that report, 57% said that they wanted to



*The play's the thing for vision: Pavlath's musical play, *It's Time for a Change*, uses songs, historical figures, and stereotypical ACS members to present his vision of the future of ACS. Here, Dr. Status Quo (second from left) and William Shakespeare (center) discuss the risks and benefits of change and innovation.*



ACS President Attila Pavlath

address the professional interests of the members.”

To Pavlath, “professional interests” means anything that promotes chemists’ careers. “Chemistry is fun—if you have a job,” he pointed out. “People go into chemistry because they are interested in chemistry, but they also expect to make a living. Very few of our members are independently wealthy.”

For years, said Pavlath, the debate about the mission of the Society has continued. Some members saw ACS as an organization devoted to publishing and meetings, while others called for greater recognition of professional interests.

Pavlath, who’s been engaged in this debate throughout his years in ACS governance, saw electronic technology as a way to resolve this issue. “In the past, we’ve had a number of reports, but they were dismissed. I started the electronic poll to settle this question once and for all: What do the members want?”

Under the guidance of a task force appointed by Pavlath, ACS developed and conducted an electronic survey in April–May 2001. It was done with the assistance of a respected consulting group with expertise in online surveys. The 8000 responses were a representative sample of ACS membership. Therefore, the survey provided an objective and comprehensive look at the views and needs of the ACS membership.

The full report includes about 500 pages of data and 150 tables. The task force, chaired by Judith Giordan, former member of the ACS Board of Directors, carefully culled and analyzed the information, developing an 18-page executive summary with key findings and recommendations. The executive summary is available online (<http://chemistry.org/presidentialpoll>) and is discussed in detail in a recent article in *Chemical & Engineering News* (C&EN, October 22, 2001, pp 65–69).

VARYING DEGREES OF SATISFACTION

While survey results show that more than 50% are extremely or very satisfied with their ACS membership, there were some significant differences between demographic groups. (Remember the scene between Jane Q. Change and Dr. Status Quo described at the beginning of this article?) Satisfaction with ACS membership is highest for members who are older, academic, Ph.D.-level, emeritus and/or retired, and male; it is lowest for members who are female, young to mid-age, in industry and government, with B.S. and M.S. degrees. Although members are especially interested in journals and meetings, they have a diverse range of other interests, Pavlath said.

“The one point which stands out from everyone is the interest in career-oriented activities and help in career development,” he pointed out. The executive summary made the same point, in somewhat different language: “There is a substantial unmet need on the topics ranked of greatest importance: careers, image and professionalism of chemistry, science literacy, and funding for science.”

What happens next with this report?

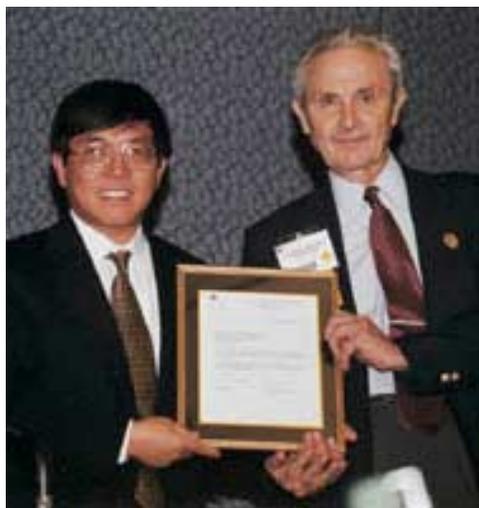
Pavlath has forwarded it to all ACS committees, and he believes the survey will provide a very important foundation for planning future activities. “In my opinion, the ball is now in the court of the ACS governance. It can no longer be argued that we don’t know what the members want. Rationally, there can be no more argument. This is what the members want. What are we going to do?”

He encouraged the committees to be both creative and persistent as they consider solutions to the concerns identified by the survey. “Frequently in the past, we dismissed ideas from the beginning, saying that they were impossible. However, the world was shaped by those who dreamed the impossible.”

With years of experience in ACS governance, Pavlath is both a realist and an optimist. “I don’t expect that all these things are going to be addressed during my Presidential term. But even if only half of the points are addressed by the committees and only half of the recommendations are implemented, I consider this as the most important accomplishment of my Presidency.”

PAVLATH’S PERSONAL APPROACH

While Pavlath views the electronic survey as the most important tangible accomplishment of his Presidency, he is equally proud of an intangible accomplishment: Bringing a personal approach to communication with members.



Personal contact with membership: Pavlath traveled extensively as ACS President to honor and recognize the contributions of ACS members to their profession and science. Pavlath (right) makes a presentation to Chinese-American Chemical Society President Yunlun Huang commemorating CACS's 20th anniversary.

“Members need to feel that they are more than just a number in the ACS computer. They need to know that we are not just interested in their dues payment of \$112. We are interested in them as human beings. Whenever there is a possibility to express personal appreciation and thanks, I think we should do it.”

ACS has rarely, if ever, had a President with such a strong and personal focus on communicating with the membership. Pavlath has been an extremely active traveler, first as an ACS tour speaker, then as a member of the Board of Directors since 1991, and now as ACS President. In his two years as ACS President-elect and ACS President, he's logged more than 250,000 miles of air travel on ACS business, speaking at regional meetings, handing out awards at local section meetings, and honoring local sections on their anniversaries. “Since 1988, I've visited 145 sections [out of a total of 189 local sections]. I've always carried the message that I want to hear what they are saying. At many sections, they've said, ‘We've never had an ACS President visit us.’”

While face-to-face meetings are a top priority for Pavlath, he also uses other formats for communicating with members.

Over the years, he's sent out “grassroots” newsletters, started his own Web site (www.pavlath.org), and published more than two dozen “ACS Comments” articles in C&EN. Since becoming a member of the Board of Directors, he's written letters every year to the outgoing Chairs of each local section, sending them personalized certificates of thanks and praising them as the “unsung heroes of the ACS”.

As President, he's found new ways to add his individual touch to routine ACS business. When he learned about the significant number of new members who join ACS for one national meeting and then let their memberships lapse, he wrote personal letters to each of them, welcoming them and encouraging their participation in the Society.

Pavlath's person-to-person approach doesn't apply just to new members, B.S. chemists, and local section officers. It also included the 55 distinguished chemists who won national ACS awards. “I asked the Awards office to give me their names and phone numbers, and I called each one—from Japan to Germany,” he said. “I can tell you that each of them, even though some of them were high-level scientists, appreciated that the President took the time to call them personally.”

FRUSTRATION OVER A SLOW PACE

When asked about the disappointments of his term as President, Pavlath points to Dr. Status Quo, the character in his play.

“I'm disappointed that some of the actions that I'm promoting are not being done as quickly as possible. Dr. Status Quo says, ‘We shouldn't hurry. We should appoint task forces, we should do surveys, and we should look for the perfect solution.’ I hear that a lot in the ACS.”

Pavlath's frustration with the slow pace of change and the tendency of some to seek a perfect solution was a major underlying theme in the musical play presented at the national meeting.

Halfway through the play, William Shakespeare and Oscar Hammerstein appeared on stage thanks to a time-travel machine. They used their plays and songs to provide insightful comments on ACS as an organization.

Hammerstein observed, “You know what I find interesting? That these are scientists who regularly venture into the unknown to discover new territories. People who are not discouraged by the failure of their experiments. However, when it comes to their own Society, they are frequently reluctant to change.”

Pavlath cited one example of a specific change that has not occurred. It involved proposals first made 12 years ago to establish a graduated scale for membership dues. Under these proposals, members who earn less, who are at an earlier stage in their career, or who use fewer ACS benefits and services would pay lower dues.

“Why should a young B.S. chemist in Kansas who works for a small company pay the same amount as a Nobel Prize winner at Harvard University who takes full advantage of subscribing to journals and attending meetings?”

Pavlath said that the ACS committee system, where meetings are often held only twice a year, contributes to the sluggish pace of change. He'd like to see greater use of electronic mail, teleconferencing, and highly focused task forces to move change forward more quickly. “Many members say, ‘The system is too slow. Even if I make a recommendation, it isn't



Renewing public confidence in chemistry: The Technology Milestones exhibit represents an important first step in the ongoing effort of Pavlath and other ACS leaders to renew the public confidence in chemistry. In this photo, Pavlath and Kelly Shannon, ACS Student Affiliates chapter president at Illinois Institute of Technology, preview the exhibit at the ACS national meeting in Chicago.

going to be done.’ What’s important is to give the members the feeling that they are being listened to and being responded to.”

ONGOING CHALLENGES

In addition to the issue of professional concerns, Pavlath has also been very involved with ACS efforts to renew public confidence in chemistry. One of the important recent advances in this area has been the development of the Technology Milestones project (chemistry.org/milestones), previewed at the Chicago national meeting.

This interactive exhibit shows how chemistry has contributed to the quality of our lives during the past 125 years, in areas such as health and medicine, agriculture and food, information and communications, and energy and transportation technology.

Pavlath strongly endorsed the Technology Milestones project. “I supported the creation of this exhibit even before I was elected as ACS President. However, I cannot take credit for it. My role was to help identify the right people and to encourage them to do the job.”

As a next step forward, Pavlath has called for the establishment of a new Center for the Public Image of Chemistry (see C&EN, August 6, 2001, p 45). The Center would have “the dual responsibility of publicizing facts and counteracting sensationalist half-truths. This would also serve as a source for middle-of-the-road, responsible journalism. There will always be some supermarket-tabloid reporting, but this way we can present a much-needed balance of views to the public—views based on logic and facts rather than on emotion and myths.” Improving the public image of chemistry has been an important theme for ACS Presidents in the recent past, and it will continue in the future. According to Pavlath, “This is just the beginning. I’ve brought attention to it, but I haven’t accomplished it. It will require the attention of future Presidents, and it will include both educating the adult public and improving K–12 science education.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Pavlath’s advice for future ACS Presidents?

“Remember that we are not a publishing organization, even though we gain many financial benefits from publishing. We are still a membership organization, and members are our most important asset. Keep close to the grassroots. Stay close to the members.”

As ACS changes and taps more of the energy, creativity, and ideas of its members, Pavlath sees a great future ahead. The conclusion of *It’s Time for a Change* provides an inspirational glimpse at what he envisions. Using his artistic license to borrow from John Lennon, Pavlath closes the play by reciting the following lines:

*“Imagine that everything is green,
It’s easy if you try.
There are no clouds on the horizon,
Above us only blue sky.
Imagine that we can agree,
It isn’t hard to do.
Nothing to disagree,
And no arguments too.
You may say I’m a dreamer,
But I’m not the only one.
I hope we can work together,
And the Society will be as one.”*

And those lines may be the purest distillation of Attila Pavlath.

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