

REPORT

WORLD SKEPTICS CONVENTION III, SYDNEY

Health, Wealth and Wellbeing through Critical Thinking

The World Convention, co-hosted by Australian Skeptics and CSICOP, and held at the University of Sydney from November 10-12, 2000, was always going to be a difficult event to bring off. As it happened, with around 400 people attending on each of the three days, it was one of the most successful Skeptics events ever held anywhere in the world, as the many comments and compliments we received from subscribers, members of the public, and overseas speakers, attest. Prof Paul Kurtz, founder of the modern Skeptics movement, said as much publicly at the convention, and he was even more glowing in his praise to members of the committee in private.

From Paul Kurtz's comments, we are now confirmed in our belief that the Australian Skeptics approach to its affairs: of taking the work seriously, but not ourselves; of leavening our serious purpose with good humour, is something that may well be taken aboard by Skeptics groups in other countries. One comment Paul made was that in all the Skeptics conventions he had attended, he had never heard so much laughter from the audience. He thought this was a very positive factor and we would have to agree with him completely.

He also mentioned the quality of the array of speakers we had assembled, noting that even CSICOP would be hard pressed to emulate it. As an example, he said it would be unusual in most countries for the chief prosecutor of the nation's largest judicial agency, the head of the major national regulatory authority, and the director of the leading museum, to appear together at a Skeptics convention. Or that the panel on alternative medicine would attract quite so many leading practitioners in their own particular fields to appear on the same platform at a lay conference. One doctor, having read our ad in a medical journal, came to the convention and took the time to tell us that in her many years in medicine, attending numerous medical conferences, she had never seen such a distinguished range of medical talent together on the same platform.

In the first instance this success was a tribute to the skills and persistence of the committee members who shouldered the responsibility of producing such an impressive array of speakers for each of the day's themes. Richard Gordon, Richard Lead and Trevor Case, worked extremely hard over a two year period to put together the excellent programme and we also had the great good fortune to get the assistance of Irene Case, whose organisational skills and the conference experience to ensure that everything was kept on track, and what a remarkable job she made of it. When it was suggested to the committee that she be made a Life Member, the response was immediate and unanimous.

Many others played a substantial part in keeping things running smoothly; Martin Hadley, Scott Campbell and Bob Nixon taking charge of the parallel sessions; Alynda Brown doing sterling service keeping

the constantly changing programme updated on the web site, with Vic Skeptics webmeister, Greg Keogh contributing a great deal in this regard. The SA and Hunter branches establishing booths to display Skeptics brochures and pseudo-medical gadgets, adding to the quality and interest. Brian Miller (Andrew Garrett Group) and Prof Brynn Hibberd (UNSW) organising a "wine challenge" which, although it didn't go exactly as planned, nevertheless helped maintain the good-natured atmosphere of the convention.

The organisation and co-ordination involved in an event of this size and complexity, contained innumerable possibilities for failure and on many occasions members of the organising committee must have asked themselves, "What have we done"? - but none of the potential disasters that could have wrecked it came to pass. Receiving an email from James Randi on Thursday (less than 24 hours before the convention was due to start) that he was in Beijing and had forgotten to get an Australian visa, was not designed to calm somewhat jittery nerves. As it turned out it was not really a problem and he turned up at Sydney International Airport on Friday morning, exactly as advertised.

Our co-sponsors at CSICOP must be thanked for their support in bringing speakers for overseas. It was never going to be easy, keeping the lines of communication open with so many foreign parts, but it worked out wonderfully well in the end. Then there was the spirit of volunteerism, (a hangover of the Olympic/Paralympic spirit, perhaps) with many people helping out: operating the registration desk, selling souvenir products; those from other branches chairing sessions, contributing ideas and support, encouraging their local subscribers to attend. There were too many to name all of them individually, but it would be ungracious not to mention the contributions made by Ros Fekitoa, Tina Case, Jessica Singer, Rafe Champion, John Stolsnow, Peter Bowditch, Alynda Brown, Colins Keay and Maybury, Laurie Eddie and Michelle Foster (S A), Bob Nixon and Richard Cadena (Vic), Richard Saunders, David Hellstrom and many, many more from around Australia. And there is also a somewhat more intangible factor at play here too, and that is the level of corporate credibility that we have achieved through our activities in all the Skeptics branches over the past few years. Without this it is inconceivable that so many distinguished speakers would have agreed to be part of this remarkable event.

To the organising committee members, to the speakers, to the willing volunteers, and not forgetting the large numbers of subscribers and others who attended, you all did great work and we offer our heartfelt thanks and congratulations.

Special thanks go to sponsors Alan Ekholm of A E Displays and Sales Pty Ltd for providing display stands, to Charles Rose of Co-gency for artwork and to BEE Printmail for printing our programme.