

An Appreciation of the Absurd

I believe that I first heard of Jan Karel Lenstra's appointment as director of CWI from Jan Verwer, who was pleased that a 'real' mathematician would be heading the Institute. I probably had met Jan Karel briefly in the late 1980's, when I first joined CWI as head of the Computer Systems and Telematics department, and he was undoubtedly at some of the initial MT-meetings that I had attended when that body still had a dozen or more members, but I did not have a specific physical or emotional image of the man who was about to come back from Georgia Tech in Atlanta to lead the Institute to which I had myself only recently returned.

In the early years of his tenure, our main contact came from sharing the north-west corridor of the third floor of what we would now call the old CWI-building. His arrival brought with it the usual commotion of painters and carpet layers. New was his introduction of a small refrigerator to the official artifacts of office. This seemingly simple deed signaled to me an iron will – a will that would later translate into the repositioning (and de-positioning) of topics, tasks and people across the Institute. The 'fridge' was, in and of itself, no big deal. But for the careful observer, it was as if a red flag had been planted in a virtual stroke of sand that ran across the threshold of his office. My feeling was: this is not going to be our typical CWI-managing director.

The sharing of our corridor gave my then-young children an intriguing new place to explore during their weekend afternoons at the Institute. In addition to the hot chocolate machine, the blackboard (and later whiteboard) in the third floor common room and the terrace outside of my office, they sensed a new gravitational force attracting them to JKL's office at the (for them) far end of the hall.

All of these were relatively passive encounters. My first real interaction of substance with Jan Karel came during the production of an early draft of the self-study document for the 2005 NWO evaluation of CWI. I had read the introduction that flowed from the Director's pen and thought: this was all too dry and factual to excite any reviewer. I decided to rewrite parts of the document, and submitted these as unsolicited comments from a concerned reader. To my surprise, he was open and ready to accept criticisms of his own work (which is much harder than sharing the criticisms of work done by others). What followed was a set of animated discussions that

ranged from fonts and punctuation rules to striking formulations that could capture the dynamic essence of CWI in a manner that would retain a reviewer's interest for the full ten minutes that he or she would dedicate to the introduction chapter of the document. When I presented the final text to the MT, the discussion never really got beyond the level of commas and semicolons. In the one-on-one conversations with Jan Karel, however, we were able to focus on a more abstract view of the content. This man had a delightful sense of the absurd.

This appreciation of off-beat formulations – and the love of the debate over details at the edge of nearly any subject – also defined the tone of the semi-annual theme/ group review meetings that I held with our director. In the early days, these meetings would consist of a relatively structured discussion of the short- and long-term goals of my young group, often ending with a discussion on the need for me to not only think globally but to act locally on establishing research partnerships. In later years, in the company of not only my cluster leader but also the Institute's budgetary and personnel gurus, our discussions became animated mini-evaluations of the people, projects and surpluses that were known as SEN5. In these discussions, Jan Karel always maintained meticulous facts lists, consisting of scribbles written in pen using a letter size more space-efficient than most characters in first generation microfilm documents. He was also keenly aware of the meta-process that guided our group's development. Rather than being boring, pro-forma sessions, I always left these meetings with the feeling that I had just stepped off the tennis court.

The piccolo style of writing was, in public, complimented by a neatly staccato delivery style that transformed mundane and often forced New Year's presentations into engaging mini-performances that drew crowds rather than repelling them. To me, the most engaging aspect of these talks was not the content, but the animated manner in which the content was structured and delivered. Set to music, they would have given Gilbert & Sullivan a run for their money. Even more impressive, however, was the critical self-analysis that followed each presentation: how were they received, did they 'work', what could be learned for the next show?

The official history of the Jan Karel Lenstra period at CWI will chronicle the exploits of a strong-willed director whose interests and insights did not always flow in the same direction as the generic stream of consciousness of everyone at the Institute. While there is

room for discussion on how all decisions were received, on what worked during the last decade (and what didn't), and on the lessons that have been learned by us all – and which hopefully will influence our new director – this official history will describe an Institute that is internationally regarded, intellectually alive and financially robust.

While I can imagine the frustrations of some (and the delights of others), I personally am left with an appreciation for the humor and directness of this boss. While I wasn't always happy with the results of our discussions, I was always invigorated and amused by them. His will be a tough act to follow.

Dick Bulterman