



Inaugural Speech by the President of the Max Planck Society

Professor Dr. Patrick Cramer

on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting

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Lokhalle Göttingen

- The spoken word shall prevail -

Transformative science for a changing world

Ladies and gentlemen,

I spent a few years living in France with my family. In France, everyone has heard of the town of Göttingen. One of the reasons for this is the story of Sibylle Penkert, a student from Göttingen. Sixty years ago, this young woman embarked on what seemed like an impossible mission: to bring the Parisian singer Barbara to Göttingen for a concert. But at the time, the rift between the two countries seemed insurmountable. Sibylle's determination, however, remained unwavering. She enlisted the help of a theatre director.

And indeed, in the summer of 1964, the singer makes a special appearance here in the city of Göttingen. She is warmly received and receives enthusiastic applause. The experience moves her so much that she composes a song before her departure. This chanson, titled "Göttingen", went on to become an anthem of Franco-German reconciliation.

Dear members of the Plenary Assembly,

This story exemplifies how people have the power to change the world. It begins with an unconventional idea. Then it requires courage to push beyond boundaries and perseverance and trust. This principle also applies to science. Those who think freely, inspire others, and venture into uncharted territories, have the potential to achieve transformative research results. And in doing so, they have the ability to change the world.



Dear Federal Minister,

Dear Prime Minister,

Dear representatives of politics,

You know this question, we all know it: why do we actually need research? My pre-predecessor, Peter Gruss, already provided an answer to this question. But we have to ask it again. It's important that we continue to address it.

Yes, research plays a crucial role in generating technologies and innovations. But science offers much more. It provides us with a compass to navigate through a complex world. It offers us facts and enables us to make evidence-based decisions. It helps us distinguish between fact and fiction, cultivating critical judgement, which is increasingly endangered. In an era filled with information bubbles, deep fakes, and conspiracy myths, science becomes a safeguard for democracy itself.

That is why we use the tax funds entrusted to us to conduct innovative research, train future specialists and leaders and engage in meaningful dialogue with society. To achieve these goals, we need one thing above all: freedom. Freedom from excessive regulations allows us to make valuable contributions to the necessary transformation of both the economy and society. Thank you for your continued support.

Dear Martin Stratmann,

Good conditions for research have always been close to your heart. You have rendered great services – to the Max Planck Society, but also to the scientific community at large.

Under your leadership, the Max Planck Society has undergone a remarkable renewal with the appointment of over one hundred individuals and the implementation of measures promoting personnel development and gender equality. Your dedication to research initiatives such as Cyber Valley and Quantum Valley, as well as the Max Planck Schools, Dioscuri Programme, and SPRIND Agency, has revitalized research centres not only in Germany but also across Europe. Together with the Administrative Headquarters and the institutes, you have steered us successfully through the challenges posed by the pandemic and the energy crisis.

A year ago, we hardly knew each other. Yet, a bond of trust quickly developed between us. This connection has been incredibly valuable to me. And I personally want to express my sincere gratitude to you for this connection.

In addition, on behalf of all the members and staff of the Max Planck Society, I want to extend my deepest appreciation and thanks to both you and your wife, who helped to support and shape the



Presidency, for everything: we wholeheartedly wish you both the very best in all your future endeavours.

(Let's give them a hearty round of applause!)

Dear members and staff of the Max Planck Society,

I have visited 84 institutes, and this journey has profoundly altered my perspective on the world. What an immense privilege to learn from so many researchers! And all the competent people in the administrations, workshops and facilities! Without them, science would not be possible.

I was also impressed by the breadth of research topics. Did you know that we are collaborating with the European Space Agency (ESA) to fly to the moons of Jupiter? That our legal experts evaluate climate protests? Or that our libraries in Rome and Florence are highly regarded by art historians? Energy conversion, cell diagnostics, patent pools - our current topics are exciting, important, and diverse.

And what unites us? Quite clearly: We are driven by curiosity. We are discoverers, more than mere seekers. We remain open to embracing this serendipity, those almost magical moments that require our readiness to recognize and seize them.

And this is not just academic enthusiasm; in fact, it is quite the opposite! Transformative knowledge often emerges unexpectedly, by chance, when we are receptive to it. A recent illustration of this is the discovery of genetic scissors, which are now being used to treat hereditary diseases and cultivate resilient plants.

Another realization became evident to me during my journey: The only thing that is certain is change. We continually challenge what we have grown accustomed to. We repeatedly let go of what we have become fond of. Because we understand that this is the only way to make room for something new. Only when we keep moving do we remain at the forefront.

Dear Plenary Assembly,

Like many of you, I'm sure, I too have been questioning what the future holds for the Max Planck Society after 75 years. In my view, there are three key areas where we must focus our efforts and take action.

First: Attracting and nurturing talent.



We aim to attract and retain exceptional researchers. When making appointments, we consider not only past achievements, but also crucial factors for future success, such as originality, leadership abilities, and collaboration. We prioritize genuine excellence in all aspects.

We provide steadfast support to those appointed, empowering them to embark on courageous research projects that have the potential to yield significant breakthroughs. We actively explore new avenues of research and continuously expand the range of disciplines we engage with. In doing so, we equip ourselves to navigate the challenges of an uncertain future.

Young researchers hold a special place in my heart. I propose implementing an interdisciplinary postdoctoral programme. This initiative will help us attract talented individuals, create early career opportunities and also foster synergies among institutes.

To ensure enhanced planning security, Group Leaders will receive six years of funding. Furthermore, we are actively increasing the number of tenure-track positions, which will be awarded through a transparent, competitive, and equitable process. It is important to note that four out of five of these young leaders will secure tenured professorships within five years. This is a real success for the science system as a whole.

This is another reason why we will continue to work with universities, clinics and research institutions. People must be able to move between institutions. This is only possible within a legal framework that ensures us flexibility.

During my many discussions, it also became clear to me that each individual perceives the world through a unique lens. We need these different perspectives. It is a great fortune that our organization is comprised of approximately 24,000 employees representing 127 countries. We embrace this diversity. We value diversity in education, professional cultures, and team composition. We welcome individuals of all genders, and we are committed to enhancing a work-life balance and supporting the compatibility of work and family. And we will remain dedicated to our self-commitment.

This is important to me: Science thrives on diversity. We welcome all those who share our values. Everyone is welcome.

This brings me to the second area of focus: Revitalizing processes and strategies.

We continue to actively evolve our international strategy. Do we know what our interests are? This understanding is crucial as it enables us to engage with partners and define shared goals.

Collaboration within Europe and North America remains important and presents growing challenges.



Think of the repercussions of Brexit, limitations on academic freedom in certain parts of Eastern Europe, and ideological trends in the US.

We are actively seeking new partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. When engaging with China, it is crucial to maintain a critical yet constructive dialogue. We value human rights, scientific freedom, and research integrity. In all our international interactions, we strive to approach others as equals and avoid a Eurocentric perspective.

These global connections are invaluable. Not solely for the sake of science. No, this is how bridges are built that endure beyond the confines of contemporary history. Especially in challenging times, it is essential that we foster personal connections. In doing so, the Max Planck Society stands poised as a bridge builder when new challenges arise.

We always seek collaboration with the world's best. However, it's equally important to compare ourselves with them. How do we maintain competitiveness in a rapidly evolving world? Simply making top-tier appointments is not sufficient. We also require development strategies for our locations. The supporting units must have a critical size. This fosters scientific autonomy, enhances attractiveness, and the development of our institutes.

And it is precisely because of our decentralized structure that it becomes crucial for us to advance digitalization and further develop our data centres. In order to address these overarching concerns, we will also expand the President's Council.

Now I come to the third and last area of action: embracing social responsibility.

This entails conducting our work in accordance with ethical standards and as environmentally friendly as possible, making our findings freely accessible and consistently communicating the opportunities and risks associated with our research.

An example that highlights the significance of this is one that you all know: Max Planck researchers were instrumental in demonstrating that global warming is human-made. And they pointed out the consequences early on. Without this transformative knowledge, the Paris Agreement would not have come into existence.

We are committed to making our contribution to climate protection. To achieve this, we will develop a sustainability concept aimed at achieving climate neutrality for the Max Planck Society by 2035 at the latest. Building upon our existing energy-saving measures, we are now taking the next step: installing solar systems at all institutes where feasible. I just heard that 30 institutes are already preparing to implement this initiative – I think this is truly remarkable!



In the medium term, energy-efficient refurbishments and the construction of new buildings will be on the agenda. However, these endeavours require special funding. And considering the high energy requirements, we will only achieve climate-neutrality if there is a rapid and widespread availability of abundant green electricity.

As a society, we face many challenges: To name just a few: the education crisis, species extinction, and artificial intelligence. Can we create positive scenarios for the future? If so, it is essential that we use our voices and engage in open and constructive dialogues, even when they are challenging. Communication is the key, utilizing multimedia platforms and establishing a presence, also in the capital.

Moreover, we should not only facilitate the transfer of knowledge, but also of technologies. Through scouting, we identify innovative ideas in laboratories, and then provide assistance with their implementation. It is important to foster collaboration with industries as they often contribute to cutting-edge research, not only in medicine and technology, but also in computer and social sciences. However, it is of utmost importance to always safeguard the independence of research.

Dear Colleagues,

We are not simply members of the Max Planck Society; we are the Max Planck Society. We shape and define its essence. We possess the power to make a positive impact and bring about change in the world. Let us embrace boldness in our research, show generosity in our support for others, and adopt a forward-looking mindset that transcends disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries.

Thank you for your dedication and commitment. It is a privilege for me to serve as *primus inter pares*.

Fortunately, I do not face these challenges alone. I look forward to working with institutes, boards and committees. Within the Administrative Headquarters, I am confident in the expertise and competence of the individuals in the President's Office and the various departments. Additionally, the support and guidance of our sponsors, trustees, and contacts in politics, business, and the media are invaluable.

I am especially thrilled to be working alongside our Secretary General, Simone Schwanitz, and the newly elected Vice Presidents, Asifa Akhtar, Claudia Felser, Sibylle Günter, and Christian Doeller.

(It would be nice if you all could stand up for a moment!)

Dear Members of the Plenary Assembly,



In May 1945, Max Planck, at the age of 87, fled to Göttingen with his wife Marga. Planck had endured the loss of his first wife and of four of his children, and of his house in Berlin. Yet, amidst the immense challenges, humiliations, and pain, Max Planck again turned his gaze forward.

He called upon the scattered institutes across Germany to unite, and in doing so, brought Otto Hahn to Göttingen, who had been interned in England. And he reached an agreement to establish a new research society, with Hahn as its inaugural president.

Even if the world is a different place today, our founding history teaches us what is important: vision, personal commitment, unity.

And with this, I come full circle to the opening of my speech.

Because that very same spirit also brought **Barbara** to Göttingen a few years later. And that spirit continues to resonate through the words of her chanson: “...**les enfants ce sont les mêmes.**” The children are the same everywhere.

This serves as a reminder that our work is always about the next generation and their living conditions.

So let us remain steadfast on this path. Let us venture into uncharted territory. Let us wholeheartedly pursue our mission to advance understanding of the world – and to its transformation, through the pursuit of free and transformative science.

Thank you for your kind attention.