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On the threshold to a new nomenclature?

Werner Greuter[1] & Dan H. Nicolson[2]

The impatient innovative mind will perhaps frown at the question in the title, having read the report on Congress action on nomenclature proposals on the preceding pages. Registration postponed to take effect by the year 2000, provided that the next Congress will again agree; the NCU principle not endorsed but sent back to the level of committee deliberations – how may we dare to voice the hypothesis of a new nomenclature having arisen out of the Tokyo Congress?

Yet those present at the recent nomenclature sessions will know what is meant. There was a new wind blowing at Yokohama that had nothing to do with the typhoon that hit the city just during the last hours of the nomenclature meeting. The meeting had indeed refrained from endorsing innovations that some still considered ruthless, after a violent and not always fully informed campaign; it had carefully and wisely avoided rushing nomenclature into commitments for which the structural basis had yet to be laid. But it had slammed no doors, quite on the contrary: it had opened the perspectives of future success of both registration and NCU protection, on the condition that their feasibility, utility, and quality be demonstrated during the six years ahead.

More importantly, the Section had been aware to an unprecedented degree of the justified needs and demands of the users of scientific plant names, of which as always only a tiny fraction were present. Think back to Sydney where a thoroughly emasculated proposal to deal with species names by conservation, restricted by amendment to "species of major economic importance", had made it with the tiny majority of 60.9 %; and to Berlin where the option to conserve the type of a binomial typifying a conserved generic name passed with the narrowest possible majority (60.1 %) and where the proposal to introduce conservation for nomina ambigua first failed by two votes (59.7 % support) then got through painfully having been amended and limited to the ranks of species and genera (63.4 %). This time, unrestricted conservation of species names and rejection of any name [irrespective of rank] that would cause a disadvantageous nomenclatural change were both admitted by an overwhelming majority on a simple show of hands!

So, do we now have a new nomenclature? The fair answer is: yes and no. The instruments have been provided to cure cases of nomenclatural disruption if and when they arise; and the continued work toward a more general solution, not limited to curing apparent ailments but aimed at a prophylaxis against all kinds of plague, has been authorized. Yet making full use of the presently available options and

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working toward their future extension is in the hands of all working plant taxonomists.

The Nomenclature Section, at its final meeting, was well aware of the promise of what had happened and of the importance of its being put into practice. Three motions of general import were discussed and carried, for which the torrential downpour outside and the army of torn umbrellas in the lobby provided a singular background.

The failure of the NCU proposals to pass had little immediate consequences since none of the extant lists were felt to be mature for adoption, either due to known imperfections or to lack of independent committee evaluation – with one major exception: Pitt & Samson's *Trichocomaceae* list. The Section recognized this by accepting the following resolution, which in fact authorizes the setting aside of the Code in relevant cases [an unprecedented event in nomenclature, as far as we know]: "The Nomenclature Section, noting that the List of Names in Current Use for the *Trichocomaceae* has already been approved by the International Commission on *Penicillium* and *Aspergillus* and by the International Union of Microbiological Societies (IUMS), urges taxonomists not to adopt names that would compete with and not to change the application of any names on that list."

Aware of the need for Permanent Committees to co-operate if the new options introduced into the Code were to be put into practice, the Section passed a second resolution addressing them: "The Section urges the General Committee and through it all Permanent Committees to make full use of the options that the Code now provides in order to ensure nomenclatural clarity and stability." We are confident that the General Committee will do justice to this request. It is not as commonplace as one might think in first reading it, though. Committees in the past have not always made use of the available options, deciding on the adoption or otherwise of conservation proposals on the basis of criteria that were (and are) foreign to the Code: the importance of the named taxon in terms of economic use, scientific interest, number of subordinate taxa and geographical range have often been put onto the balance, although the only criteria given by the Code are "avoidance of disadvantageous changes" and "retention of those names which best serve stability of nomenclature". In the future, also for economy of printed space, consideration of "the case both for and against conservation" will have to be limited to the legally relevant aspects: avoidance of change and service to stability. The General Committee will consider new procedures to ensure this, and will issue appropriate new guidelines for Committee operation.

Finally, as we have already said, sympathetic committees are not the whole answer. Committees can only act when proposals are submitted. It must now become generally acknowledged that there is no longer an excuse for changing any name, at least in the principal ranks, for reasons other than those mandated by new taxonomic insight. This is a message that concerns the entire botanical community, and the Section therefore resolved to add power to it by submitting it as a draft resolution to the whole Congress: "While work continues to find further ways to reduce changes of well-established names, such names should not be displaced for purely nomenclatural reasons, whether by change in their application, or by resurrection of long-forgotten names." This motion, combined with the traditional one to ratify the Section's decisions, was to become Congress Resolution No. 1, here reproduced:

"Considering the great importance of a stable system of scientific names of plants for use in the pure and applied sciences and in many other domains of public life and economy;

"noting with satisfaction recent important improvements of the International code of botanical nomenclature and ongoing efforts to explore new avenues for increased stability and security in the application of plant names;

"the XV International Botanical Congress urges plant taxonomists, while such work continues, to avoid displacing well established names for purely nomenclatural reasons, whether by change in their application or by resurrection of long-forgotten names;

"resolves that the decisions of the Nomenclature Section with respect to the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature, as well as the appointment of officers and members of the nomenclature committees, made by the section during its meetings, 22-27 August, be accepted."

The third clause of this is the message to you all, in your capacity of botanical editors or authors: rather than condoning or indulging in harmful nomenclatural changes on spurious grounds, make full use of the present options of conserving or rejecting names; and, in the hopefully few cases in which these options do not suffice, do not rush into harmful changes but postpone them until even better rulings can be found at the next Congress. For Taxon we will now certainly not accept any more papers contrary to these principles, but will instead urge authors to submit proposals as appropriate. In view of the now "wide open floodgates" [a famous quote!] and of limitation of printed space, we may find it useful in the near future to issue guidelines for writing such proposals in a concise yet complete way. When in doubt, contact the Nomenclature Editor of Taxon.

This message is important enough for us to give it prominence, in our joint capacity of officers of the General Committee and of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy. Yes, we are on the threshold of a new nomenclature. Let us step beyond.