

## Competence, enthusiasm and tenacity

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**Abstract.** With this small contribution I would like to share with the readers some important moments of my working life when I had the honour of working closely with Nichi D'Amico. This is my way of celebrating this great man who has certainly left his mark on the life of many of us.

**Memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives back life to those who no longer exist (Guy de Maupassant)**

Although I have always been a radio astronomer, I never worked with Nichi. Our scientific interests, even if in the same broad field of Radioastronomy, have always been different. But being radio astronomer all my life, I couldn't help but know Nichi. A myth for all of us, known for his great competence, his enthusiasm and his tenacity. It takes great tenacity to lay the foundations for a dream, to work always and incessantly, fighting against continuous obstacles and problems, so that this dream becomes reality. But it is also necessary to have the humility to realize that a dream can only come true with the collaboration and help of many. This is how the big ones act.

In the early years of my career I met and interacted with Nichi only a few times. Our interactions became more frequent when in INAF began to turn the idea of establishing a single institute that could manage the major projects and infrastructures of Italian Radioastronomy, the Osservatorio per la Radioastronomia (ORA). We talked about it many times. Nichi, "father" of a new reality of Italian Radioastronomy, the SRT community in Cagliari, now consolidated, and myself,

who have just begun to form a small group in Catania, focused on Galactic Radioastronomy, a real new entry in the Italian scene. I spoke to him with great pleasure but also with a little fear.. on the other hand he was myth.

We had a similar broadly view of ORA but profoundly different in some respects. But it was always a pleasure to talk to him and simply fascinating to hear him pitting, without ever getting tired, all his thesis and motivations that should have convinced me. Later, when I received the phone call from the then INAF President, Nanni Bignami, who asked me to take the interim Direction of the ORA, Nichi was the first person I phoned. I felt important to have his advices and to share with him opinions on the challenges and responsibilities that this new appointment would brought with it.

The interim was necessary to cover a short period of about six months waiting for Steven Tingay, chosen downstream of a procedure in which both Nichi and I had participated. I had no doubt that the head of Italian Radioastronomy should have been Nichi, but things went otherwise. We had a very long telephone call and since then Nichi has entered my



**Fig. 1.** Nichi signing some annexes to the SKA-IGO Treaty, in Rome, on the 12 March 2019, at the MIUR.

professional life forcefully and has been a firm point of reference ever since.

I remember the frantic exchanges of emails in those days. I jealously guard those mails that sometimes I read with nostalgia. They are stuffed with wisdom and with some ironic reference to what was happening, as only he could do. During my first visit to Cagliari, as director of ORA, Nichi was splendid and hospitable. I still remember a lunch party organized for me at his house, in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere. I also remember someone told me that he didn't usually invite colleagues to his house. And this flattered me so much.

We worked together, trying to solve the many problems related to having, in fact, to manage two structures united overnight. My only goal was to put the structures in a position to work as soon as possible. Nichi was very helpful in those very first few weeks. I realized only after some time how much his support and

acceptance me into that role, even if Nichi was deeply opposed to the ORA, was fundamental to the full achievement of my goal.

I believe that to fully understand the impact that a director or project leader has on his community it is necessary not only to pay attention to the results, such as what has been achieved by the SRT community under the D'Amico management, but also to rely on the respect and admiration that the community has towards him. And this respect and admiration for Nichi was tangible in all colleagues in Cagliari. One for all, the legendary Renata Schirru, who managed for years, with strength, resolution and competence, the Cagliari administration, being by his side for many years and who has always called him "Professor", as a sign of deep respect.

After a few months, Nichi became INAF President. I had the opportunity to appreciate him also in this role, in my position as Director



**Fig. 2.** Nichi giving his opening speech at the the Italy-South Africa Radio Astronomy Workshop. On his right, Prof. Fioramonti and the Italian Ambassador in South Africa, HE P. G. Donnici.

of the Astrophysical Observatory of Catania. He was a President with clear knowledge of the INAF and with a particular attention to the personnel. He was always present, with emails or using WhatsApp, willing to listen and, whenever possible, pro-active in troubleshooting. He consulted frequently with the Directors of Structure, analyzing the problems from different points of view and always working to find the most appropriate solutions. He understood very well the different problems that a Director of Structure has to face from direct experience, having been director of the Cagliari Observatory for a long time. This helped me a lot when I had to confront him.

I didn't need to speak much...he understood immediately.

In those years I worked and often confronted him on the SKA project. Nichi has always believed in participating in the project not only as INAF, but also as a "sistema paese", and he always tried to create opportunities not only for the many INAF researchers and technologists but also for the Italian industries. I had the honor of being part of the Italian delegation for the negotiations that led to the birth of the SKA Observatory, managed through an intergovernmental treaty (IGO). I remember the day of the signing of the treaty, on 12 March 2019, at the Ministry in Viale Trastevere. Nichi was evidently thrilled. It had brought Italy to this very important goal. That signature would have ushered a new era for Radioastronomy and more in general for Science. I remember the extremely emotional

moment, when Nichi signed a series of documents (see figure 1). We exchanged a series of meaningful glances. Also in this case, with foresight, tenacity and determination, the objective had been achieved.

Always in the SKA context, I remember a very delicate negotiation within a design SKA consortium working group, of which I was chairman, when we had to hold on to the other members of the consortium to ensure Italian industries have opportunities for growth. I remember an exchange of mails, full of ideas and considerations on how to support the Italian position. On that occasion I had the opportunity to fully appreciate his great sense of responsibility towards his country, the full awareness of his role and how he could make use of it to provide a significant and decisive contribution to the problem. Needless to say, thanks to his efforts, the objective was once again fully achieved.

Nichi paid particular attention to promoting and consolidating international collaborations in various areas of INAF interest and the country system in general. I had the pleasure of participating with him in an institutional visit to South Africa in autumn 2018. The visit was part of a series of initiatives, supported by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI), to promote collaboration between Italy and South Africa. Both countries are making major investments in the field of Radio astronomy and it was therefore strategic to reinforce existing collaborations in the field of technology, high-performance and scientific computing, with particular reference to SKA and its precursors.

The starting point of this process was the Joint Research Scheme Project (Progetto di Grande Rilevanza) between the MAECI and the National Research Foundation "RADIO SKY 2020 - Fostering the cooperation between Italy and South Africa through radio astronomy", whose main purpose is to pave the way to the full exploitation of the Square Kilometre Array's breakthrough in both countries. The project has as INAF PI, Dr. Tiziana Venturi.

As part of this project, the Italy-South Africa Radio Astronomy Workshop was organ-

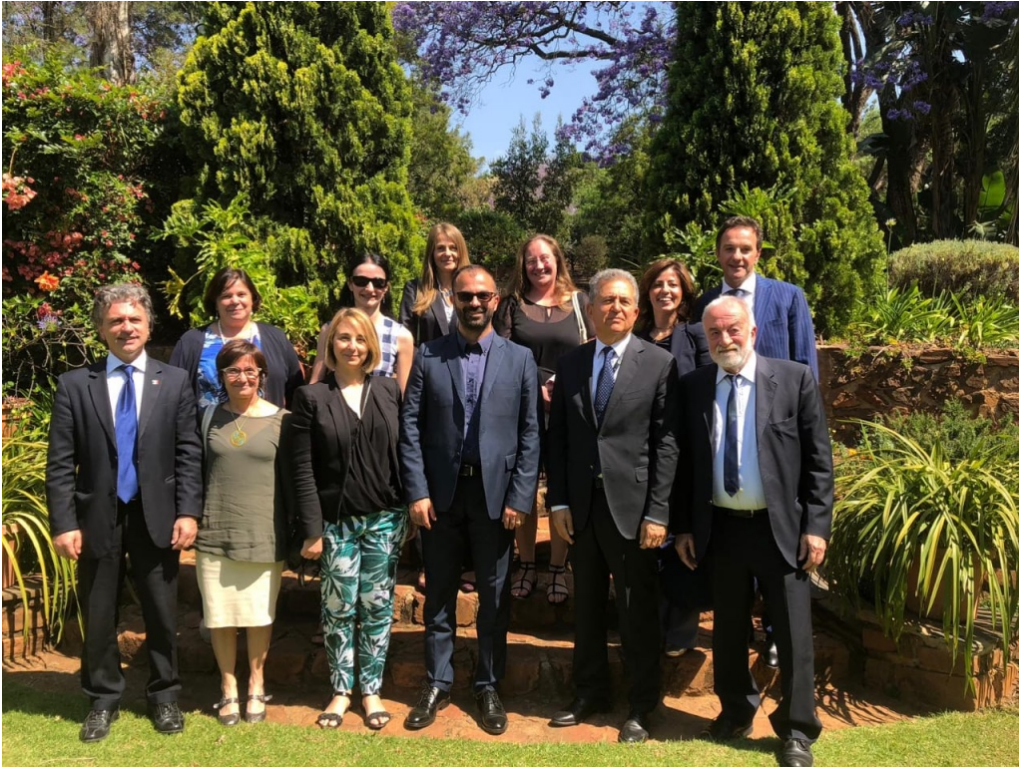
ised, with the ambition to prepare the ground for new bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements among research councils and national governments, to ensure a long term planning of the scientific, technological and industrial cooperation.

Nichi made one of the opening speeches of the Workshop, with his usual lucidity and vision, helped by his long time international experience in the field of Radioastronomy(see figure 2). The speech was very well received and particularly appreciated by our South African colleagues and by the then vice-Minister MIUR, Prof. Lorenzo Fioramonti, who was present at the meeting. Later, it was Fioramonti, who became Minister MIUR in the Conte government, who signed, in late 2019, the renewal of Nichi as INAF President.

The confrontation with Prof. Fioramonti continued at a lunch in the Residence of the Italian Ambassador in South Africa, where Nichi (see figure3), in a pleasant and relaxed context, did not miss an opportunity to highlight the excellence of Italian research in the field of Astrophysics, its peculiarities, possible industrial returns but also the actions necessary to maintain the achieved levels of excellence. Nichi's commitment was constant and he never missed any opportunity to achieve his goals.

The last part of my professional life made together with Nichi began when I was appointed as a member, indicated by the personnel, of the Board (CdA) of INAF. It was a unique experience, at times more difficult than I had expected. During those few months, I got to know another aspect of Nichi President. Strong and determined, with everything under control, and with a clear vision of what was to be the evolution of INAF. Nichi was always present, for whatever matter, scientific, technical or bureaucratic. And he was always at work, tireless, always with new ideas to propose. He maintained constant contact with his CdA, through mails, WhatsApp or phone calls. Going back to my mailbox, I counted an average of 25 mails/month. We also clashed, even harshly, on some issues, but Nichi, as soon as he changed the subject, was as if nothing had happened. Apparently he did not seem to hold a grudge even though I had learned, over the





**Fig. 3.** A photo group taken after the lunch at the Italian Residence hosted by HE P. G. Donnici. Nichi is together Prof. Fioramonti, some Italian Researchers, based in South Africa, Pierguido Sarti, science attachè at the Italian Embassy in Pretoria, Tiziana Venturi, Corrado Perna and Grazia Umana from INAF

years, to read some signals: when he raised his eyebrow.... It was better not to insist. But even in times of increased tension, he never lost his humour. I remember every time he joked about my being from Catania, playing in a joking way on the atavistic rivalry be-

tween Palermo and Catania. I still remember that Monday morning, when I was wondering why he hadn't sent an email or hadn't called yet. A colleague's phone call came in the early afternoon. Three words. Then a sense of dismay and loss that I still have today.