The
Mathematical Gazette

Editorial

My children have become interested in the stars and planets, so last week I went looking for a new astronomy book. I grew up with my father's copy of Larousse's Encyclopaedia of Astronomy and a view of the solar system that was gained entirely from beneath the soupy atmosphere. In a remaindered bookshop I found an atlas of the universe that contains superb colour pictures of the planets and their satellites, taken by robots like Mariner and Voyager. Here are the public fruits of the massive expenditure of the Cold War: maps of the surface of Mercury, shots of the Venusian surface taken by a Russian robot that was crushed moments later by the weight of the atmosphere, pictures of Titan, perhaps the second most homely place in the solar system. And the solar system has changed since I was at school. Jupiter, Uranus and Neptune have rings, Pluto has a satellite, Charon.

But what of Britain? What part did we play in this great romance? President Kennedy promised in 1961 that an American would walk on the moon within ten years. Here is a suggestion for John Major. Promise the British people a proof of the Riemann Hypothesis by the year 2001. This promise would cost peanuts by comparison with the space program: I'd suggest a budget of £200 million per year financed out of the National Lottery. That buys a lot of mathematics, because mathematics is cheap. Think of the benefits, the spin-offs. Hugely increased public interest in mathematics leading to a better educated work force; Britain leading the world intellectually again; mathematicians flocking to this country to get a share of the Riemann loot. We'd get the money back in invisible earnings alone as we exported the knowledge generated by the Riemann project. Imagine: in the U.S.A. or C.I.S. is a child who will be the first person to stand on Mars. And somewhere, in your classroom perhaps, is the first person to prove the Riemann Hypothesis.

Because the MA Computing report has been delayed, the editor was asked not to make this a special computing edition. Any resemblance to a special computing edition is purely accidental.