

Prime numbers man takes stock

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September 27, 2006



Fields of his own: Maths genius Terry Tao is worried his subject is being downgraded in Australia. Picture: James Croucher

ONE of the world's greatest mathematicians enters the room with a modest shuffle. He is wearing sandals, well-loved jeans and a baggy jumper.

He speaks softly and reluctantly admits to having assumed a role as a spokesman for mathematics.

A month after being awarded the Fields Medal, the world's top maths prize, Flinders University-educated Terry Tao is back in Australia to attend the 50th anniversary conference of the Australian Mathematical Society, at Sydney's Macquarie University.

He will give presentations on long arithmetic progressions in the primes to fellow academics and on the cosmic distance ladder to high school maths teachers.

He tells the HES the week after the Fields Medal presentation, was "very intensive with media attention but now it has calmed down".

"One lasting thing is I really feel like I have a responsibility to be a spokesperson for mathematics," he says.

He sees his position as Australia's only Fields medallist as important in selling the message that maths is vital for technological progress. He has heard "horror stories, second-hand" about how maths is being downgraded in universities and that teacher training is also suffering.

But then: "Australia never really had a historical emphasis on intellectual pursuits," he says.

"In the US, people respect maths and science because they recognise that a lot of the prosperity has come from it. Australia also has many scientific and technological advances but they don't receive as much press, for instance, as they do in the US."

The 31-year-old also knows his opinions will resonate in the maths world. "The words of a Fields medallist carry weight," he says. "If a Fields medallist says that a direction in maths is worth pursuing (it happens)".

But even a top mathematician has domestic concerns. Tao, professor of maths at the University of California, Los Angeles, and his wife, Laura, an engineer, juggle their work so their son, William, 3, gets as much attention as possible. And it's paying off: the youngster counted to 150 last week.

Having been out of Australia for most of the past seven years, Tao enjoys returning to the laid-back attitudes: "I've got a lot of old friends here. When I meet them, it's 'Congratulations' but then it's 'How's the family?'"

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