The 96th Session of the IMO Maritime Safety Committee took place at IMO HQ in London from 11 to 20 May 2016.

Publicity
In the second week, on the second day of the session, 17 May, the forenoon coffee break was sponsored by the IAIN. This was in order to draw delegates’ attention to a presentation which was to be given at 1240 that day by James Fanshawe, Chair of the UK Maritime Autonomous Systems (MAS) Regulatory Working Group (MASRWG). He spoke on the need for the early implementation of regulation regarding the operation of MAS and, in particular, that at least USVs are included as Vessels within Rule 3 and related requirements of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (Colregs).

The same day an information leaflet on the IAIN, its aims and activities was made available to delegates by Secretary General Simon Gaskin.

MAS
At the subsequent presentation, which was very well attended, James Fanshawe introduced Maritime Autonomous Systems that range from the current common forms of research and survey vehicles which are typically small and mostly operate away from other marine traffic to potentially large vessels that will be operating in the same waters as manned marine craft.

He went on to list the membership of the body he chairs that includes Government agencies, Inter-Governmental bodies (such as Safety and Regulations for European Unmanned Maritime Systems (SARUMS) and Non-governmental Organizations (including IMarEst and IAIN), Commercial Organizations and Academic Institutions.

The MASRWG will be endeavouring to address the inclusion of autonomous vessels in the regulatory framework on the basis of ‘equivalence’ and, in addition, supports to development of a set of ‘goal-based’ classification rules for vessel construction and outfit.
He observed that his group faces some significant challenges, including the harmonization of definitions, international consensus, legal precedents and the education of the mariner community and emphasised that safety would be the paramount driver in their activities.

In drawing his presentation to a close, James re-iterated the international dimension to the regulation of MAS which will, in part, be reflected by liaison work between his group and bodies such as the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International and SARUMS.

He concluded by announcing the Second International Conference on MAS to be held at the UK National Oceanography Centre, Southampton on 16 and 17 November 2016 and the aspiration to present a possible paper to the IMO at MSC 98 in May 2017. He closed by stating that he looks forward to collaborating closely with the IMO Member States, IGOs and NGOs. Judging by the number of questions from the floor, his presentation engendered considerable interest amongst those who attended.