
President's column

This President's Column comes to you from just after the 2017 election while we wait for MMP to deliver our next government. It has certainly been an interesting month or so, with some very dynamic changes in fortune for various political parties and ideas. Throughout this there has been a modest focus on science, but climate change and river water quality have certainly played a role in the conversation. As promised at our annual conference in June¹ the Association, in conjunction with the PSA, held a public forum where science spokespeople for most of the political parties gave a brief statement on their policies and then responded to questions from the audience. Issues like expectations around allowing greater access to scientific views, open data, climate and support for early-career science were all touched on. It was too brief to drill down as to what the future will hold for science. Time will tell.

As I've noted in earlier columns, I think there is a real need to put science more squarely in the political frame. In order to secure things like more science funding and better perspectives on science careers, science has to make the benefits clear, and there is no better way than to do this directly. The Speaker's Science Forum at Parliament, supported by the Royal Society Te Apārangi, is a pathway for presenting science ideas. Worthy as it is, the sector needs something disruptive, to use the parlance of innovation-speak. Imagine a day-long session where we get a diverse range of scientists into Parliament – to be coached in how the political process works and, in exchange, to give politicians free access to some of the brightest minds in the land. It can't fail. It is, of course, an idea stolen from the Australians², but think of it as fair exchange for Phar Lap/Pavlova/Crowded House. At the other end of the spectrum, when it comes to injecting science into society, I must point to the Unlocking Curious Minds initiative driven by the present ministry funding science. This seeks to expose young New Zealanders and their families to science ideas and concepts, and surely sets the scene for a society better grounded in scientific ideas.

One of the annual science funding milestones recently was passed – the announcement of MBIE Endeavour results. Behind the stories of great science ideas given a lease of life, lies a dreadful story of wasted effort with little meaningful feedback.

With a success rate of around 17% (although complicated because there is a split between economic and environmental outcomes), it is absolutely vital for a transparent and accountable system that seeks to minimise wasted productivity, that there be clear feedback on proposals. In future initiatives the Association will continue to promote better systems for decision-making around funding.

A number of previous columns have dedicated space to the issue of speaking out³ and the role of university academics being the critic and conscience for society⁴. A new award, the Critic and Conscience Award, supported by the Gamma Foundation and administered by Universities New Zealand, has been instigated in recognition of this key role for society. The inaugural award was made to Dr Mike Joy, a freshwater scientist based at Massey University.

The Association was proud to support a public talk on Suffrage Day (18 September) exploring how we can reach equity for all scientists. I had the pleasure of introducing Dr Zuleyka Zevallos, an applied sociologist and an Adjunct Research Fellow with Swinburne University. She developed and managed Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE), an initiative of the Australian Academy of Science. This was based on the Athena SWAN Charter, an evaluation and accreditation programme that has been running successfully for over a decade in the UK⁵. Dr Zevallos reflected on national approaches to improving the hiring, promotion, retention, recognition, and participation of all women, specifically including Indigenous and transgender women, as well as other under-represented minorities in science. Panellists Joanna Kidman, Izzy O'Neil, Di Tracey, and Richard Blaikie gave a local perspective on the ideas, and NZAS past-President Nicola Gaston closed the evening. The audience got a sense of what has been achieved and what goals remain. In the applied sciences one often talks of enabling activity through development of a social licence to operate. This applies equally to science itself and, if science wishes to build a stronger foundation for our society, it needs to reflect that society.

Craig Stevens
President

¹ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/science/26-06-2017/ziggy-stardust-and-the-scientists-from-new-zealand/>

² <https://scienceandtechnologyaustralia.org.au/event/science-meets-parliament-2017/>

³ *New Zealand Science Review* 2015, vol. 72(1), p. 2. President's Column http://scientists.org.nz/files/journal/2015-72/NZSR_72_1.pdf

⁴ Education Act 1989: 162, 4(a)(v). <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/whole.html>

⁵ *Nature* (September 2017) vol. 549(7671): p. 143–144, doi:10.1038/549143a