President's column

We're now a few months post our Annual Conference. It was a pleasure to mark the Association's 75th year with a bit of a bang. The Minister responsible for Science and Innovation, Hon Steven Joyce, opened with a welcome and some news about the evolution of the implementation of the National Statement of Science Investment. Then we got into the talks. It's hard to go past chronological order as a useful structure, so the day started with some views on the birth and growing pains of science in New Zealand (not that long ago). The NZAS came on the scene about half-way through this timeline, and the challenges science and the Association have faced over the last three-quarters of a century mirrored the big events of that period. Funding of course was, and remains, the apparently dominant theme. But wider issues spanned political ideology, war-rationing, salaries, career structure, policy drivers, identity, demographics, and open science. Arriving at the present day, contemporary versions of these issues were explored with some spirited challenging of the status quo. We then threw the gear-stick into full-forward, to see where we are going. Interestingly, this saw us immersed in how school-aged proto-thinkers connect with science. This underpinned our finishing note where a discussion panel of early-career scientists talked through, with the audience, the needs of the lead scientists of tomorrow.

One of the many positive side-effects of the conference for me was that, in order to construct the President's Address, I immersed myself in the history of the NZAS and NZ Science over the last 75 years. This was made possible by looking through back-issues of this journal, the NZSR, as well as Geoff Gregory's fabulous four-part history of the NZAS. It was a great pleasure to be able to acknowledge Geoff on the day. This also made me aware of writing for an audience from a different era and how they might look back at contemporary developments. Having the science system turned on its ear once again might well appear as a minor blip 75 years hence – or it might be a tipping point in one direction or another.

Only a few days previous to my writing this column, the UK voted to leave the European Union, seeking to end a decades-long, at times fractious, merger of values, histories and systems. This is against a background of a fractious Australian election and the interminable but unmissable US electoral process. A number of themes have emerged in all these campaigns – 'the truth' in all its variations, generational differences, and the voice of the disenfranchised. There are resonating aspects of all three of these in the international, and New Zealand, science communities.

One of the casualties of all these political campaigns appears to have been the truth. So much so, that the phrase 'post-truth' is getting out and about rather a lot[1]. A politician can bypass reality by saying something outrageous. Or they can dismiss careful research with an anecdote. That this can become the norm is disturbing. I've finished more than one talk or radio interview about meeting the challenges facing society with science with (what I think of as) a flourish –'one thing is certain, approaching these challenges with increased ignorance is not a good idea'. But if George Orwell's clocks can strike 13[2] then perhaps increased ignorance is okay.

Science, and scientific values, are simple and complex at the same time. Shaun Hendy, a past President of the NZAS, has a book out at the moment[3] that is catching a bit of media attention around muzzling of scientists. As important as this is, to me the book does something more valuable (but related). It calls for an improved framework for communicating between the public and scientists. If we want to end 'post-truth', we need a society that questions things, that applies elements of the scientific process and that wants 'the truth', however complex that might be.

The demographics of the 'Brexit' Referendum in the UK showed a stark demarcation as a function of age[4]. Young adults have a very different outlook to their senior counterparts; they're the first generation of the internet era – they are different. Yet, with decision-making and wealth sitting with a sub-set of the older generation, it is a recipe for all the 'dis' words – dis-connected, disenfranchised, distrust, etc. This is something that simply can't be allowed to flow through into science. As a senior scientist, if one ever gets past thinking about 'the next proposal', it turns out that for the long haul, the intellect, energy and ideas of the next generation of scientists are the only thing propelling the system forward.

The 75th Anniversary Conference was held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa – a special venue – and the view from the balcony during the breaks was just another pinch on the cheek reminding you of the good things and that it is worth striving to make the good even better and for more of us. In the wake of the conference we made a note to ourselves to get organised for next year's conference a bit earlier. Which is easier said than done, seeing as we all have at least one day job. However, we have given ourselves a target to aim at, and the theme for the 2017 conference is 'Science beyond the Usual Suspects' – the science, scientists and science-informed things that happen outside the universities, CRIs and big research laboratories. The idea is that science and scientific values are a part of everyone's lives and experiences to greater or lesser degrees. So get in touch with me at president@scientists.org.nz if you have ideas or energy to contribute.

Craig Stevens
President

1. Keyes, R. 2004. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*. Macmillan.
2. Orwell, G. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100021.txt
3. Hendy, S. 2016. *Silencing Science*. BWB Texts, http://bwb.co.nz/books/silencing-science
4. http://www.politico.eu/article/graphics-how-the-uk-voted-eu-referendum-brexit-demographics-age-education-party-london-final-results/