# President's column

This is my first President's column, having taken over the role from Nicola Gaston in mid-October of 2015. Science in New Zealand owes Nicola a large vote of thanks for her work over the past two years. She, with the support of the Council, has extended the Association's position as the conscience of science for the nation.

In the best tradition of 'efficiency', I looked back at what Nicola wrote in her first column two years ago[1] to see if I could steal some ideas. It turns out I can almost cut and paste. It seems the challenges for science in New Zealand evolve slowly – she highlighted issues like the evolution of Industrial Research Ltd (IRL) into Callaghan Innovation, the poor state of 'the postdoc' in this country, the difficulties in the nascent National Science Challenges, diversity in science, and funding transparency. All of these issues remain central to thinking around New Zealand science.

I headed south to Antarctica almost immediately after taking on the role of President. I can recommend sitting in a container on sea ice well away from the internet and very close to sampling gear to get one's mind focused on science. I did eventually return to New Zealand to start pulling my weight in terms of NZAS duties. The first was being the front-person for the NZAS awards night in mid-November. I'll admit to having initial reservations around timing and media saturation as they are held only a week after the science awards of the Royal Society of New Zealand and the Prime Minister. But, as Shaun Hendy noted to me, the capacity of the public, the media, and our members to celebrate science and scientists is definitely not saturated.

The night was a great success, with a full house, all the winners present (and giving short talks on their work), and some good media attention in the wake of the awards. Probably the majority of this attention went to the winners of the 2015 Communicator Medal, presented jointly to Chris Battershill and David Schiel of Waikato and Canterbury Universities, respectively. It recognised their efforts in communicating the science behind the wreck of the MV *Rena* and the subsequent oil spill and clean-up. Their work is a fantastic example of how to meet the rising expectations around scientists being prepared and able to communicate what they know, about both their own research and also issues of the day. It also fostered an entire cohort of students who cut their scientific teeth on a topic at the forefront of national relevance. This connects to the debate about the rights and roles of scientists when it comes to speaking publicly about scientific issues. This is something that is not yet resolved in the New Zealand space and the Association continues to play a significant part in the debate.

Interestingly, the remaining awards went to physicists, or at least in one case, the interface between physics and chemistry. Recall that the awards are chosen independently of the President and each other. Stephane Coen from the Physics Department at the University of Auckland was awarded the Research Medal for early-career success and gave an energising talk on solitons. The other two medal awardees, Ian Brown and Mike Andrews, spent substantial parts of their long careers at Industrial Research Limited (IRL), its predecessors, or its present incarnation, Callaghan Innovation. The many aspects of their respective research careers show a strong connection between basic science, applied science, and commercial realisation. Nicola noted in her inaugural column some of the difficulties and uncertainties around the formation of the new Callaghan Innovation. Despite the intervening two years, in many ways crunch time is approaching for the research groups that were part of IRL, as the bridging funding enters its last few months. We've seen upheaval over the last year with substantial loss of science capability at both AgResearch and Landcare Research. It is important that, for a nation looking to diversify our economic basis beyond primary production, the true implications of further losses are fully understood.

Mike Andrews, the 2015 Marsden Medal winner, looking back at his career, finished on a key point. In our system you have to be flexible and agile to succeed. Certainly, as demonstrated by Mike, this is the basis for one recipe for success in the New Zealand system. But does it get the nation *all* the research it needs? This need for agility is apparent to anyone considering the various deadlines for the new calendar year – the next Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment (MBIE) funding round. This coming round, with the National Statement of Science Investment (NSSI)[2] as a guide, sees MBIE move to freeing up the funding process so that there are no limitations on topic other than very broad strategy statements. While liberating as long as one can align with these strategies, this sets the science system up for a highly wasteful and demoralising process. We can only guess at success rates, but looking at the 2015 open Smart Ideas round, they are likely to be comparable to the Marsden Fund. Suggesting that this kind of success rate is okay because the initial application 'is only a 1-pager' is, to my mind, disrespectful of the ideas, time and experience needed to generate the ideas. The NZAS will closely observe this new structuring for one of the Nation's key funding instruments as it evolves.

The big news though, is that the Association is entering its 75th year. This is a milestone that truly is worth celebrating. Especially as it doesn't take much reading[3] to see that the issues we've struggled with in the near and distant past come around again, either in different form – or in exactly the same form. Looking forward can benefit from keeping an eye in the mirror. The *next* 75 years of the Association and Science in New Zealand will provide the thematic basis for our annual conference, with details to be announced soon. This event, our biggest for the year, follows from some excellent, and highly relevant, foci in recent years – speaking out, science and society, the value of science and the emerging scientist.

As well as thanking Nicola for her steerage over the last two years, I acknowledge the continued work of everyone on the Council, including out-going Councillors Paul Gandar, Noam Greenburg, Justin Hodgkiss, and Rhian Salmon and all the members who helped out with other roles. I look forward to a constructive and energising 75th year for the Association.

**Craig Stevens**
President

[1] Gaston, Nicola. 2014. President's column. *New Zealand Science Review 71(4)*: 54.

[2] National Statement of Science Investment http://www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/science-innovation/national-statement-science-investment

[3] Gregory, G. 2013. Not to be forgotten: New Zealand Association of Scientific Workers. *New Zealand Science Review 70(1)*: 10–19.