
President's report 2013/14 *

This is my first report as President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists. It has been an interesting and educational year to date; and I have appreciated the privilege I have in leading the Association with the assistance of all members of Council.

The New Zealand Association of Scientists is an Association that exists to advocate for science and scientists. This purpose has been reinforced to me through a number of events since I took on the job of President. Our goals are, if I summarise those given in the Rules of the Association, to promote the public discussion of science, to encourage the wide application of science, and to defend scientific fact, promote intellectual freedom, and encourage scientific excellence. We achieve these goals in a number of ways: through our conferences, such as the one we held in Auckland in April this year, to discuss issues pertinent to the Science in Society project being led by the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment. The NZAS Awards, which we presented last week to our 2014 winners, are another important activity. Publication of the *New Zealand Science Review* is a third, complementary strand of our activity, and in combination, these three efforts allow us to work towards goals of the Association.

There are two specific goals listed in our Rules to which I have given a lot of thought, recently:

- 4.7 To defend the right of society to access scientists' professional expertise.
- 4.8 To combat all tendencies to limit scientific investigation or to suppress scientific discoveries.

These are perhaps not the most straightforward part of the job. But the most important aspect of these goals that I can work towards, is to represent and support the voices of scientists who have concerns about these aspects of their job. The labelling of Dr Mike Joy as a traitor, a statement that was supported in a Herald editorial at the time, was an occasion upon which support was called for, regardless of the details of the scientific debate. The debate is part of the scientific process.

More recently, we surveyed scientists in New Zealand on their experiences with the National Science Challenges at the request of one of our members, with the aim of representing their views – this was in light of comments by the Minister that he had heard no criticism of the initiative. We have also engaged with the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment on the same matter: our response to their National Statement of Science Investment in October made use of the survey responses in commenting on the various pressures within the science system in New Zealand.

Most recently, we asked scientists what they think about the proposed development of a 'Code of Public Engagement', which is being considered by the Royal Society of New Zealand.

The proposed 'Code of Public Engagement' was little more than a footnote in a Ministry document summarising their Science in Society project, 'A Nation of Curious Minds'. However, that project was led by the Chief Science Adviser to the Prime Minister, Sir Peter Gluckman, and when asked, he made com-

ments to the effect that he was concerned by scientists saying things that they shouldn't be 'advocating'. His statements were generally interpreted in support of concerns that the proposed Code would aim to set boundaries on what scientists can and cannot say.

Therefore, we decided to ask scientists firstly, what they felt about the proposed Code, and secondly, what experience they had talking about their science in public, in order to put their responses in some context.

Science works best when research projects do not presuppose a particular outcome. However, there's also enough research around about implicit bias that we should all understand that we do bring our particular preconceptions to any research project. However, if we view science as a collective enterprise, we can aspire to the advancement of scientific knowledge being carried out by people who bring to it a diverse range of viewpoints, and a diversity of skills. Over time, we can hope that our biases are evened out, based on a scientific culture of self-correction and honest criticism. The work that we do – especially the science which is most useful for policy development, in health, environmental and hazards research, for example – is clearly susceptible to biases and political pressures. A culture in which scientists are able to speak freely – in which scientific debate in the media can be dealt with in a mature fashion, and that deals with uncertainty well – is an important counterweight to those pressures.

I make no claims about the representativeness of what was a simple poll. The examples of scientist's concerns that we have published on our website have been selective, firstly because we don't want to inadvertently identify any of the respondents, and we want to highlight the issues that scientists have in common, rather than latching on to the most extreme examples. But we know that a significant number of scientists cared enough to respond to the poll, and that their experiences and concerns are, to a large extent, consistent. It is worth recognising that many concerns are shared by scientists in universities and Crown research institutes; this indicates, perhaps, the extent to which the problem is a cultural one.

Perhaps the fundamental solution to this problem would be for there to be public appreciation of the complex relationship between science and policy, and encouragement for scientists to speak out, even if that means that they sometimes get it wrong. Good science depends on scientists being willing to test hypotheses that will sometimes be wrong; good science communication includes the possibility that scientists sometimes say things that are wrong. It is more important to have honest and open discussion, than to always be right - at least in an ideal world. However, we can also be mature enough to recognise that sometimes not all kinds of right and wrong are equally valuable. A false negative in a medical test, which results in a lack of treatment is far worse than a false positive that would be picked up in subsequent rounds of testing. But that does rely on the presence of additional levels of testing, which is the context – and for us, the context is our culture of science communication and the extent to which we are open about issues of ethics, rather than relying on simple, static rules about what can be said.

*Presented at the New Zealand Association of Scientists' 73rd Annual General Meeting held on Wednesday 19 November 2014 at the Thistle Inn, Thorndon, Wellington.

Membership

Our membership is stable, but I have not forgotten the challenge I was presented with at the last AGM by the outgoing President. I am encouraged by the members who have very recently joined, either apparently, or in some cases explicitly, in response to our activities in representing the views of scientists. I also appreciate the comments that were made in our two surveys on the value of the Association, both by members and by non-members.

Awards and medals

We announced the medal winners [see *New Zealand Science Review* 2014, 71(3): 79–80] on 12 November 2014 at a function held at the Royal Society of New Zealand in Thorndon, and attended by the Minister for Science and Innovation, Hon. Steven Joyce.

It went very well, and I would like to personally thank all those who made the effort to attend and celebrate with us.

In addition to our annual medals, however, we have a particularly pleasurable task in store for the AGM tonight.

It was agreed at the last meeting of Council that we wished to acknowledge two of our most long-serving members through nominating them for the award of Honorary Membership at this AGM.

Our rules state:

Any person who has given the Association specially meritorious service may be nominated by Council for election as an Honorary Member at any annual or special general meeting; provided always that the number of such Honorary Members elected in any one calendar year shall not exceed two. Honorary Members shall be entitled to all privileges of Full Members.

Janet Bradford-Grieve (aka Grieve) was a Council member for many years ending 2010.

She was President 1998/99 and 1999/2000, and Treasurer from 2006 to 2009, and introduced electronic accounting to the Association's financial system.

She was an active contributor to the Association's public position papers and, for a period, organised the NZAS Awards ceremony. Janet was the annual conference co-convenor of several conferences: on Rabbit control, RCD: Dilemmas & implications (1998); Resetting Science & Innovation for the next 20 years (2010). She is also the current distributor of *New Zealand Science Review*.



David Penny's involvement with the NZAS arose out of turbulent times for New Zealand science, as he responded to the dismissal by Treasury Director Roger Kerr, in 1985, of the recommendations that were to be published in the Beattie Report in 1986. David published two key papers in *New Zealand Science Review*, on New Zealand science policy in terms of international sector comparisons and outputs, and on the expected economic benefits of Government involvement in R&D. The fundamental importance of these papers is with us still.



David was President of the Association in 1989/90 and 1990/91, and contributed to the original comprehensive NZAS Survey of Scientists.

Council Membership and Affiliates

I would like to thank and acknowledge the following members of Council who have served during 2013/14:

Neil Curtis, our Patron
Shaun Hendy, Immediate Past President
James Renwick, Chair of the Communications Subcommittee
Hamish Campbell, Chair of the New Zealand Science Review Subcommittee
Paul Gandar, Treasurer and Membership Secretary
Fiona McDonald, Executive Secretary
John Clare, Minutes Secretary
Allen Petrey, Editor of the *New Zealand Science Review*
Justin Hodgkiss, web manager
Peter Buchanan, Chair of the Awards Subcommittee
Desmond Darby
Mike Berridge
Tim Kemmitt
Chris Bumby
Joanne O'Callaghan
Natalie Plank, who has joined us this year as a new member of Council.

Thank you all for your advice, support, and hard work over the year.

Nicola Gaston
President
19 November 2014