
President's column

I start the year as the new President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists with both trepidation, and anticipation – natural enough responses to a time of change. I have enjoyed my past two years on Council, in particular the opportunity to organise the 2013 Conference in Wellington. I appreciate the time and effort that all members of Council put into the Association, whether into *Science Review*, into the annual conference, or into the business of keeping us connected with, and in a position to articulate the views of, our members. These may all be small activities, but they add up to something which I believe is more than the sum of its parts, and which provides real value for scientists in New Zealand.

I must express my profound appreciation, and that of Council, to the outgoing President, Professor Shaun Hendy. In his two years as President, he has witnessed many changes in the scientific landscape in New Zealand, and he has managed to represent the NZAS by providing a rational and balanced viewpoint to the media and to the public on a wide range of issues affecting science in New Zealand. This is no trivial accomplishment.

Only a year ago, Industrial Research Limited was still a Crown research institute, employing 300-odd scientists out in the Hutt Valley. Perhaps it is not surprising that a place that was referred to as the former DSIR more often than by the name it had worn for 20 years should disappear from our scientific landscape almost wholly unremarked: it is, however, an indictment on our national sense of scientific history.

Callaghan Innovation, the Crown Agency that has filled the geographic space of IRL, if not its purpose in carrying out scientific research, attracted considerable attention in its first few months: little has been heard of it since. I am left wondering what role the NZAS has to play in commenting on an organisation which seems now wholly divorced from the world of scientific research: yet we have members who are finding their way in this new organisation, and we need to speak for them where necessary, too.

The two most successful science teams at IRL, the Carbohydrate Chemistry team led by Richard Furneaux, and the Superconductivity team led by Jeff Tallon and Bob Buckley, have been transferred to Victoria University of Wellington, becoming respectively known as the Ferrier and Robinson Research Institutes. While this change is administrative, rather than geographic, it preserves the crucial ability of the 55 scientists in those teams to apply for contestable research funding. It does not make them any guarantees of employment past the three years of current funding, nor is there any apparent mechanism to ensure that the capability in those teams, built up over many years, is maintained.

The lack of a strategy behind current changes in the science system seems of most concern with respect to the National Science Challenges. The ten challenges were announced in May last year, and proposals have been submitted for the first three challenges, and requested for the remaining seven. Peer review is certainly no perfect guarantee of quality, but as a scientist

it is hard not to be discomfited by a funding system in which the priorities are set by a handpicked panel, and proposals are developed by a steering group of selected experts.

It is always of concern when funding is anything less than transparent; this is especially true when moving to a decentralised funding system. As scientists, we rather like to think that we are more objective than average, and this might justify some trust in our systems of allocating funding. Unfortunately, reading around the issues that remain with gender parity in science has led me to a number of interesting studies of unconscious bias. One of the articles that caused me the most profound disquiet demonstrated a significant correlation between a person's self-assessment of their own objectivity, and their reliance on stereotype when assessing a CV, resulting in significantly higher demonstrated bias.

Another unresolved – and related – issue is the status of post-doctoral fellows in New Zealand. The days of the FRST NZS&T postdoctoral fellows have now well and truly passed, and it is not clear what has replaced them. There are still postdocs in New Zealand, but do they have the same ability to seek out and define a scientific problem of their own, or are they restricted to working in the more established research groups? I have always seen some irony in the fact that the increased popularity of the term 'innovation' in New Zealand has coincided with the loss of the most innovative scientists that we could potentially support – those who take their expertise, developed through their PhD training, and move into other areas of research, to apply their skills for short periods to a new problem. Postdocs are the risk takers of the science system, who try ambitious things and are prepared to fail quickly.

Raising issues such as these, on behalf of our members, is one of the key purposes of the NZAS. I am very keen to hear feedback: Which of these issues matters to you? What are we missing? Which of the current suite of changes in the science system is working well? It is an election year, and we can speak out – but we need to hear from you about what matters.

I would rather like the pessimism of my assessment of the National Science Challenges to be unmerited: I am reassured by the number of excellent scientists who are involved in the process, though the cost to us all in their time is not insignificant. I am also highly appreciative of Sir Peter Gluckman's announcement of the Science and Society Challenge, the 11th National Science Challenge: the goals of this seem entirely laudable, though once again the process through which this is being put is far from transparent. Our annual conference, to be held this year on 5 April in Auckland, will focus on this topic, and is being chaired by the inimitable Dr Siouxsie Wiles. As a celebration of science in New Zealand, the conference will be concluded by the presentation of our annual awards, the details of which can be found on our website (and in this issue).

I hope to see many of you there.

Nicola Gaston
President