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## President's column

It's election year, and as I write this, the general election is only two months away. While there is much happening politically, one area seems strangely quiet. For the past few months, NZAS has been canvassing the political parties to learn about their science policies, with the goal of placing science policy documents on the NZAS website for members' information, comment and discussion. Almost none of the main political parties has had anything to say. The one exception is the Green Party, who came back to us with a detailed policy statement. The best any of the other parties has managed is a 'watch this space' or a 'here's what we said last time' message. This does not fill me with confidence that the idea of a knowledge economy, or investment in science and technology for economic growth, is really taken seriously at a political level in New Zealand. At least the Greens seem to be gaining in the polls! The upcoming NZ Institute of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences Political Forum at Te Papa (4 October) is very welcome and may provide some insights, or at least some information.

Science funding has been in the spotlight again lately, around funding for postdoctoral positions in New Zealand and the scrapping of the FRST postdoctoral scheme in favour of the Rutherford Discovery Fellowships, which are aimed more at mid-career scientists. Melanie Massaro from Canterbury University garnered a huge amount of support in a short time (well over 500 signatories) for an open letter to the Royal Society and the Minister pointing out the dearth of opportunities in New Zealand for young post-PhD researchers.<sup>1</sup> The letter generated a very quick response, with the Ministry of Science and Invention announcing that a planned review of the Rutherford Discovery scheme was being brought forward (time frame yet to be announced). The Rutherford scheme itself is great, and the now-defunct FRST postdoctoral scheme was extremely valuable, too. It would be nice to see funding go into both stages of the science career structure, rather than have the usual situation of one or the other.

Things do not seem especially brighter in Australia. A recent report from the University of Melbourne<sup>2</sup> shows that more than one-third of younger scientists in Australia are planning to leave science in the next few years. The main reasons given were 'poor job security, a lack of research funding, low pay and endless red tape'. Most of the 5500+ polled were passionate and excited about the scientific research they were doing, but worn down and disappointed by 'the system'. Sounds familiar, and strongly echoes research done in New Zealand over the past few years by Lesley Hunt at Lincoln University. She found<sup>3</sup> that while many Crown research institute (CRI) scientists felt a real commitment to their science, they felt very little commitment to their CRI and were 'doing science despite the system'.

All of this seems to me a symptom of changing times, and the huge economic imperatives on many aspects of society, imperatives that are much stronger than they were a generation ago. Science is a strange beast, capable of generating immense economic gains and improvements in the lot of humanity (indeed, *all* of modern society rests on the science and technology of the past century and more), yet science is a pursuit that cannot easily be measured in economic terms and that withers under a system of rational economic accountability and justification. Which is not to say that the science community should be granted unlimited funds from a grateful public to do whatever we please. Rather, a light hand in science management and genuine breathing space for serendipity to work its magic will bring more benefit to New Zealand than another round of science advisory boards and yet more funding structures with a short-term focus.

Now on to the good news! The modernised NZAS website ([www.scientists.org.nz](http://www.scientists.org.nz)) is going from strength to strength. It has a great facility for discussion and news, commentary and general bloggy interaction. Have a look, if you haven't already, and post something – your latest work, reflections, questions, commentary, and responses to others. We hope that the website will prove useful for discussion around the general election and science policy – if only we had something to discuss (see above).

The NZAS annual awards ceremony is coming up fast. This year's event will be held on Thursday 10 November at Turnbull House in Wellington, and will see the presentation of the Marsden, Shorland, and Research Medals, and the Science Communicator Award. NZAS is having to think hard about the role and future of the Awards, in the changing science landscape – your thoughts on this topic are welcome, via the website or by e-mail. Following the Awards night, the Association AGM will be held on Wednesday 23 November, at the Thistle Inn in Wellington. Come along to the meeting, and have a drink or a meal while you're there.

**James Renwick**  
President, NZAS

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.scientists.org.nz/news/2011/09/disappearing-post-docs>

<sup>2</sup> <http://theconversation.edu.au/talkin-bout-my-generation-young-academics-on-why-so-many-eye-uni-exit-3476>

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, Lesley 2009. Doing science in a culture of accountability: Compliance through resistance to alienation and estrangement. *Kouitui, New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 4(1): 25–40.