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## President's column

Looking back on my NZAS notes I find that the last time that I wrote one of these columns was in September last year. The past 10 months have brought with them enormous changes across the globe. In New Zealand we have a new Government, the global recession has struck, the first budget – a recession budget – of the National Government has been delivered, Prof Peter Gluckman has been appointed as New Zealand's first Chief Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister, an employment dispute left many hiding behind their coats not willing to find their voice – while others may have found too much voice. The banks are still making enormous profits while small businesses fall over and families lose their homes and the Government has decided that tertiary education, adult literacy and community education are unimportant compared with a several million dollar referendum and a tourism campaign.

For a science organisation it is perhaps easy to think of only those aspects of the above that impinge immediately and directly on science. For example, considering the budget, many of us may have heaved a sigh of relief that it was not as bad for science as it might well have been, given that it was coming from a National Government for a start, traditionally not a science bedfellow, and it was a recession budget. A modest increase – of 2.5% to Vote Science – appears good news on the face of it, until you look at other countries who have announced funding increases in science of 25% or greater based on recognition of the role that science plays in sustaining and enhancing a nation's economic basis, and then you couple that with the huge cuts faced by education. Sadly, it does not seem that this Government believes that science is a lynchpin to sound economic growth.

Considering the education cuts further, one can be left in little doubt that science and society will suffer, because what underpins science more than education, whether that be in direct participation of science or an appreciation of science?

The disestablishment of our top PhD scholarships, the cutting of undergraduate scholarships, the reduction in funding for adult literacy, and the decimation of adult and community education funding are but a few examples. Let's consider adult literacy as a specific example. In the recent International Adult Literacy Survey, New Zealand had an average literacy level across the areas of prose, document and quantitative literacy below a level of 3.<sup>1</sup> This level is regarded as the minimum level required by individuals to meet the 'complex demands of everyday life and work' in the emerging 'knowledge society'. Moreover 1 in 5 New Zealanders have a level of 1.<sup>2</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup> Level 3: This level represents the ability to cope with a varied range of material found in daily life and at work. People at this level would not be able to use all printed material with a high level of proficiency, but they would demonstrate the ability to use longer, more complex printed material. Taken from [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/assessment/adult\\_literacy\\_in\\_new\\_zealand\\_results\\_from\\_the\\_international\\_adult\\_literacy\\_survey](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/assessment/adult_literacy_in_new_zealand_results_from_the_international_adult_literacy_survey)

<sup>2</sup> Level 1: People at this level have very poor skills, and could be expected to experience considerable difficulties in using many of the printed materials that may be encountered in daily life.

a truly shocking statistic, more so when it is considered that literacy levels track with education, employment and ethnicity. As such, the reality that a conscious decision was made by the Government to cut funding to adult literacy, signalling that this is not a priority in this country, is deplorable. It is such a small amount of money, amounting to almost nothing on the balance sheet, but an amount that has the potential to positively affect a large number of people and not just those people working in adult literacy or the adult learners, but also their associated social networks. It should be borne in mind that, according to documented knowledge, scoring a lower adult literacy level does not necessarily mean that a person is less able to contribute to society at a higher level, it just means that they have not managed to achieve their potential level of contribution.

At the other extreme we have the disestablishment of the top-achiever doctoral scholarships, coupled with the real dollar decline of university-negotiated budgets. I cannot see this as anything but short-sightedness. With funding for approximately 80 new scholars per year, on a rough estimate this equates to approximately 2% of our new PhD students each year across every discipline. Yet it equates to those that are the best. Yes, these students will probably pick up other scholarships – but will the offers they accept be here in New Zealand or will they be overseas? Also, what of those students who are just exceptionally good rather than the very best? They will now not get scholarships because they have been bumped off the other scholarships lists by the best students. What happens to them, and can New Zealand afford to lose them as well?

With these things in mind, can one really heave a sigh of relief and think: 'Phew, science did okay', after such a budget?

Putting the budget and the recession aside, there have, of course, been some positive moves by the new Government. The establishment of a Chief Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister – a recommendation that came out of the National Science Panel – is some small recognition that science should at least be considered. Time will tell if this position comes with real power, and one must put cynicism aside, when you realise the position does not come with a budget. However, it is a positive step, and small steps are often the crucial ones. Perhaps one day, when we have a paid Chief Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister, and a Cabinet Science Committee, and there is an underlying knowledge and acceptance that a strong New Zealand-based active science platform is what underpins a vibrant stable economy, as so many other countries have realised, we will look back at this small step and celebrate it as the start. And if it isn't the start we want, we will just have to work that much harder to ensure that we get what we believe is needed for New Zealand, setting in place a system that looks beyond today and is actually truly geared for achieving the best tomorrow.

Till next time

**Kate**  
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