

Listening to Our Conscience

Scientific independence is slipping away as a result of corporate self-promotion, commercial hype and a growing secretiveness, says Julian Cribb.

“If one wants two words to suggest the whole problem and keep it in one’s mind, I think one might choose Science and Con-science,” said Sir David Rivett, who was soon to found Australia’s CSIRO. The problem to which he was referring, in March 1947, was the loss of scientific freedom and “the threat, now much more than a mere threat, to that free trade in scientific knowledge of all kinds, which has been the glory of these last three hundred years that have seen the most rapid advance in human knowledge of Nature since man began his course”.

Many scientists in Britain, America and Australia shared deep misgivings that science, having been conscripted to the task of making war, would remain enchained to bureaucratic control, political manipulation, secrecy and commercial expediency instead of being free to fulfil its fundamental ideal of service to humanity.

Sixty years on, the ideal for which Rivett stuck out his neck – he was accused of being a communist sympathiser – and which laid the foundation of Australia’s post-war scientific independence is slipping away.

Rivett understood clearly that if Australia was to assemble the best scientific minds and nurture their best work, the essential guarantee was scientific freedom. Sir Henry Dale, President of the UK’s Royal Society, said in 1946: “I hold it to be our right and our duty to unite in telling the world insistently that if national policies fail to free science in peace from the secrecy it accepted as a necessity of war, they will poison its very spirit”.

How far Australia has fallen short of this ideal recently is a matter for each discipline to judge. However, as a science communicator – a practitioner of Rivett’s “free trade in scientific knowledge” – I am aware of a disturbing departure from the principles of honest and open science communication in favour of corporate self-promotion, commercial hype and a growing secretiveness about the real work.

This is now widespread in Australian science and engenders three ill-effects.

The first is public mistrust in science generally, and its institutions, which benefits neither the nation nor science. The second is that it substitutes institutional vainglory for the reporting of actual scientific findings. Thus, the achievements of Australian scientists are less known to the people, who in



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turn wonder why they should pay more for universities and science agencies when there are so few apparent benefits. The third is that much of our hard-won knowledge goes offshore before Australians are aware of it.

Of the \$11 billion invested in Australian science annually, taxpayers contribute more than 90%. The public account of what is done with it is insufficient, to put it mildly. Furthermore, by depriving Australians of an awareness of what their scientists achieve, we retard the progress of the nation and hinder early exploitation of our newest knowledge.

An eminent Australian, Richard Newton (Dean of Engineering, University of California, Berkeley), argues that what counts in research is its beneficial impact on the community, nation and world. That, he says, is best achieved if knowledge is freely and efficiently shared: “It’s about maximizing impact, not about dollars.” His Faculty measures its impact in jobs created, total market value and industry revenue.

How ironic that Australia should be pursuing so many policies that will limit the prospects for public good and wider commercial success. We need to re-absorb the lesson that the best and most productive science is the kind which is free to enquire where the greatest opportunities beckon, and in which the knowledge flows freely to all those who need it.

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