

**RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF SCIENTISTS  
AND RESEARCHERS**

**Federation of Australian Scientific and  
Technological Societies**

**Forum**

**Old Parliament House**

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***Senator the Hon Kim Carr  
Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and  
Research***

**[Check Against Delivery]**

Professor Ken Baldwin, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – thank you for the invitation to speak here today.

This forum has been organised in response to the Rudd Government's decision to develop charters of rights and responsibilities for public sector research agencies.

I appreciate this initiative by FASTS. It provides a timely opportunity to progress the public debate in an area of significant interest.

It's a topic of even greater public policy importance.

### ***Broad context***

I want to begin by setting this issue in its broader context.

As you may know, the Rudd Government is committed to a future for Australia based squarely on innovation. A high performing science and innovation system is essential to the goal of a prosperous, productive, sustainable society and to improved social wellbeing.

Internationally, increasing investment in science and technology is regarded as key to future growth and prosperity. Australia cannot afford to fall behind our competitors.

We also face serious challenges – climate change; and ageing workforce. We need to build on our research strengths and encourage research collaboration. If we can increase our national research capacity and capability, Australian research and researchers can provide much greater social, environmental and economic benefits for our community.

### ***Science and public policy***

For the national innovation system, Labor sees a central role for universities and public research agencies in building a nation that can meet the challenges of the future.

Our best and brightest have a critical part to play. We have a collective responsibility to ensure that their creativity is marshalled.

The previous Government took the view that public intellectuals, our universities and our public research agencies were not to be trusted. It was presumed in the culture wars that the intellectual elites were hostile to the Government's agenda and priorities.

Labor, on the other hand, sees creativity as essential to problem solving, which is at the heart of innovation. That

is why we have taken early steps in the policy areas of science, research and universities.

First, the Government's mission-based compacts with universities are important instruments that will enhance institutional autonomy, academic freedom, cultural change and structural reform within institutions. They will encourage diversity, collaboration and a concentration on research strengths.

The compacts mark a significant shift – a transition from a centralised model of management of the higher education system.

The compacts will be developed in tandem with Education Minister Julia Gillard.

Second, we have moved to return the Australian Research Council's independence and authority by establishing a high-level advisory council.

Third, the charters for public research agencies are a key element in our approach to restoring public confidence in our iconic research agencies.

The charters the Government is going to formulate, sitting down with the researchers as well as the agencies themselves, are essential to these goals.

These public research agencies do not, broadly speaking, draw upon a legacy of custom and practice, and policies, that support freedom of expression in universities. They lack the centuries of tradition, in terms of a role in public and intellectual debate.

### ***The Rudd Government approach***

Too often in recent years, we have seen the former Government stifle intellectual debate and suppress ideas. Instead of valuing the contributions of Australia's scientists and thinkers, the previous Government sought to silence them, or to discredit them.

The Rudd Government is committed to the opposite approach. We are committed to a broad-ranging plan for Australia's future based on innovation. We need to secure a culturally vibrant, prosperous and socially inclusive future for the nation – against the many serious challenges that we face.

In order to achieve this, we need the intellectual resources of our scientists and researchers. We value your knowledge and capacities very highly indeed.

We value what Australia's researchers can do. They advance knowledge *per se*, and their research also has

the potential to bring great benefit to our economy and society.

In other words – we are committed to basic research, and also to where basic research can lead.

Both fundamental and applied research fit squarely into the Government's agenda for innovation.

### ***Charters***

Our charters will be statements of rights and responsibilities. The charters will apply both to the individual scientists who work in these agencies, and also to the agencies themselves, as institutions.

We believe that there will be a lot of common ground to be covered for all the agencies – the kinds of general principles that would apply to any similar body, and similar group of scientists.

Of course, we will add to those general principles as appropriate for each agency. We will sit down with the agencies one by one, and find common agreement.

What will emerge in each case will be a formalised understanding of shared principles and values.

The charters will go beyond the existing statements of expectations that have been articulated regarding these agencies and the people who work in them.

They will embody the fundamental principles on which statements of expectations will be based.

### ***Six principles***

The charters will be formulated based on six principles. In summary these are:

- Encouragement of debate on scientific and other research issues that are of public interest;
- Independence and integrity of public research institutions in their research activities;
- Government – accountable to Parliament and the people - remains responsible for policy formulation and implementation;
- Open communication, dissemination of information and debate on the findings of research;
- Recognition of the role for researchers in such communication and debate; and
- The contestability of ideas.

## ***Intellectual freedom***

One of the most important principles set out in the charters will be a guarantee of intellectual freedom.

Crucial to the contribution of our researchers to innovation is their right to speak publicly about the findings and implications of their research. With this right go responsibilities, which I will come to presently.

But first the rights: on scientific matters, frank and open discussion is essential. Unless scientists can speak in their areas of expertise, the progress of human knowledge will be impeded and stifled. And the fruitful, humane and rational use of that knowledge will be limited.

## ***Intellectual freedom undermined***

Over the last decade in Australia we have seen attempts to stifle scientists who have dared to speak out about alternative fuels, about carbon capture technology, about climate change and the environment.

These many examples, which I won't go into today, illustrate the urgent need to clarify and codify the proper and responsible role of scientists and researchers in public life.

## ***Responsibilities***

As I have said, this role involves not just rights, but responsibilities.

The Government hopes to reach agreement with CSIRO and the other agencies – AIMS, ANSTO and the Indigenous research agency, AIATSIS – on a common understanding of their responsibilities. They are publicly-funded organisations with a duty to advance the public good.

Parallel responsibilities apply to individual scientists and researchers, on the one hand, and the agencies they work for, on the other.

Individuals will be expected to conduct their research according to applicable ethical standards; and to act with awareness that they are entrusted with the task of the honest and fearless pursuit of truth and knowledge.

Government, for its part, has corresponding responsibilities – it must agree not to interfere improperly in the business of science or in the scholarly process. It must uphold the intellectual rights of individual researchers.

### ***Informing public debate***

Experts including scientists are essential to informed public debate.

I, like hundreds of thousands of Australians, listen to ABC Radio National in the morning, I am grateful to Professor So-and-so and Dr Such-and-such for providing us with access to their expert knowledge. It is of great assistance for us in understanding difficult topics – for example, the potential of stem cell research; or the problems associated with carbon capture and storage; or the interface with our region.

If members of the public – including politicians – are well informed, it makes for better public policy.

### ***Boundaries to freedom to speak as experts***

Of course, it is governments that govern. Scientists and scholars generate ideas and theories. It is Ministers, however, who are responsible to Parliament and the people for public policy.

All of us, whatever walk of life we come from, have ideas about public policy, but generally we have those opinions as ordinary citizens, and not as experts. Everyone is free to say what they like. But we should all make it clear if we

are speaking in our expert capacity, or whether in our personal capacity, or indeed on behalf of an organisation.

We are looking to researchers to provide expert advice, in their fields. New ideas are often contestable. Peer review is important in public comment, just as it is in refereed journals. The right to speak out carries with it other responsibilities.

We are not afraid of new ideas: sometimes, though, these ideas can be wrong. We genuinely want to promote vigorous and open public debate. Because these ideas are contestable, scientists have the right to be wrong.

### ***It's not just about good communication***

Science communication is an important function, and science communicators are indeed highly skilled. Good communication about what you're doing can help immeasurably in getting the public to understand your work, and its relevance.

I want to make it clear, however, that I believe that the obligations of scientists go well beyond simply explaining clearly what they're up to. Scientists' responsibilities go to the society and the country in which they live, and which provides them with financial support.

The stereotypical bench scientist is a shy and retiring one. But researchers are like everyone else – they need to engage actively with the broad community the government encourages scientists to be good citizens.

But there is more. Scientists and researchers have legitimate – I would say essential – roles as public intellectuals. They have a responsibility to contribute to public debate within their fields. They should be professional in approach, and creditable in their reputation.

The division of labour might mean that they are the ones who are best placed to generate theories and test them out in the lab. But they can't do this in splendid isolation. They can't do it without reference to what is going on elsewhere in society.

Science is vitally placed to contribute to the world – both in terms of theories and also in terms of practical outcomes.

This is the culture of engagement that the Rudd Government is seeking to develop among researchers and scientists, and in research agencies and universities.

### ***Three-way balance***

So, as you can see, essentially we are putting forward a plan for a three-way agreement that will involve

Government, the public research agencies and the individual scientists and other researchers who work in those agencies.

We see everyone's rights and responsibilities balanced by those of the other parties. Rights and responsibilities are reciprocal.

That means we as a Government will uphold the rights of public-sector researchers, and will also expect things of them. They, in turn, can expect that the Government will support them in the pursuit of knowledge.

At the same time, the Government will expect the public research agencies to provide a nurturing environment for science and scientists. As well, they need to be aware of their responsibilities to the public good.

### ***Universities***

As far as the university sector goes, the Government has provided a guarantee that it will respect institutional autonomy. We will not be sitting beside the Vice-Chancellor at her desk, nor standing behind the bench scientist in his lab coat.

We value and will promote basic research, and are strongly committed to the principle of peer review.

The Rudd Government hopes to achieve in universities a plan of structural reform. We want to engender cultural change that will underpin our national agenda for innovation.

We will enhance the international competitiveness of our higher education sector. At the same time we will guarantee institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

### ***Central to innovation***

The Government regards this process, and its outcomes, as basic to our agenda for innovation. We want to build a prosperous, secure and socially inclusive future for Australia.

We won't be successful in that endeavour unless, in the generation of knowledge, we get the basics right.

We want scientists and the public research agencies to play a full role. This means that they must be unimpeded by political interference, wherever that might spring from – directly from Government, or indirectly, via pressures or sanctions applied by managers, lobbyists or the media.

## ***Conclusion: Review of the National Innovation System***

Finally, I want to mention the Government's Review of the National Innovation System.

The role and functions of public research agencies, and of researchers in universities and elsewhere, will be examined as part of that major review process.

The Rudd Government is serious about its innovation agenda and ambitious about its scope. We want to enable and encourage our scientists and researchers, wherever they may be, to lend their invaluable knowledge and abilities to our great nation.

We want you to join us in building the great Australia of the future.