

The Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) is the peak representative body for 60,000 Australian scientists and technologists.

(1) Senator Kim Carr, *Liberating the Voices of Science*, Opinion piece, *The Australian*, HES, Wednesday January 16, 2008, p. 23.

Liberating the voices of science

Kim Carr | January 16, 2008

AUSTRALIANS look to our scientists and researchers to contribute to our economic, social and environmental wellbeing and to expand our horizons of knowledge. This inevitably involves controversial interpretations. It is through the contest of ideas that we expand our understanding.

The Labor Government looks to scientific debate as an essential means of resolving difference of opinion about our options as a society. Australia faces a growing number of social, economic and environmental issues marked by their intractability and the need for long-term, collaborative action to address them. The reality of climate change, environmental degradation, the need to boost productivity, address skill shortages and the impact of globalisation are just a few of the more important issues.

Governments are elected with the responsibility to govern: to develop and implement policies and programs that address the challenges we face. This means governments must continually make choices between competing policy options.

The Rudd Government looks to its science and research agencies to provide cutting-edge scientific research from which policy can be formulated. The Government recognises that it carries the responsibility for such policy formulation and is accountable to parliament and the people.

In this context, it is essential to communicate new ideas and to infuse public debate with the best research and new knowledge.

Public debate must be as well informed as possible and those who have expertise in the areas under debate must be able to contribute. This means that researchers working in our universities and public research agencies must be - and must be allowed to be - active participants in such debates.

We need to reinvigorate the concept of the public intellectual. We need to ensure that public communication is as important as professional discourse.

Public concern and questioning from the Labor Party at Senate Estimates hearings about the gagging of its scientists led the CSIRO in 2006 to review its then-restrictive policy on public comment by CSIRO staff.

The resulting revised policy restored some fundamental principles: CSIRO scientists "are encouraged to communicate the outcomes and implications of their scientific research and, where relevant, policy options and scenarios stemming from their scientific findings."

And again: "In a world of rapidly evolving public debate and discourse, a national research agency such as CSIRO should discharge its public role by being readily and rapidly available to provide information on the most up-to-date science and technology and its implications for the nation."

I support and commend this policy position, and believe we can do better.

It is not good enough to allow scientists and other researchers to comment on matters of public interest but then to quarantine them from contentious issues. As is often the case, it is in matters of contention and sharp debate that their knowledge and expertise is most valuable. Their right to speak out and to represent their research or discoveries must be protected.

The Rudd Government has done away with the contractual constraints on the right of NGOs to criticise government policy without fear that they will lose public funding. In a parallel context, the same must hold true for our public sector researchers.

Our public research agencies, by and large, lack any formal recognition of the rights of their research staff to legitimate freedom of expression.

In the absence of codification of those rights, is it any wonder that in recent years accusations of political interference by the former Howard government have involved organisations as disparate as the Australian Research Council, the CSIRO and the National Museum of Australia?

The Rudd Government is committed to creating a charter (akin to that of the ABC) for public research agencies, including the CSIRO, the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation.

These charters will identify and guarantee the responsibilities and obligations of each organisation. They will enshrine not only the right, but the obligation, of scientists and other researchers to participate in public research debates.

As an initial step, I will be consulting with public research agencies on developing a policy addressing these issues.

The principles guiding such a policy will include:

- Encouragement of debate on scientific and other research issues of public interest.
- Support for the independence and integrity of public research agencies.
- Recognition that the Government remains responsible for the articulation, formulation and implementation of government policy.
- Support for the open communication, dissemination of information and debate about the results of scientific, technical and social research.
- Recognition that researchers are encouraged to engage in such communication and debate.

The Rudd Government's commitment to the independence of all researchers as they share knowledge and participate in public debate is not an isolated commitment.

The Government also has taken decisive action to restore the independence of the Australian Research Council.

The creation of an independent advisory council for the ARC has been well received by the research sector, and I have further guaranteed the independence and integrity of the ARC through measures for greater transparency in decision-making and through my commitment to provide a public explanation should any grants be rejected.

These actions, both taken and proposed, reflect the principles of freedom of expression and the right of scientists and any other researchers to participate in public debate.

Senator Kim Carr is the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.