

President's Column

JAK KELLY

Why are we here?

Aside from this thought occurring to those of mature years when we go down to the garage and forget on the way what we came for, it is a serious question that all organizations must confront from time to time. On several occasions in the long and illustrious history of our Royal Society there have been those who could not find an answer and suggested that we should just fade away.

We were for a considerable time *the* scientific society in Australia. This has changed over the 184 years of our existence, partially due to our ideas and efforts. Our suggestion, and follow up efforts, that there should be a university in Sydney, for example, seems to have turned out well. Scientific specialities such as chemistry, physics and the rest have formed their own societies with their own meetings and publications, so what is left for us to do? We should remember that we were originally a meeting place for those interested in the rational investigation of nature, both for its intrinsic interest and, importantly for a struggling isolated colony, to discover new resources that could economically support the country. The discovery of gold and coal are two continuing contributions that our members have made.

OK that was yesterday but what have we done today? We have always acted to show sci-

ence as one of humanities most interesting and effective activities and this is still our central role today. At a time when there has rarely been a greater need to defend it from ideological attack and the public fear that this propaganda engenders. Fundamentalists of various religious persuasions are reviving heresy trials which can have you executed or merely sacked, depending on which country you are in. American states are trying to remove evolution from schools. Fear campaigns of the dangers of nanotechnology or stem cells are having some success.

Strong emotions like fear and anger play well on TV and make better headlines than the unadorned truth. Even positive media coverage of a scientific achievement often leaves much to be desired. To me, "scientific breakthrough" conjures up images of Hagar the Horrible & his henchmen, in white lab coats with a battering ram knocking down a door to get at the secret formula. The need for more rational thought is clearly great. Let us hope we can continue to influence people in that direction.

Professor J.C. Kelly
Department of Physics
University of Sydney
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