

(Coyne, J., 2022)

EVOLUTION IS TRUE

Prev

Thursday: Hili dialogue

Next

Antarctica, day 21a: Cuverville Island and lunch

Garth Cooper explains why he resigned from New Zealand's Royal Society

March 24, 2022 • 8:30 am

I've explained several times that two members of the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ), philosopher Robert Nola and biochemist Garth Cooper (distinguished members of their trade), resigned from the RSNZ after a recent investigation cleared them of being miscreants after criticizing the government's initiative to teach Mātauranga Māori (MM), or Māori "ways of knowing", as coequal to science in science classes. They were accused, among other things, of causing "harm" to people by expressing this view.

Cooper and Nola, along with five other University of Auckland professors (one now deceased) had given this opinion in a short letter to *The Listener*, a popular Kiwi website. While the University of Auckland also attacked all seven signers—a blatant violation of their right of academic freedom—the University has now quietly shelved its criticisms, but their promise to have a public University debate about the merit of teaching MM as science seems to have disappeared as well.

At any rate, Nola issued a statement explaining why he resigned despite being exculpated, and I posted that here. (It was largely a free-speech issue, but there were several reasons.)

Now Garth Cooper has issued his own statement about why he resigned. I've put the bulk of it below the fold, but give a brief excerpt here. (Note that Cooper is part Māori and has spent much of his career educating and helping the Māori.)

Cooper:

The events that in the end led me to resign followed on from my signing of the letter "In defence of science" (NZ Listener, 31 July 2021) along with six of my colleagues. Our combined expertise includes biology, biochemistry, psychology, education, philosophy of science, and medicine, and all of us are expert science educators and communicators.

I signed the letter to make clear, in a public forum, my opposition and deep concern about processes now underway in New Zealand that are evidently undermining literacy,

numeracy, and science literacy, particularly amongst Māori children.

P **I have Maori heritage.** For most children, a good education is often their best hope of improving their trajectory in life and I was raised in that belief. I did not experience anti-Māori bias. Real bias stems from the view that Māori can't do things or participate fully in society because they're Māori. Unfortunately, the partial substitution of mātauranga Maori for international-format science education, perhaps unintendedly, is implying that limitation.

. . . An NCEA (NZ's public examination system) working group referred to science as a "Western European invention". We strongly objected to that particular characterization since science is universal. One recent extreme of some astonishing views being introduced, for example, claims that "to insist Māori children learn to read is an act of colonisation" [see here].

. . . The inherent bias against students in suggesting that rather than a sound grounding in mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics, there is to be parity with non-scientific systems such as mātauranga Māori, will be massively counterproductive for all students, but especially biased against Māori.

Māori are good students when they are afforded the proper opportunity to learn, and I have specific knowledge and experience of this based on my past formal roles in Māori education. Their right to unbiased access to optimal education, if they wish, should be protected vigorously.

This whole mess has made everyone look bad save the "Satanic Seven" who signed the initial *Listener* letter. Those seven have been vindicated. But The University of Auckland has embarrassed itself by apparently worshiping MM and by criticizing a perfectly reasonable letter (read it; it's short). The RSNZ simply looks foolish and inept for investigating the signers of the letter and especially for its initial statement (now quietly removed) given below:

The recent suggestion by a group of University of Auckland academics that mātauranga Māori is not a valid truth is utterly rejected by Royal Society Te Apārangi. The Society strongly upholds the value of mātauranga Māori and rejects the narrow and outmoded definition of science outlined in *The Listener* – Letter to the Editor.

It deeply regrets the harm such a misguided view can cause.

And the government of New Zealand, once a bellwether of true liberalism and progressivism, now looks weak and woke, giving precedence to the valorization of its indigenous population over scientific truth.

Where this will end is in the watering down of science education in New Zealand and the departure of its best students to study elsewhere. (It has not escaped my notice that there are parallels with what's going on with the politicization of science in the U.S.). MM is surely something that Kiwis should be educated about, but it should never be taught as if it were equivalent to modern science. Educational and governmental officials in New Zealand, besotted with worship of all things indigenous, can't seem to make that distinction.

Click "continue reading" to see Cooper's full statement.

Why did I resign from the Royal Society of New Zealand?

Garth J S Cooper DPhil (Oxon) DSc (Oxon) FRCPA FMedSci

My reasons relate to its loss of understanding of its *raison d'être*; suppression of free speech; failure to properly support science and science education; untoward political focus of management and governance processes; and prolonged defamation of myself and Professors Michael Corballis (now sadly deceased) and Robert Nola, by certain of its authorities.

My concerns do not apply to the Fellowship but to other aspects of the RS, and I acknowledge all those Fellows who share the central belief that "Science is Science". I am grateful for my time of service with the RS Academy, for my many rewarding associations with members of the Fellowship, and for their substantive support throughout this process. Moreover, the Initial Investigatory Panel (IIP) established by RS to examine the complaints against me and Professor Nola, eventually recommended not to continue the investigation.

The events that in the end led me to resign followed on from my signing of the letter "In defence of science" (NZ Listener, 31 July 2021) along with six of my colleagues. Our combined expertise includes biology, biochemistry, psychology, education, philosophy of science, and medicine, and all of us are expert science educators and communicators.

I signed the letter to make clear, in a public forum, my opposition and deep concern about processes now underway in New Zealand that are evidently undermining literacy, numeracy, and science literacy, particularly amongst Māori children.

I have Maori heritage. For most children, a good education is often their best hope of improving their trajectory in life and I was raised in that belief. I did not experience anti-Māori bias. Real bias stems from the view that Māori can't do things or participate fully in society because they're Māori. Unfortunately, the partial substitution of mātauranga Maori for international-format science education, perhaps unintendedly, is implying that limitation.-

Much of my career has been focussed on kaupapa (Māori agenda) research and teaching aimed at improving Māori health care delivery and Māori science education, on marae and in hospital and medical school/university settings. That focus has been literal – personally designing, writing, teaching, and executing novel and successful programmes in both Māori health and education. As part of my commitment to these objectives, I served on the national Health Research Council, including 6-years' service on Te Komiti Māori with further years advising on Māori health development.

While treating many Māori in diabetes clinics, I turned my focus to kaupapa diabetes research, since this disease is a leading cause of disability and death amongst Māori. *Inter alia*, this work entailed visiting marae throughout the country to inform and seek endorsement of iwi.

~~With much dismay, I have been witnessing a recent profound undermining of the meaning of science in New Zealand, now underway with the introduction of mātauranga Māori education as having parity with sciences including mathematics, chemistry, biology, and physics. Mātauranga Māori should be taught, as we stated in our letter, but not as part of the national science curriculum.~~

An NCEA (NZ's public examination system) working group referred to science as a "Western European invention". We strongly objected to that particular characterization since science is universal. One recent extreme of some astonishing views being introduced, for example, claims that "to insist Māori children learn to read is an act of colonisation" (<https://nzareblog.wordpress.com/2022/03/22/maori-literacy/>). -

Our letter also spoke against the NCEA report's divisive suggestion that the colonising damage purportedly caused by science be taught nationally in schools as part of the NCEA curriculum. The particular view that underlies this problem originates, at least in part, with the concept that the New Zealand education system is a colonising force that needs to be 'decolonised' – these radical and divisive views promoted by some, are fundamentally antithetical to educational achievement and opportunity, more especially for Māori.

I have remained largely silent throughout the prolonged, conflicted, and defamatory RS management behaviours against us arising from our widely endorsed letter 'In defence of science'. As a past member of the RS Academy, I had hoped that its overseers would in time come to understand that the role of RS has always been to protect good science and its servants, the scientists – that their role was not to support the redefinition of science itself.

Nor are those who currently guide and manage the RS absolved from their responsibility for condemning my, and my colleagues' rights – and indeed obligations – to speak from our considerable individual and collective knowledge of accepted scientific processes, knowledge, and understanding. They should understand the fundamental requirement that all New Zealanders have the right to have an acceptable education based on sound principles of literacy, numeracy, and science literacy.

The quality of science education must be a central concern of RS. A key function of RS under section 6 of the Royal Society of New Zealand Act 1997 is "the advancement of science and technology education" (note that this does not include the advancement of humanities education).

The inherent bias against students in suggesting that rather than a sound grounding in mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics, there is to be parity with non-scientific systems such as mātauranga Māori, will be massively counterproductive for all students, but especially biased against Māori.

Māori are good students when they are afforded the proper opportunity to learn, and I have specific knowledge and experience of this based on my past formal roles in Maori education. Their right to unbiased access to optimal education, if they wish, should be protected vigorously.