

## Report on the 4th Sydney-Tilburg Philosophy of Science Conference: The Authority of Science

University of Sydney, 8–10 April 2011

The conference brought together scientists and philosophers of science to explore the idea that recent developments in philosophy of science can help with the uptake of scientific ideas in public policy. It opened with a public forum (televised and available at <http://www.themonthly.com.au/authority-science-3255>) and ran two days of papers, including several plenaries and a keynote address. Christian List's plenary address, which opened the conference, examined the very idea of the 'voice of science' from the perspective of his recent work on group agency. List emphasised that if the 'voice of science' is considered to be the expression of the views of the scientific community then, whatever aggregation procedure is used, the collective judgment of science may lack essential qualities of a 'voice' which guides policy, such as consistency of opinion across a range of issues. For science to have a coherent 'voice' in this sense, science itself must be a structured institution of the kind that is often regarded as a group agent, such as a corporation or a government. Institutions such as national academies may have adequate structure to count as group agents.

The debate over action on climate change is widely regarded as an example of the failure of science to translate itself into policy. In his plenary address, the distinguished chemist Theodore Brown compared this case to the successful effort to reach international agreement on the control of chlorofluorocarbons to protect the ozone layer. He demonstrated how contingent that outcome was on the timing of events and the interests of particular actors at those times, and how these conditions for successful policy making were absent in the superficially-similar case of international negotiations over greenhouse gas abatement and climate change. Similar themes were explored by academic lawyer Rosemary Lyster, although her focus was on the legal implications. She discussed the recent attempt to bring a case of 'civil conspiracy' against ExxonMobil for misleading the public about climate change, and the legal and moral responsibilities of the media in giving disproportionate coverage to climate-change sceptics.

The keynote address was delivered by Sir Peter Gluckman, who, in his role as the New Zealand Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, has just released 'Towards better use of evidence in policy formation: a discussion paper': <http://www.pmcsa.org.nz/>. In contrast to much recent discussion engendered by the perceived failure to translate climate science into policy, Gluckman argued that to maintain the efficacy of scientific advice, scientists must scrupulously avoid advocacy and seek to act as honest brokers laying out options and facilitating social choice through the normal democratic process.

A general theme that ran through the conference was that there is a genuine need for engaged philosophy of science to help with both the public acceptance of science and the subsequent translation of science into policy. Indeed, this has been something of a recurring theme in all the Sydney-Tilburg philosophy of science conferences; we hope to see such socially-relevant philosophy of science continue in our future conferences.

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