

Editorial: Contradiction is not argument

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Editor

“Argument isn’t the same as contradiction. An argument is a collected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition. It isn’t just contradiction. Look, if I argue with you, I must take a contrary position. But it isn’t just saying, ‘No, it isn’t.’ Argument is an intellectual process; contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of any statement the other person makes.” From *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, *The Argument Clinic*, BBC-TV, 2 November 1972.¹

The CSIRO and the Coalition (and News Corp.) have been engaged in a continuing disagreement about the costs of future power for Australia: which is cheaper — renewables or nuclear? Is this a suitable case for a Point Counterpoint debate in the pages of the *Journal*? For this engineer-turned-economist (and a one-time beneficiary and employee of the CSIRO), it doesn’t seem so, because one side (CSIRO and the Australian Energy Market Operator, AEMO) is listening to the other and adjusting its estimates of the cost of renewables;² but the other side (Peter Dutton’s Coalition) just repeats its mantra that “nuclear is cheaper.” That is, it contradicts the CSIRO, but doesn’t engage in argument. And it conveniently overlooks the issue of time to delivery.

At a recent Zoom meeting of the Editorial Board of the *Journal*, there was general agree-

ment that including written interactions between parties who disagree can be very interesting for readers and even historically valuable. The *Journal* has done this, once: in the December 2020 issue, we included seven pieces around the topic of natural gas as a “transition” fuel on the de-carbonising path to a renewable future.³ The participants were current and past Chief Scientists of Australia, three FRSNs, a member of the Chief Scientist’s Advisory Group, an ANU engineering professor, and a physicist from Arizona State University. I called it “*Point Counterpoint: Gas as a Transitional Fuel*.” None of the parties denied global warming; the issue was rather how to transition. Such debates, properly and respectfully curated, could be of great value and interest to readers of the *Journal*, we agreed.

The question remains how to create or find such constructive disagreements. Another Point Counterpoint would require serious disagreement but also argument by established authorities. Such conditions or situations are not readily or frequently experienced. I do not believe that the political disagreement over renewables versus nuclear — significant through the stakes are — meets the prerequisites for a PCP.

This issue contains a section on the book launch for the history of the Royal Society (from the mid-nineteenth century to the

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLlv_aZjHXc

2 <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/technology-space/energy/GenCost>

3 “*Point Counterpoint: Gas as a Transitional Fuel*,” *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW*, 153: 180–204, 2020. <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/v153-2/>

beginning of the First World War), by Anne Coote. In *Knowledge for a Nation: Origins of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, Dr Coote establishes pretty conclusively that the Society is directly descended from the Australian (Philosophical) Society of 1850, which became the Philosophical Society of NSW in 1856, and finally the Royal Society of NSW from 1867. Her Excellency, the Governor, refers in her Introduction to the vice-regal role of her predecessors in the Society's foundation. In particular, she highlights the role of Sir William Denison (Governor from 1855 to 1861), who was an engineer and scientist. The emergence of the 1856 Society was largely due to the arrival in Sydney of Sir William. We have included an image of him in the introduction to the Book Launch section, courtesy of Government House, Sydney, where his portrait hangs. His first address to the new Society (on 9th May 1856) was on railways, and their impacts on business and society.

But it was Sir William's interest in science (he was a conchologist as well as an engineer) that excited interest among local journalists in the fifth estate, who were sufficiently excited to write a piece which worried about the new Governor spending too much of his time and energy on his scientific pursuits, at the expense of activities — building roads, railways, bridges, wharves and harbours, and other noble civil-engineering projects — necessary for the Colony. One newspaper published a satirical article about a meeting of the fictitious "Royal Society" — remember, this was 12 years before the Royal Charter — which mocked fictional scientific engagement.

To give a flavour of the article:⁴

Royal Society of N.S.W. This learned body met this year in the large hall of the Australian Museum, when after an excursion to the site of some Botany Bay or other remains, and an investigation into the nature and quality of the beer of the natives, Professor Swell read a paper on 'London Gin.' The illustrious Professor considered that sold at two and sixpence a bottle: preferable, when a friend had to pay for it; that at two shillings he found sufficiently pure and strong, in cases when he himself had to act as the purchaser. London Gin was divided into different species, of which the poetical 'cream of the walley [sic],' for the use of bards, and the more familiar 'Old Tom,' for mixing in general society were the best known. Gin contained turpentine to a large extent; and such was the inflammable nature of it, that it would be a really interesting experiment to ascertain whether a gentleman placing the lighted end of a cigar to his mouth after imbibing alarming quantities of the liquor in question, would not at once take fire ... The remainder of the day was devoted to an animated conversation on certain Colonial cherries, which grew with their stones outside;⁵ and some interesting experiments as to the amount of liquids and solids really containable in the human stomach.

And so on.

Was it the Society which excited such a reaction? More probably it was the new Governor. Anyway, Fort Denison in the Harbour reminds us that he did not neglect the task

⁴ See "Denison and Science." *Bell's Life in Sydney*, Feb. 3, 1855, p. 2. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/59759779>

⁵ Probably *Exocarpos cupressiformis* (Santalaceae)

of improving the Colony's infrastructure. I am indebted to the current Governor, H.E. Margaret Beazley, for drawing our attention to the article and providing the portrait of Sir William, which has not, as far as I am aware, been published online previously.

The publication of a new history of the Society might not always excite great interest, but Anne Coote has gone to some lengths to mine the archives, focussing on the personalities of the members, their agreements and disagreements, and the consequences for New South Wales over sixty years. This makes for fascinating reading. The book is available from the RSNSW online shop⁶ at \$50 for RSNSW members, or John Reed Books (\$59.95).

The December issue of the *Journal* contains eight papers, nine PhD abstracts, and the 2024 Proceedings (Awards, Events, and newly gazetted FRSNs). A measure of our advance in use of solar energy as a renewable energy source is the efficiency of solar cells to convert sunlight into electricity. Green (2022)⁷ reported a solar cell efficiency of 26.8% in October 2022, which is over twice the efficiency seen in plant photosynthesis. The first paper, by Herdean, presents an exploration of the biofeedback photobioreactor concept, delving into the technological paths that might lead to such a breakthrough in the study of and applications with photosynthetic microorganisms. The second paper is a biographical portrait of the nineteenth-century amateur Sydney astronomer, George Denton Hirst (1846–1915), by Nick Lomb, one-time curator of

the Sydney Observatory, Wayne Orchiston and Andrew Jacob.

The Book Launch section includes, as indicated above, a welcome by the Society's Patron, Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley; the official launch by the State Librarian, Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon; the Foreword to the book, written by the Society's current President, Dr Susan Pond; a few words by the author, historian Dr Anne Coote; and an enthusiastic review of the book by the Society's current Vice President, Dr Peter Shergold.

Following the Book Launch are four papers which derive from presentations made at monthly meetings of the Society. In February, John Bell spoke on "Shakespeare on politics: what can we learn?" The paper derived from the talk reproduces the only surviving example of Shakespeare's hand. I note that the results of the U.S. presidential election make this quite timely.

Roy Green and Ken Henry gave talks to the Society several months apart. Green's talk was about productivity, and possible reasons for Australia's slow growth of labour productivity, which in turn results in slow wages growth, compared to other advanced economies. The topic is related to inequality in society, the topic of Ken Henry's talk in late 2024, in which he explored revising Australia's tax regime and other issues.

Federal Parliament has enacted a law (a world first, in apparent response to concern about the state of mental health of young people) which will ban under-16s from accessing some social media. Several months earlier, the Australian eSafety Com-

⁶ <https://members.royalsoc.org.au/rsnsw-shop/>

⁷ Green M.A. (2022) Silicon solar cells to power the future, *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW*, 155, 168–181.

missioner, Julie Inman Grant, had addressed the Society on the broad topic of the internet, and how its initial promise⁸ has been blighted by the behaviour of users of social media, inter alia. What are the possible remedies? Her paper has proved very timely.

In 2023 we republished a paper by Jim Falk et al.⁹ on the hydrological impacts of climate change. Now we republish another paper by Falk et al. on the impacts of climate change on the world's oceans, following COP-29. Despite the opinions of some, I believe that climate change is the most serious issue that humanity faces in late 2024.

Housekeeping

At Council's suggestion, the Editorial Board of the *Journal* was expanded to twelve by including three new members: Pamela Griffith FRSN; Helen Irving FRSN; and Toner Stevenson. A Zoom meeting of the Editorial Board was held on 4 December.

A revised version of the *Journal's* style guide and Information for Authors will be released in the coming months. The current edition was published in May 2017.

I wish to thank Jason Antony MRSN and Rory McGuire for their assistance in producing this issue of the *Journal*. I also thank members of the Editorial Board for their suggestions for improving this Editorial. Lindsay Botten FRSN, web-master extraordinaire, helped to upload it to the Society's web pages. Indeed, Lindsay should be thanked for his efforts in a smooth transition of all the Society's web pages to a new architecture, WordPress. This transfer means that the URLs of recent *Journal* articles have changed. The new URLs are to be found on the *Journal* Archive.¹⁰

Balmain
12 December 2024



⁸ My first recorded interaction on the internet was Marks, R.E. (1986) Easy-to-learn, WYSIWYG, technical word processors? net.text, June 5, archived at https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/net.text/rvi_FPmQBTE

⁹ Jim Falk et al. (2023), Critical hydrologic impacts from climate change: addressing an urgent global need. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW*, 156: 291–297.

¹⁰ <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/society-publications/the-royal-society-of-nsw-journal/journal-archive/>