



8 April 2022

John Ryan  
Auditor-General  
Office of the Auditor-General

By email: [John.Ryan@oag.parliament.nz](mailto:John.Ryan@oag.parliament.nz)

Dear Mr Ryan,

## CONCERNS OVER PUBLIC MONIES FOR THE ROYAL SOCIETY

1. I write to raise concerns over taxpayer funding for The Royal Society Te Apārangi. The Free Speech Union is a registered trade union with a mission to fight for, protect, and expand New Zealanders' rights to freedom of speech, conscience, and intellectual inquiry.
2. As you may be aware, last year seven eminent University of Auckland academics wrote to the *Listener* to express their concerns over the incorporation of mātauranga Māori in the NCEA science syllabus. The letter was met with widespread condemnation and criticism from organisations including the New Zealand Association of Scientists and the Tertiary Education Union — as well as the academics Vice-Chancellor, Dawn Freshwater.
3. Rather than supporting the right of fellows to speak publicly about their concerns about mātauranga Māori in the science syllabus, the Royal Society joined in the denunciation of the letter signatories and responded to the controversy with a statement on its website that said their views were not only “misguided” but caused “harm”. Most concerning is that following complaints, the Royal Society proceeded to launch an investigation into the letter signatories who were fellows.
4. News of the investigation made international headlines and led to prominent international scientists, including Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne and Steven Pinker writing to the Royal Society to express their outrage. After characterising the opinion expressed in the *Listener* letter as racist and without merit, the Royal Society recently announced that the investigation will not proceed further as “in the Panel’s view, the matters raised are of substance and merit further constructive discussion and respectful dialogue”. Professors Grant Cooper and Robert Nola have since resigned in protest.
5. 73 fellows have now written to the Chief Executive of the Royal Society to move three motions at an extraordinary meeting next Wednesday. They have moved that the Royal Society apologise to the investigated fellows for its poor handling of the entire process, review its current code of conduct to ensure that this cannot happen again and conduct a full review of the entirety of the Royal Society entity to examine its structure and function and alignment with other international academies.
6. Alongside bringing itself into disrepute and embarrassing itself internationally, this episode has shown the Royal Society to itself be an active force in shutting down debate and discussion. We are therefore of the firm view that the Royal Society’s handling and exacerbating of the *Listener* letter controversy raises serious questions about whether the organisation is a fit custodian of taxpayer funds. We are unaware of the full scope of funding the Royal Society receives and administers but know that, for

example, the Royal Society was trusted to administer Marsden fund grants totalling \$79 million in 2020 alone.

7. Investigating distinguished fellows merely for offering an expert opinion on a contentious and topical debate demonstrates that the Royal Society has been ideologically captured. This is an absurd state of affairs for an organisation ostensibly dedicated to the pursuit of science in a free society and means it cannot be regarded as a neutral recipient and distributor of taxpayer funds.
8. In light of these concerns, I write to ask whether you are aware of any safeguards to ensure that the Royal Society Te Apārangi operate with respect for free speech or, if there are no safeguards, whether you believe it is appropriate for an organisation of this kind which receives taxpayer funding operates without such assurances for the importance of academic freedom and free speech.
9. We look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully,

**Free Speech Union (New Zealand) Inc.**



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