President's column

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AMSI

Many of you will be aware that, following last December's launch of the National Strategic Review of Mathematical Sciences Research, a number of members of the Society held discussions with public servants, politicians, and scientists from other disciplines. The aim was to deliver the message of the review. The Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute played a crucial role in this process.

In part, that role was immediate and direct. For example AMSI staff, especially Phil Broadbridge, Garth Gaudry and Jan Thomas, helped organise, and were closely engaged in, the dialogue that led up to the forum on the review in February and to the federal budget three months later. These activities will, I am sure, continue into the future.

However, in a broader and less explicit way, AMSI played an even more important role as a vehicle for the mathematical sciences. AMSI provides us all, whether we work in a private company, a university, a government agency, or wherever, with a connection to just about everything that touches mathematics in Australia. These vital linkages are visible and tangible throughout the range of activities in which AMSI is involved, from writing school textbooks to running high-level research workshops and engaging in mathematical work for industry. Many members of the Society benefit directly from AMSI's enterprise, but it's the indirect benefit that concerns me most here.

The breadth of AMSI's work is also apparent through the Institute's membership, which encompasses many institutions willing to pay for the privilege of being engaged in the mathematical sciences right across their spectrum in Australia. The size and scope of AMSI's paid-up membership and programs, as much as anything else, express AMSI's reach and commitment impressively well to those outside the profession. In order to make the point to you, inside the profession — and to make clear to you the substantial indirect benefits that we gain from AMSI — let me briefly describe one of the meetings held in Canberra early this year, after the launch of the review but before the forum.

The aim at the meeting was to convey information about the review to a high level in the public service and among politicians. We were talking to a senior person who was, I felt sure, both sympathetic and sceptical. On the latter side he was concerned that the review report might be presenting only part of the picture of the mathematical sciences in Australia — the part that represents those of us who work in universities. The government wasn't really interested in increasing its investment in university teaching and research, not unless it could see the whole mathematics picture, ranging from school mathematics teaching

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through to universities, business and industry; and unless it was convinced that the mathematical sciences community was unified and communicating within itself and with the world outside. Most importantly, we had to be totally committed to helping ourselves before the government would raise a hand to assist us.

The role played by AMSI was essential to substantiating the sweeping scope of mathematics, to providing the vital linkages between university mathematics and the rest of the world, and to describing our commitment to work for the good of mathematics as a whole. Without AMSI we would have foundered. The review report would have struggled to get traction in the federal sphere, and I feel sure there would not have been the extra funding for mathematics and statistics that we received in the federal budget. In the view of the person to whom we spoke in Canberra, AMSI supplied the glue that connected individual mathematical scientists to other professionals in different areas of the economy and in other parts of the nation, and in particular which linked university mathematics to schools, business, industry and government.

Ironically, AMSI is still not financially supported by the federal government as a mathematical sciences institute, although the government acknowledges AMSI's achievements and merits. From our point of view, as working mathematicians in a wide variety of fields, we should appreciate what AMSI has done for us in the past, both directly and indirectly, and what it can do in the years ahead. We must continue to support AMSI, indeed increase our support, because of the many opportunities AMSI brings us and the invaluable connections it provides.

Of course, this is not to say that AMSI should be immutable. Particularly when we can ensure a more reliable line of funding, AMSI should evolve so as to give ever better service, and still more opportunities, to the profession. Right now, however, AMSI needs our heightened support as it seeks funding that will take it more securely into the future.

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