

Free speech green light

By BRUCE MONTGOMERY

Published in the *Australian*, 17 May 1995, pp. 23, 28.

THE University of Tasmania has refused to sanction one of its professors, accused by the greens of abusing his status to derail the debate over draining Lake Pedder in the State's south-west.

In a landmark decision, the university senate has defended academics' freedom to speak on public issues, regardless of the forum, the subject or the adequacy of their argument.

Without examining in detail statements made by aquaculture professor Nigel Forteath, the senate reaffirmed his right to speak freely.

A member of the University Council, Dr John Greenhill, said the overriding principle had been an academic's liberty to speak, not his ability to justify his argument.

"In simple terms, academics must retain the right to, at worst, make fools of themselves and, at best, be free to tell the emperor that he has no clothes," Dr Greenhill said.

The Tasmanian Greens leader, Mrs Christine Milne, had complained to the university that Professor Forteath had used his academic status to assert, without satisfactory evidence, to a federal parliamentary inquiry that up to 4000 platypuses were at risk if Lake Pedder were drained.

In 1972 the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission flooded the original Lake Pedder to create a storage for its Gordon power scheme.

Conservationists want the lake restored but Professor Forteath, who appeared earlier this year as an expert witness for Huon Valley salmon farmers and the local council, effectively undermined their campaign.

He said that draining the lake could destroy perhaps the biggest population of platypuses in Tasmania, which were thriving on dragonfly and mayfly larvae there.

He later reduced his initial assessment, which he said had been made on the basis of his observations when fishing on the lake and comparing his head count with statistics on known populations in NSW.

However, the political damage to the Greens had been done, the plight of platypuses contributing to their decision to acknowledge officially that the draining was not a priority issue for them.

Professor Forteath weathered a storm of phone calls to his home from people objecting to his contribution to the debate. "I have been very, very intimidated by the whole thing," he said.

Mrs Milne peppered the vice-chancellor, Professor Alan Gilbert, with complaints about Professor Forteath's conduct.

"I do not question his right to comment, but he has to be held accountable for what he said," Mrs Milne said.

"He used his academic status to justify his remark, but could not support them with research.

"He had to admit that his only research was observation.

"I rang the vice-chancellor because I was concerned about the reputation of the university. Its reputation is jeopardised if academics can't justify what they say in terms of research."

In a commentary, Dr Greenhill said academics would damage the university's reputation and diminish its contribution as a society watchdog if they spoke in a partisan manner or misrepresented their area of expertise.

"It would, however, be very dangerous to allow any censorship of the right of free speech by academics," he said.

"The pressures on any person or committee which exercised such a censorship role would be difficult to contain and academics would soon have no more freedom than their private or public-sector colleagues."

Mrs Milne, meanwhile, did not escape the judgment of her peers. For admonishing Professor Forteath, she was censured by both the Tasmanian House of Assembly and the Australian Senate, in motions opposed only by Green MPs in each House.

[Suppression of dissent website](#)

in the section on [Documents](#)

in the subsection on [Australian university speech codes](#)
