

## **OPINION PIECE: THE ARMIDALE EXPRESS**

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### **Our leading lights in acquiring wisdom**

District's Novel Laureate inspires IAN CHUBB on his regional visit

*By Professor Ian Chubb AC*

When I think of Armidale I think of Sir John Cornforth, our eighth Nobel Laureate in a scientific field, who spent much of his childhood in this region. It was the stars in the clear New England skies that first drew him to science: stars that only became more wondrous as he learned more about them.

But chemistry was his great passion, and the field in which he made his name.

There were no institutions in Australia at which a PhD in chemistry could be earned when Sir John was a young man in the late 1930s.

He also happened to be deaf.

There were no jobs here for research chemists who couldn't lecture.

So one of the most incredible scientific minds we have ever produced did us proud overseas, while our nation built up the universities and research centres we know today.

We may not think about our science as often as we think about sport or celebrity scandals, but when we write the history of these times I know which of those three will still count.

The jobs we do, the cities we build, the food we eat, the things that fill our time and the years of life we enjoy, all have science at their core.

Some people think we should just go about our lives, while the scientists get on with giving us all the things we want.

This view always troubled Sir John, who knew from hard experience that human beings are not always intelligent or compassionate users of the tools that science provides.

It would be easy, he wrote, for us to assume that science will always be there when we need it: 'always on tap, never on top'.

It is much harder to take responsibility for our future, and make sure that science contributes to a better world for generations to come.

But we have to be patient enough to see past our own needs, and impatient enough to get on with practical actions today, if we want that kind of future.

After all, where will our great scientists come from tomorrow, if they aren't being inspired by the education they receive in our schools today?

Where will the big knowledge breakthroughs come from in 50 years' time, if we focus our research only on the things we want right now, and don't invest in the blue-sky projects that might not pay off within our lifetimes?

How will we keep generating new jobs for Australians, if we aren't looking now for things we can do smarter and better than other countries later on?

Science isn't just something that sustains us. It's something we have to sustain.

So like Sir John, let's point our children to the stars you can see from New England and prepare them all for an inspiring future through science.

*Australia's Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb will be visiting the University of New England tomorrow and taking part in a number of events related to the launch of UNE's Virtual Institute for Teaching and Learning. On Friday he will attend an event with the Armidale Business Chamber.*