

# Confronting the ‘experts’

by RICHARD HOUSE

## Whistleblowing and suppressing dissent in science

*Richard House interviews Professor Brian Martin*

**Richard House [RH]:** Can you share something of your own professional and academic journey, and how you came to be interested in the issue of dissent in medicine and science?

**Brian Martin [BM]:** It was the late 1970s. I was doing research in astrophysics at the Australian National University. I was also active in the environmental movement, and this was long before it became mainstream. I gradually learned about several environmental scientists and teachers whose articles had been blocked, their tenure denied, their access to data prevented, or their jobs terminated. It seemed to be a pattern. I investigated further and started writing about it and getting some publicity – this led to more people contacting me.

Over the years, my interest in the ‘suppression of dissent’ snowballed into a wide range of domains, such as controversies over nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation and vaccination, all of which involve scientific and medical dimensions. In the 1990s, I became active in a new organisation, Whistleblowers Australia, and talked with many whistleblowers.

**RH:** It surely requires great integrity to take up such positions when one knows one’s career progression will be adversely affected.

**BM:** For sure, there is some risk in studying dissent. My career in science never took off – I was on one-year contracts for a decade, and was even terminated a couple of times; but it’s hard to be sure why, because others had difficulty too. There’s one sobering aspect of supporting whistleblowers: many of them have a really hard time, losing their jobs, their careers, their money, their health. Compared to them, I’ve been fortunate. Most people have no idea what it’s like to do what’s right and then come under a relentless attack.

**RH:** Your 1996 book, *Confronting the Experts* had a great impact on me; tell us about that book.



Professor Brian Martin

**BM:** In the 1970s and 1980s, I was part of the movement against nuclear power. We were up against two eminent pro-nuclear experts, Sir Ernest Titterton, a nuclear physicist, and Sir Philip Baxter, a nuclear engineer. Several of us engaged with them through letters and articles in the local newspaper, *The Canberra Times*. After several years, to aid anti-nuclear campaigners, I decided to write a critique of Titterton’s and Baxter’s views, and it came out as a pamphlet titled *Nuclear Knights*.

This engagement got me interested in how to challenge prestigious experts aligned with powerful enterprises. Years later, I decided to write a practical manual for how to challenge establishment experts. By that time, I had a job in the social sciences at the University of Wollongong in NSW, Australia. It took me two years to muster the courage to write this manual, titled *Strip the Experts*. In academia, the expectation is to be scholarly, to write for peers, not to go ‘downmarket’ and practical.

*Strip the Experts* wasn’t enough for me though. Over the years, I had gotten to know several courageous

and enterprising challengers who were experts themselves, but were up against powerful establishments. Two were my friends: Mark Diesendorf, a critic of fluoridation, and Sharon Beder, a critic of Sydney sewerage policy and practice. Others I knew through correspondence. So I had the idea of putting together this book in which each of them would share their experiences. Their stories, in diverse fields, showed striking parallels.

**RH:** Tell us about your research on whistleblowers.

**BM:** Due to my investigations into the suppression of dissent, I was aware of the issue of whistleblowing. Indeed, these are two ways of looking at the same thing: the focus in whistleblowing is on the whistleblower, whereas the focus in suppression of dissent is more on the perpetrator, the agent imposing suppression.

In the early 1990s, the organisation Whistleblowers Australia was set up. It is a self-help and mutual-help organisation; most members are whistleblowers.

I became president in 1996, and suddenly all sorts of whistleblowers wanted to talk

to me – teachers, police officers, public servants, company employees, health workers – you name it. I knew a lot before that, but I soon learned a lot more.

After repeatedly giving similar advice to callers, I felt like a broken record. So I decided to write a practical manual for whistleblowers, incorporating comments from several other experienced whistleblower advisers. Many people told me it was really helpful, and years later I prepared a new edition titled *Whistleblowing: A Practical Guide*.

Although I drew on research, writing a practical guide isn’t considered research because of a strange disjunction between theory and practice. There are volumes of research on whistleblowing, for example survey data and legal analyses, but hardly any of it is useful to actual whistleblowers.

My conclusion from years of involvement in the issue is that the usual approach – i.e. whistleblower protection via legislation – is inadequate. Just as important are the skills for bringing about organisational and social change.

**RH:** What are you working on at the moment?

**BM:** As an academic, it’s always been frustrating to see how scholars write mainly for each other, and seldom do research to help activists. But also, perhaps there is something activists can learn from academic work, so I set about trying to explain how to do this, while avoiding all the useless stuff.

After starting on this project, it seemed slightly dry and lifeless, so I decided to write *Sarah’s Day*, a fictional story illustrating features of university life. This led me to turn the entire thing into a story, a sort of ‘educational fiction’. Doing this was challenging, but it was also more fun than usual academic writing.

The short book should appear later in 2025 and will be free on my website, along with all my other writing.

- **Brian Martin is emeritus professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia:** <https://www.bmartin.cc/>
- **Confronting the Experts:** [tinyurl.com/2p8h5f54](http://tinyurl.com/2p8h5f54)
- **Truth Tactics:** [tinyurl.com/3dac4sxb](http://tinyurl.com/3dac4sxb)
- **Vaccination Panic in Australia:** [tinyurl.com/yeje75ut](http://tinyurl.com/yeje75ut)
- **‘Interview: Dissent in medicine’:** forthcoming in R. House, *Conversations in Medicine, InterActions, 2025*