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## THE LOOKING FORWARD PODCAST – INTERVIEW WITH DR PETER RIDD

**Topics:** Peter Ridd's research, issues with JCU, GoFundMe campaign, the replication crisis, academic freedom, French Review.

**Co-hosts:**

Dr Chris Berg – Senior Fellow, RMIT University

Scott Hargreaves – Editor, IPA Review

**Guests:**

Dr Peter Ridd - Marine Geophysicist

Gideon Rozner – Director of Policy, IPA

[Scott Hargreaves.](#)

00:07

Hello and welcome to this very special edition of the IPA's Looking Forward, a weekly podcast of debate and discussion about politics and ideas. For this very special edition, we have a very special guest. It's my great pleasure to welcome to the IPA studio, a physicist, academic, author, environmentalist, and stalwart defender of free speech on everything that matters. It's my great pleasure to welcome to the IPA, Dr. Peter Ridd.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

00:32

Thanks very much.

[Scott Hargreaves.](#)

00:33

Thanks for joining us. I'm Scott Hargreaves, editor of the IPA review, joined as always by my Looking Forward co-host, Dr Chris Berg.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

00:41

Good morning, Scott.

[Scott Hargreaves.](#)

00:42

Great. How's the RMIT going?

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

00:43

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Yeah, really well.

**Scott Hargreaves.**

00:44

Good. That's a mandatory plug there. The IPA's Director of Policy, Gideon Rozner.

**Gideon Rozner**

00:49

Good day, Scott. Always good to be on Looking Forward.

**Scott Hargreaves.**

00:51

Great. It is, and of course many listeners and viewers will recognize Gideon's mug from his live broadcast from a certain Brisbane courtroom.

**Gideon Rozner**

01:01

Before I entered gonzo journalism.

**Scott Hargreaves.**

01:03

Yeah, where some very historic events came to pass that we'll be talking a bit about today. This Looking Forward podcast is brought to you by the Institute of Public Affairs. If you're not already a supporter, please do go to [ipa.org.au](http://ipa.org.au) and see how you can join or donate to support our research and podcasts like this one. Our end-of-financial year appeal is in full swing, so if you want to lower your tax bill, provide a tax deductible donation right now. Chris.

**Dr. Chris Berg**

01:34

Peter, thank you very much for joining us. I thought what we might do is we might talk through your career and the issues that were raised and then potentially some of where you see the university sector going now as someone who's had some very unique and interesting experiences and of course a long background, but first of all, let's start with this. How did you come to study the reef? How did you move into reef science?

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

01:59

It was entirely by accident. I was a physicist and my mom saw an advertisement for a physical oceanographer at the nearby Australian [crosstalk 00:02:07] Science, and said you should apply for this. And I said,

what's a physical oceanographer? I went there and-

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

02:14

After a week in a library, yeah.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

02:16

That's right, and I said to the guy who was going to employ me, I have no idea about physical oceanography. He says, it doesn't matter, you're a physicist, you can pick it up. And he gave me a whole pile of books and within six months I was a physical oceanographer.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

02:27

Oh, fantastic. And you moved quite senior as a physicist and in the oceanography space.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

02:33

Yeah. Over a period of many years. I'm really a physicist, is really what I am, and I ended up being professor of physics at James Cook University and also working with the engineers and running them for a little bit, too.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

02:47

Okay.

[Scott Hargreaves.](#)

02:48

And a lot of field research during that time.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

02:50

Yeah, huge amount. So, I spent a lot of time on the reef, especially in the early days. Not so much nowadays, but a lot of time on the reef.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

02:57

Is that something that has changed in this space or just because of your sort of senior roles and management or has the nature of the science actually changed, the practice?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

03:06

No, it's, I guess my role. I get seasick.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

03:14

Oh, you chose a terrible profession.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

03:16

That's right.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

03:18

So, why don't we talk a little bit about what has happened and many of our listeners and of course many IPA members will be very familiar with what's a good in part because of the stilling work that Gideon has been done, but we might, for the benefit of listeners who are coming to this story fresh, we might sort of hear about exactly what your first skirmishes or issues in the academic freedom space were, and how that ended up with the Climate Change: The Facts book published by the IPA.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

03:47

Well, actually goes back a long way to things that most people don't even know about. My first skirmish actually was in I think 1997 or so when I made some comments about Pauline Hanson, that she was actually a result of university political correctness. It was actually a response to that, and I got into trouble for that. But no sort of big misconduct things. I got into trouble and my head of department was told he had to counsel me and he just called me and said, consider yourself counselled. And we talked about other things. And then I got into trouble for ... Oh, probably about 10 years ago. We did a lot of work on education and I was saying that university education faculties were incredibly damaging with their so-called research, which isn't really research and their influence on the way education has gone. And I sort of got into trouble for that. But then the big things obviously with the reef ones where it was becoming increasingly clear that so much of the science was not properly quality assured. And there were these famous photographs which supposedly showed a dead reef and it just looked dodgy from the beginning. I'd asked a couple of my guys to go down there on their way to Mackay, check out these inshore reefs, see if there was coral there, and of course there was, and I blew the whistle on that. But that was fairly unpopular.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

05:12

And you've published quite extensively in that space too, so this is-

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

05:14

Yeah, that's right. So, I've got over a hundred publications altogether. A large fraction of those are on the reef. I'm actually the guy who invented the instruments to major sediment movement on the Great Barrier Reef work. Before that we could never measure over long periods sediment resuspension on the reef. Of course, sediment is one of the things that's supposed to be killing the reef. So, I've had a career in that.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

05:39

A number of people have asked us to ask you, talk us through the coral bleaching issue because of course we, we read about it in the papers. It's obviously a major political issue, particularly in Queensland and even at the federal level, but it's not always clear, I think, to listeners or the general public about what specifically are the claims and do those claims stack up in your view?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

06:01

No, they don't. The claims go from anything like 33% of the reef died to 93% of the reef died. Actually when you bury down to the data during that bleaching event in 2016 at the extreme 8% died, which sounds like a lot, but when you consider that for the whole southern part of the Great Barrier Reef between 2011 and 2016 there was a 250% increase in the amount of coral. The 8%, it can actually recover from that within a year altogether. You actually look at the coral cover records which have been going on in a quality way since 1985 and there's about the same amount of coral now as there was in 1985.

It goes up and down mostly with cyclones, a little bit with bleaching, but my view on climate change and the effect on the reef is that of all the ecosystems in the world, in fact the reef is the one best able to adapt to increasing climates. Whether that's natural or whether it's anthropogenic, and half a degree temperature change certainly doesn't cause mass bleaching events. These are entirely natural things. They occur whenever you have a hot year. You get a hot year, your grass dies, there is a forest fire, it recovers. It's been going on since time immemorial.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

07:15

Just take us through though. Talk to me like I'm an economist and don't have any idea of what's going on in these spaces.

[Scott Hargreaves.](#)

07:21

Hypothetically.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

07:22

Hypothetically. What is bleaching? How does bleaching actually occur?

[Gideon Rozner](#)

07:27

It's an important question because I think where this debate has fallen off the rails a lot is that certain media outlets and certain groups with particular agendas, you know, have footage of ghastly looking white corals and the case is frequently made that the reef is dying and look what's happening to it. But for the benefit of those who haven't read your great chapter in a book, *Climate Change: The Facts 2017*, yeah, talk us through the bleaching effect.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

07:54

All right, so a coral is an animal, a little polyp in a little pot of calcium carbonate. And inside that animal is microscopic algae, which give it its colour, and it also uses the sunlight to produce energy for the little coral animal. And there's billions of these coral animals to make up a coral sort of thing. And what happens is that when the temperature gets very hot or cold, actually, it will just chuck out those algae. And that's bleaching, because when that happens, the algae gives it its colour and it goes white. And sometimes it will die when it bleaches. Actually, most of the time it doesn't die. These algae are floating around in the water and it will take those algae back when the hot water has gone.

So, that's essentially what bleaching is. It's a bit like a bushfire. Sometimes a lot of coral does die, but it generally recovers very quickly. But if you actually look at temperature versus coral growth rate, in fact, the higher the temperature, the better the coral growth rate is. So, the best coral in the world is in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, where the coral grows almost twice as fast as it does in many parts of the Great Barrier Reef. So, the general rule is the hotter the better. If you want to see rubbish coral, go to Sydney Harbor. There's corals in Sydney Harbor, but they're total rubbish or if you want even worse corals go to Scotland. There are corals in Scotland, and you may be interested to know that even those freezing

corals in Scotland are supposedly being killed by climate change when obviously for corals, especially in Scotland, a little bit more warm water is only going to be a good thing. And that in my view is what will happen to the reef.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

09:28

Now, if you had a five degree increase in temperature of the ocean, well that would be a disaster for the reefs. It would be an even bigger disaster for everything else. But generally speaking, for the tropical water, even with the worst case scenario, a one or at most two-degree increase in temperature is all that you can expect. And the temperatures for coral can go right up to 38 degrees in the Red Sea and they're quite happy to deal with that.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

09:51

So, this week we've seen tourist operators from North Queensland complain that the scaremongering over the reef is killing their livelihoods. What would you say about that development and about what this irresponsible scaremongering is doing?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

10:08

Well, I think it's exactly what you'd expect. You do hear it again and again. People expressing their surprise when they visit the reef. Oh, we were surprised how good the coral was considering we've seen all these pictures of it being dead. Now, I'm not sure whether the downturn in tourism is entirely due to that. It could just be a natural decline, and we're mixing correlation with causation there.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

10:30

This is why we have economists.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

10:33

That's right. But nevertheless, if you kept on telling people that Sydney Harbor, the bridge was covered in rust, it was falling down, the water was just full of litter and junk, you might expect a few less tourists in Sydney. And I think the same is a pretty obvious thing that's going to occur for the Great Barrier Reef.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

10:52

So, let's move from there. That's a really useful context, because I think a lot of people would be wondering about that. But let's move from there about how you shared this information and then how that came to be such a big issue with your university. So, you published in *Climate Change: The Facts*, and what was the argument of the piece? Was it precisely that?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

11:16

It was essentially that bleaching is-

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

11:19

Scott is holding up a copy of the book for the film that's being videoed? right now.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

11:25

We'll link to where you can buy it, of course.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

11:27

So, it was essentially explaining bleaching, saying that climate change, irrespective of anthropogenic or natural, is probably not a big deal for the reef, but mostly that the conclusion was that we have a quality assurance problem with the science. That essentially you can't believe everything that the big science organisations say, which is a great shame. And I said that on the Alan Jones show, and that's what got me into trouble because I said that our science organisations, the work that comes from them is untrustworthy, which is what I believe because we simply do not have the quality assurance processes in place.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

12:07

So Peter, talk us through that because as you said, there were two theses to your chapter in our book. One, that the bleaching effect is not necessarily proof that the reef is dying, but secondly, that the quality of science by a lot of your peers surrounding the Great Barrier Reef and the effects of climate change can't be trusted. Now, the counter reply to that will always be, oh, but it's all peer reviewed. This is peer reviewed science. How can you argue with peer reviewed science? One of the things you've been saying is that peer review isn't necessarily the guarantee of scientific authenticity that the protagonists of reef scaremongering would have you

believe. So, talk us through that.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

12:48

Well, this is the thing, that scientists will go on about peer review as though it's, a dozen scientists pour over the work for a month on end and they repeat the experiments. This is what ... They give the public this impression and it's like a bunch of con men actually to say that because peer review is often ... And I've done hundreds and hundreds of peer reviews, probably many hundreds of peer reviews and most people like me, you read the work maybe for a couple of hours, you might spend a whole day on it. Usually not. You have a quick read. It looks all right. You can't do the experiments; you're not being paid for it. And that's peer review. Now, this is not proper quality assurance, and they're finding that when you actually try to replicate peer reviewed literature, it tends to be wrong around about half the time.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

13:35

Now, getting it wrong half the time, and when you don't know which half is wrong and which half is right, this is not what the public expect. And the fact that scientists will claim that peer reviewed is not what it is, makes me really believe that, myself as part of this profession, I'm part of a profession that really is worse than a used car salesman. I'm sorry to say that to used car salesmen, because at least half the cars you buy from a used car salesman, actually drive. Only one in probably a hundred is a dud from a used car salesman.

**Scott Hargreaves**

14:13

And I just want to stay on this point for a moment. So, what you're talking about there is, you used the phrase replication crisis. I find it fascinating that in Australia, I don't know anyone else who's actually calling this out. So, you started with the interest in your field. You've got skin in the game, you're seeing it for yourself, you've done your own research, but you've also linked to other research including ... What's his name? Ioannidis.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

14:42

Yes.

**Scott Hargreaves**

14:43

This is unremarkable at the sort of mental level of science elsewhere in the world. And perhaps give us a little bit of an idea of that, because I just find it remarkable that this is also part of science that people are looking at this. But the moment, say a certain doctor Peter Ridd from Townsville actually starts to talk about this, you're a heretic.

#### Dr. Peter Ridd

15:04

Well, this is the thing. I mean since 2005, John Ioannidis has been saying ... Very famous paper. I think it was entitled, Why Most Published Findings Are False. This is one of the most cited papers that's ever been written. And in the rest of science it's completely uncontroversial, that peer review is complete rubbish. So, the big journals, the Royal Society are saying we have a problem here and we need to try to deal with it. Now, I don't think that they're really fair dinkum about what the total implication of this is, but at least they know there's a problem. So, I actually didn't really know about it until five years ago, and when I started to read about the replication crisis, so many things gelled in my experience, and I just wondered why I hadn't worked it out a lot longer. But no, it's uncontroversial in fact.

#### Dr. Chris Berg

15:57

And it's going through ... I mean, so it started in biology and it's gone through psychology with really devastating consequences for that field. But any area that does particularly statistical significance tests because you can run tests multiple times and only report the one that gives you the answer you want. Just throws the whole concept of statistical significance out the window, but turns out it precisely follows your incentives because you as a working academic and myself as a working academic, we need to get stuff published for our careers, for our standing in the profession. And so it doesn't matter whether it's true or not, just as long as it looks significant or looks interesting. And the only thing preventing us from just outright being misleading is a sense of guilt or just a desire to search for the truth and all that sort of stuff.

#### Dr. Peter Ridd

16:48

That's right, because there's actually very little consequence to a scientist being wrong. I mean, I've written multiple papers. I actually took it on myself about a decade ago, just when an important paper came out that I thought was wrong, I'd spend the time, a lot of time to show why it was wrong, and I'd then publish a paper saying, this is why it is wrong. And some of these papers are not just wrong. They are just fairy tales. That's the only way you could describe them. But there's no comeback on the

scientist for making these mistakes.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

17:17

For example, these reefs, which were supposedly dead, and on websites all around the world, in annual reports. Well, the reef wasn't dead. We got pictures of it showing there's great coral in that region. It doesn't matter at all. It's like water off a duck's back that they're wrong. Whereas if an engineer makes a mistake, there are dead bodies in the wreckage of the aeroplane. So, this is the problem. There are no consequences, especially in the environmental sciences to being wrong. In 30 years' time, we may ... The Crown of Thorns starfish for the Great Barrier Reef. This has been going on for 50 years. They've been predicting the death of the reef from Crown-of-thorns starfish. People are starting to cotton on only now. There are no consequences to scientists being wrong. We've got to make sure there are.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

18:02

The process even ... sorry, I'm going to back you up entirely, because the process even selects against those consequences, so it's very, very hard to get a replication, successful or unsuccessful, published. So, you're not going to spend your time trying to replicate other people's studies.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

18:19

It's worse than that. You actually can't get it funded. I tried.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

18:22

Yeah, of course you did, yeah.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

18:23

I tried to, through the Australian Research Council, to put in a replication study and it wasn't just that it didn't get through reviewers, which is what I expected. The reviewers actually said, "It goes against the funding rules for the Australian Research Council." And it does. I then read it and I thought, oh my goodness, they've got me now. Because it was true. It has to be new work, new science, and replication is not new work. Even though it's fundamental to the scientific process, if you can't replicate it like Newton's Laws of Motion are replicated millions of times every day, we can rely on them with our life. If you can't replicate it, it's actually not science in the first

place. And we don't fund replication.

**Scott Hargreaves**

19:00

And I think I've heard you say, Peter, elsewhere that it's not like you're trying to turn the entire scientific establishment upside down. You know, maybe tilt it at a certain angle, but I think I've heard you say something like, "Even if you just took 1% of the funds that flow towards this new but unreplicable sort of science and funding alarmist claims and rewarding that kind of research, if we just 1% and applied it to quality assurance, imagine what you could do."

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

19:30

That's right. Similar to most industries, you don't normally spend more than one or 2% on quality assurance. But I, for the reference since this whole word, quality assurance, actually was a big moment for me when in a conversation with Russell Reichheld who was the head of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and he'd got into trouble for supporting the Adani port, the Abbot Point. And I rang him up or emailed him, I can't remember which, and he said, "We certainly got a quality assurance problem." And I asked him the question, "How many papers would we have to check? That it's all based on." And I was thinking 20, and he said, "12." Only 12 papers." And everything else is-

**Scott Hargreaves**

20:07

And this is to do with sediment-

**Dr Chris Berg**

20:08

and everything else cites that dadadada. Yeah.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

20:11

Everything sites that. It's like an inverted pyramid. If you chop away the base that everything else falls down. So I reckon of the \$440 million that the government's recently announced to save the reef, if you spent 1%, 2% at most, you could actually check those fundamental papers and some will pass. I suspect most wouldn't, but you know, that's just-

**Dr Chris Berg**

20:32

That's the discovery.

Dr. Peter Ridd

20:33

That's right.

Dr Chris Berg

20:34

So, normally when you publish a book chapter at a university, you'll record in the- Normally when you publish a book chapter, you'll report it to the university on, go into some research system. And normally if you do a media appearance, you know, it will come up in a media mentions list or something like that and then like you add it to your CV or whatever it is that you do, whatever. That's important. What happened in this case after you published with the IPA, went on Alan Jones.

Dr. Peter Ridd

21:00

Well, I got a phone call from the Dean signed that I had to report to see him.

Dr Chris Berg

21:04

For congratulations I presume.

Dr. Peter Ridd

21:07

Then I saw the dean hand. He handed me a brown paper envelope and told me that I was up for serious misconduct, and then it went from there.

Dr Chris Berg

21:16

On what grounds did he originally make that claim?

Dr. Peter Ridd

21:20

Because that I had been uncollegial or I'd broken the code of conduct or whatever because I'd said nasty words essentially because I'd said untrustworthy, that the institutions were untrustworthy and that the marine biologists were emotional, which I firmly believe is one of the problems which we've got though. Though I was actually saying it because Alan Jones said, "Oh, these marine biology, so they just did it for them, the grant money," and I said, "No, no, no. They actually believe it. Don't, don't tell them that they're corrupt because they're mostly not corrupt." You know, I don't know any marine biologist who's doing it just for the money. Those

marine biologists who actually think the reef is buggered really believe it is right, but their emotional. So anyway, I was done for both of those and we decided we would fight.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

22:05

But sorry to roll back. These were you were being uncollegial to colleagues in your school or ...?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

22:13

And at the Australian Institute of Marine Science, even though I didn't name anybody by name, I said the two organisations, the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the ARC Center of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

22:23

And for the benefit of our listeners, those two bodies are affiliated with your employer or your former employer, James Cook University.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

22:30

That's right. Yeah.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

22:32

So, so where did it go from there? So obviously you decided to fight it.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

22:36

Well, I got to say-

[Gideon Rozner](#)

22:40

Before we talk about the fight, did at any point did any of these higher ups who were putting you through this disciplinary process, did they actually refute your substantive complaints about quality assurance?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

22:50

No. And they never even asked, you know, "Bloody hell Peter, what were you saying this for? You know, it sounds like a pretty harsh thing you said. Let's have a chat about it." It was nothing like that when I could have explained, well, you know, you read my chapter. Of course they've never

read it. In fact, at the first they didn't realize that what I'm going on about is quality assurance of the science, right? Not just the science. I'm not just saying the science is wrong, but there is a fundamental quality assurance problem because they'd never even bothered to read my papers. I've also got papers out on this as well. They thought that I was just criticizing the science when I'm going into much more. But no, it was just big stick. We're gonna whack this guy as hard as we can.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

23:31

But you're allowed to criticize the science, yeah?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

23:34

And I should be allowed to criticize the quality assurance of the science.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

23:36

Absolutely.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

23:37

Now they are saying, "You're allowed to criticize the science," because I had been doing that and they have allowed me to do that, but now I was going to the heart of the matter, and this is really a dagger at the heart of this whole thing that actually the problem is the quality assurance and if the quality assurance is wrong, then by definition it's untrustworthy. Even if in the end it turns out to be right, right? If you can't demonstrate that you've got a process which will give some measure of, you know, reliability, then that is no longer trustworthy.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

24:09

But that is such a weird distinction from the university's perspective because I mean most academic disputes ... it's not obvious from the outside, but most academic disputes are methodological ones. They're about process. Did you use the right model? Did you include the correct tests or not enough tests or anything like that? When you are contesting what we're calling quality assurance, that is... you'll really talk about method testing. Well, arguments about that, yeah?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

24:38

We are, but you see, this is a far more dangerous argument to those on the other side because up to then I'd been arguing, you know, sediment doesn't affect the reef for this reason or whatever. Okay. But now I'm going to the heart of the problem that because they can ignore a person if they're talking about the details of the science, but because we were shooting it back to the replication crisis, I think they could really see that this actually is true, that there is a massive problem here. And that was one of the motivations of why they wanted to come down on me pretty hard.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

25:10

But even so, I mean, so you are protected as an academic by something that we amusingly call academic freedom. Everything that you have said would be ... I think most of our listeners would associate that within the realms of academic freedom.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

25:25

And Judge Vasta agreed.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

25:27

Yeah. And the judge, which of course we'll come to, agreed, but why did, why they say it wasn't covered by academic freedom? Because I'm certain that you would've responded like, "Hold on, I've got academic freedom."

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

25:40

Yes. They said, "You've got to obey the code of conduct." They put on top of academic freedom, the code of conduct. Now the code of conduct, I'm sure that if I looked at you like this, that's aggressive, right?

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

25:55

Yeah, yeah, and we're going to have a discussion after this, yeah.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

25:55

All right.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

25:56

Snowflake right there?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

25:57

Literally that code of conduct is so loosely written that almost anything you do that's going to cause a bit of an argument is going to break the code of conduct, so they've got you over a barrel if you're going to have to follow the code of conduct. So in the end, the court case does the code of conduct override academic freedom or vice versa. Now of course the university was going to argue academic freedom is subservient to the code of conduct.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

26:22

And once again, for the benefit of our listeners, the technical nature of the legal dispute was that your right to academic freedom was in the enterprise bargaining agreement, which was in effect your employment contract and again the JCU administration layered over that a code of conduct where all sorts of rubbery, obligations, including for example, being collegiate and respecting the integrity and good reputation of the university. Now you cannot by definition, protect at all costs the reputation of the university and point out the science is wrong. It's just impossible I would think.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

26:56

Well this is precisely it, but that's what the university was arguing. Yeah.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

27:01

So I'm looking at the judgment, so we'll move to the court case itself, but the judgment has just a massive litany of accusations from the university. And obviously there was a lot of disputes that built up over the course of these academic misconduct processes and procedures and so forth. But there's just ... I haven't got the number on me. It's something like 16 accusations or something along those lines.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

27:30

Well altogether there was over 40.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

27:32

That's right. They sort of gelled and down to a nice round-

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

27:35

That's nice. Just an extraordinary litany of things, which the judge in this case threw out every single one of them in a rather devastating judgment for the James Cook University. Certainly to a layman's view. But I'd like to sort of talk through some of those if that's okay. One of the things that I found the most interesting, and this is purely from my own personal perspective, is the claims that to have written in a book published by the Institute of Public Affairs that constituted a conflict of interest. Now, I raise this because I'm hosting a podcast at the Institute of Public Affairs right now.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

28:16

We could never understand that one. I mean, some of the things, you at least understand what their argument was, but this one you think, well, I just don't understand the argument. How do we even almost respond to this? I was offered, you know, I think every of the authors of those was offered a couple of grand or so to write a chapter, right?

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

28:32

Or bribed a couple of grand you're obviously referring to.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

28:35

But I didn't. I said, "No, no, it's my job to write."

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

28:37

He did indeed.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

28:38

I said, "No, I'm not going to take money," because I never do. Right. Not just because of the IPA. I mean, I've done a huge amount of consulting work for the university. Literally probably well over \$10 million in my career and I've always taken the view ... and I could have taken some of that. I could have done some it on the side. I've always taken the view; I will never do that. I'm just going to work for the university, it makes life simple. We could just never understand what the argument was. In fact, in the court itself, they sort of almost seem to withdraw...

[Gideon Rozner](#)

29:08

If I could chime in, that was one of the, for lack of a better word, funnier aspects of the hearing, which was great high legal drama anyway, but when it came to the point about conflict of interest, the judge was just exasperated. He just could not. There's this poor bloke who was the barrister for the other side and had to run this argument. He was sort of dancing around it and no matter how hard the Judge Vasta tried, they couldn't produce any reason why writing that chapter in that book constituted a conflict of interest other than the fact that, you know, perhaps the university just didn't like the IPA, didn't like the cut of our jib.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

29:48

Let me give you a hypothesis. Doesn't it speak to a claim that it wasn't just about the code of conduct or anything like that? They were actually frustrated with the content of what you are arguing because the IPA would have had a reputation as a organization that's more open to debating climate science and this is obviously a climate science book, or book about the policy and science behind climate change. The claim that writing for that is inherently a conflict of interest does tell you that it's not just about the code of conduct. It's actually about your views on the science of coral bleaching.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

30:31

I think that's definitely true and also on the quality and everything that despite JCU saying ... what's the quote that ... "We will fight until we're blue in the face for his academic freedom," which is clearly not-

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

30:42

And then they got blue in the face and they stopped.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

30:44

Well, I mean in the end they were arguing that what I said was not an acceptable thing to do and that who I was talking to or whatever was not acceptable, and the judge threw it all out.

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

30:57

Yeah, I mean there's a big element in academia that you are the person. You as an academic are treated as responsible for the places you choose to publish and they'll encourage you to publish in top journals and so forth. But by and large it's part of the ideology of academia. There's a trust that

you're an academic, you're a working academic, you know your field better than anyone else on the planet or maybe better than, you know ... there were four or five people who could judge your work. So you get to decide how you communicate that work, what organisations you work with, what industry partners you'll have and so forth. And it seems like the university sectors, certainly in your case, try and start to override some of those decisions and say, "Well, you know, you can, you can publish with who you want, but not the IPA." I mean, that's a different thing.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

31:46

That's right, and of course the IPA has got an appalling reputation within the university. One of the most interesting-

[Gideon Rozner](#)

31:51

Funny about that.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

31:52

Yeah, hard one. A hard one.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

31:54

One of the most disgraceful things was when I went to see a very senior academic, basically to ask to build a bridge between me and the VC said, "Look, we've got to talk. We've just got to talk. We cannot slug this out in the media." This is before we went to the GoFundMe. I wanted to get a bridge to talk and I mentioned to her that I was working ... no, she knew that the IPA was involved at that stage because they've paid for some legal fees, a few thousand bucks. She told me that was a terrible mistake that I should never have taken the legal assistance from the IPA and I said to her, "But nobody else was helping me. The union didn't help me. You didn't help me. None of the other academics helped me." And so the IPA come along as you seem to view them as some sort of neo fascist organization, but all they're interested in here is free speech, and they gave me a few thousand bucks and you're telling me that I was not supposed to take the only help that was on offer to me at the time? It's just an incredible situation. And that would be ... I don't think that would be right through the universities, but there certainly would be great disquiet. I've been told, you know, "We think that what the university did to you was terrible, but we do worry about the friends you keep."

[Dr Chris Berg](#)

33:11

But that is extraordinary given the sort of issues that were in dispute in this court case, particularly provisions that you were supposed to stay silent to everyone, including your wife if I'm right.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

33:27

But even worse, that when I then mentioned the fact that they had done that to me, that then hit me with yet another misconduct allegation for supposedly lying about the fact.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

33:36

You had to be silent about the fact that you'd been told to be silent.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

33:39

Yes, yeah, that's right.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

33:42

That's the Soviet model.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

33:42

My personal favorite when you forward one of those outrageous emails on saying quite for your amusement FYI, let you put a no satire direction.

[Dr Peter Ridd](#)

33:52

Yes, that's right. I have to know there will be no satire. [crosstalk 00:33:55] .

[Speaker 2](#)

33:57

No, sorry Chris. I will just interrupt your flow slightly because you alluded to the GoFundMe campaign and that initial support which then resulted in the GoFundMe. Apart from anything else, Peter, as someone watching all of this, I mean, that was the response to that really does restore your faith in people that here you were being criticised for, you know, don't be friends with them, you know, probably being told, you know, just keep your head down. The response to that GoFundMe campaign just tells you there are thousands upon thousands of people out there who do believe in academic freedom, who do understand the issues.

### Dr. Peter Ridd

34:37

And are very grumpy with the universities. I mean, I remember talking with John Roskam because we didn't know what was going to happen. It was a heck of a risk. And because one of the problems with it is as soon as we went to the GoFundMe, JCU we're going to come out with a great big stick. And so if we fail to get the funds, you know, I would have been fired. And we thought we might get 500 bucks. We didn't even dream that the first one would be over in two days and the second one would be over in three days.

### Scott Hargreaves

35:04

No, just remarkable. A lot of people listening [that donated]. Thank you.

### Dr Chris Berg

35:07

All right, so I do commend to listeners the judgment itself, given how absurd some of the claims that the university made against you, Peter, and the rather devastating approach that the judge took to some of those clients. But I want to sort of move us forward to talk about what you've learned. So this has been an incredible, deeply personal experience for you as someone who spent your career in academia. What do you now know about the university system that you didn't know before they made these claims?

### Dr Peter Ridd

35:45

Well, one thing I do know, and this is a bit of a shame, actually, is that most academics actually don't really care about academic freedom. Most academics are doing stuff that's uncontroversial, or if it is controversial, they are on the politically correct side of the controversy, and so that they really don't care. There'll only be one in 500, one in 1,000 academics that really care. I think what I've learnt most about this is actually since what followed the judgment, the reaction of the university; no contrition, no regret. And even worse, that the ... one of the university organisations, their industrial sort of organisation has come out on the side of the university so they're still arguing against academic freedom. To my knowledge, none of them have signed up or have agreed that they will sign up to the Chief Justice French's review on academia and academic freedom. None of, as far as I know, are doing that. What I've learnt is that the university system is just utterly and totally in need of massive reform and the problem is I have no idea how you do it.

*(recorded prior to UWA supporting French)*

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

36:55

We might talk about that in a moment, but I do want to say my understanding is that the National Tertiary Education Union was very supportive of you.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

37:02

Yes, they were.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

37:04

And listeners might be interested to say that there was a union actually backing [crosstalk 00:37:08]

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

37:07

Yeah, they were backing me. I mean I might have been a bit harsh before, the union said, "Look, we don't have the money to do it." And I understand that they didn't have the money, because there's only about 20% of academics are in the union and IPA listeners you're all going to be really disappointed with, or some of you will be. But I've been in the union since the beginning and I would encourage all academics to join the union. We need to sort out the union because-

[Gideon Rozner](#)

37:32

Well, it sounds like this is one union that actually is doing what it should do, which is sticking up for its members.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

37:36

Well, yeah in this case it does.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

37:39

This is a world first for the Looking Forward Podcast I have to say.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

37:42

There's other things that the union does which I think are a bit crazy, but if you're a member of the union you can at least influence it. So yeah,

academics; join the union and get them to make sure that the code of conduct does not override academic freedom. Which in Sydney University I think it actually is the other way round.

**Dr Chris Berg**

38:02

Yeah, so you mentioned the Robert French inquiry into intellectual freedom at universities and free speech on campus and so forth and, look, we've spoken about this a couple of times on the podcast already. But the French Inquiry recommended, found that there wasn't really a free speech crisis on campus but that each university should adopt a voluntary code of practice or something along those lines on freedom of speech and academic freedom and so forth. How do you sort of see your experiences tying into that bigger debate that we've been having?

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

38:39

I think it demonstrates there actually is a crisis, and the way you can tell there's a crisis is; the reaction of the universities. That they've all decided, as far as I can tell, that they're not going to adopt his thing. Now that then by definition, to me, is a crisis. You see; for every Peter Ridd, there's another few hundred people who would dearly love to have said something but they're just not ... And then they see Peter Ridd and say, "Oh, well Peter Ridd won his case. Oh, I'll now stick my hand up and say something." I don't think so, right? Because they're going to say, "Well, I would need to get \$260,000 worth of other people's money and go through that." So they're not going to, they will see my case as not being an indication that academic freedom exists. It's actually that academic freedom definitely does not exist is the lesson that should be learnt from that and the reaction to universities of the French's is another example of that.

**Gideon Rozner**

39:30

Do you think though that as a result of your win there might be, particularly those who are covered by an academic freedom clause in their EBA, there may be some loosening of that dynamic? Some more academics who might come forward and-

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

39:44

No.

**Gideon Rozner**

39:45

No?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

39:45

No, the lesson is absolutely clear; you might be able to get your job. We're not even sure whether I will get my job back, okay? It's probable I won't because normally in these things reinstatement is not the one ... not that's given. So I probably won't get my job back, but maybe there'll be some compensation that will make up for that. But the lesson that every single academic is going to get is that; whatever you do, don't do what he did, right? And unless we have, essentially, a revolution with the universities which may start with this French thing, but we've also got to deal with vice-chancellors who clearly don't understand what they should be doing, universities will continue on as they are and the other people, and there's plenty of my ilk, will remain silent because it's the only sensible thing to do, especially if you've got a mortgage and you've got kids.

[Gideon Rozner](#)

40:40

What do you think is driving this dynamic? I mean, look, if I was a vice-chancellor at a university and I understood, at least theoretically in the abstract the importance of having ... of making the university over which I preside a free speech zone, why wouldn't vice-chancellors be chomping at the bit to introduce a code of conduct immediately and show that they were committed to academic freedom? What is it about the university sector that's working against that?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

41:06

Well, they just fundamentally don't believe it. It's just as simple as that; they don't believe it. It doesn't matter how much damage it does to the reputation, because JCU's reputation, especially in North Queensland, has taken a heck of a beating. And even that, they don't believe in intellectual freedom, they see Peter Ridd as being supported by some murky, neo-fascist organizations, climate deniers and they believe that they are on the side of the angels, they really do. They really believe that they're doing the right thing and it doesn't matter that they had to do disgusting things like reading emails and all this type of stuff, it was just a necessary evil. It's like having to bomb the Germans in the Second World War, you might have had to have killed a few million civilians, but if you take out a few factories it justified the ... what had to be done. That's essentially, I think, the mindset of the universities.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

42:02

You mentioned that the first time you came into trouble on public commentary, you just sat down with the Dean and you just had a chat.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

42:13

Well, it was more than a chat. I was pretty cross with the Dean at the end of it, but I now look back at that as the good old days.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

42:18

This was quite pleasant, tea and biccies and all sort of thing.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

42:20

That's right, yeah.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

42:22

But obviously this was much more a brown envelope across the table, HR representatives standing in every corner of the room, that sort of thing. That itself is indicative of a huge change in the university sector, isn't it?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

42:35

Total. Because I mean what would have happened 20 years ago under the similar circumstances is that I would've been spoken to, and if they had started to the bad things the professoriate would have got together and said to the VC, "What on earth do you think you are doing here? You can't do this."

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

42:50

But what's happened at universities in the last 20 years is that the administrators have taken all the power, the professoriate is ... doesn't have any power. When I joined JCU the professor of physics was an important person with a budget who would talk to the VC every couple of weeks or every month, now at JCU and most universities are like this; the professor who runs chemistry, physics and maths all combined, doesn't even have a budget. He's so detached from the vice-chancellor by five levels of administration that you'd probably see the vice-chancellor at the graduation ceremony and they have no power. The professoriate, academia no longer has power in the university and that is a fundamental

change that's occurred.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

43:33

How does that bureaucratization or, the left often call it corporatization or something like that, the neo-liberalization, how does that affect the intellectual climate?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

43:45

Well, it means that everybody's now scared that, if the academics are scared, they're scared of the next round of redundancies, especially at JCU at the moment. They know that they have no power, they know that the administration can be quite brutal, it means that you pull your head in. It's as simple as that. You're never going to grumble too much, you're certainly not going to do the sort of thing that I did if you've got any sense in your head.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

44:12

I mean you sort of said that you weren't sure exactly what reforms would help. But I mean to answer something like that, in Australia there's a lot of confusion about ... we don't have tenure in that American traditional sense where you can't be sacked except for incredible business reasons. I'm employed on a temporary contract, but most people are employed on a permanent contract if they're a full time academic employee. Do we need some sort of change like that? Do we need to impose some sort of tenure or some sort of formal protection? Or how do you think about those questions?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

44:46

No, I don't think that would necessarily work because I don't know whether that's the solution. I think the fundamental problem with the universities is that almost from top to bottom it's full of the same type of people and we've got to get more genuine diversity of views in the universities. I think a certain type of person is attracted to academia and we need to get other people in there who have different views and will be probably more likely to stop some of these things. But the federal government does have a part to play, I mean the French Review is certainly an important thing that it means that a university just can't make any rules willy-nilly, they're responsible for giving millions and millions of billions of dollars and they need to be able to make some rules for these universities, which at the moment they're not doing.

Scott Hargreaves

45:34

Yeah, and the very idea that the federal government might have some influence is itself challenged, even though as you say, that's the source of much of the funding. And just the thing about academic freedom so getting ... Was reported on much of this in terms of how that was bought out my Stuart Wood acting-

Gideon Rozner

45:58

Brilliantly.

Scott Hargreaves

45:58

[crosstalk 00:45:58] Peter and then picked up by Judge Vestas so that this is not something that's just a bunch of people sitting around in studio talking about it, it's something which has a long heritage, it has real meaning but we only find it activated in enterprise bargaining agreements. Now, credit again to the union for ensuring that it was, but that is not a safe home for such a fundamental principle and that's really what French is about to me.

Dr. Peter Ridd

46:24

That's right, I mean one of the things that I keep on going on about is that we were saved by 13.3 of the enterprise agreement, right? That was what saved us. Now, 13.3 now has been removed.

Gideon Rozner

46:34

Wow.

Dr. Peter Ridd

46:35

I think that the union-

Speaker 3

46:36

In the latest enterprise bargaining agreement?

Dr. Peter Ridd

46:37

Yeah, at JCU, but it's worse at Sydney, it's already worse at Sydney.

Gideon Rozner

46:42

Geez.

Dr. Peter Ridd

46:42

I mean I have sympathy for the union, they're supposed to be doing a lot of things and academic freedom is one of many. They're worried about people's jobs, and so if there's a bit of pressure on 13.3, which was what we relied on to a large extent, then maybe it goes. It shouldn't be up to a union to defend academic freedom.

Scott Hargreaves

47:03

Precisely.

Dr. Chris Berg

47:04

It strikes me that there's a deep interaction here between research funding and the structure of the university, not just at an individual level but you seem to have come up against some relationships that JCU had that really were key to their reputation and key to their interaction with federal research funding bodies like the Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at JCU, the Australian Institute of Marine Science also a key stakeholder of JCU and even the Great Barrier Reef Marine Parks Authority. Was a lot of what you think going on just that interaction between federal relationships, the reputation of the university and you as a little gadfly trying to destroy that happy space?

Dr. Peter Ridd

47:55

I'm actually not so sure that it was about money for JCU, I mean I know a lot of people say that and there may have been a bit of a motivation there. No, I think that a couple of the characters high up in the university, including the vice-chancellor, just hated everything about what I was saying and that they believe that they are acting on a point of principle.

Dr. Chris Berg

48:16

If you were a young academic now, wanting to work in the space of marine physics or just anywhere, what advice would you give? Assuming that that person didn't just want to get along and just have a happy, quiet career. If they actually wanted to pursue the truth, if they wanted to pursue research;

could they do so or how would they do so?

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

48:37

No, it's just not possible.

**Dr. Chris Berg**

48:39

With that incredibly optimistic note.

**Gideon Rozner**

48:41

Quite depressing.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

48:44

You just couldn't. I mean, look, I've advised some of my PHD students when they're writing a paper and they want to get to that last paragraph and say, "This totally proves that the reef is fine, it's not being killed by sediment or whatever." And I'll say, "Just hang on guys."

**Dr. Chris Berg**

48:56

"No, the answer is more research funding is needed."

**Gideon Rozner**

48:59

Yeah.

**Dr. Chris Berg**

48:59

That's it.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

49:00

The answer is more nuanced than that and I'd say, "No, just remove that. It's bad enough that my name's on the paper and that you're associated with me, that you just can't afford to do that at your stage of the career." I mean I've often said, and there's an element of truth in that, this. That I didn't deliberately go out to get myself fired, but on the other hand I probably knew I was prepared to take a higher risk because I'm closer to my retirement than I would've been if I was in my 40s and if you're a 20-something PHD student you would just be absolutely mad to do the sorts of

things that I've been doing.

[Dr. Chris Berg](#)

49:36

This is particularly the case I think because we've got such a wild overproduction of PHDs as well.

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

49:42

Well, it certainly doesn't help. But even if that wasn't the case it would just be a mad thing to do.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

49:48

I was just going to say, which brings back amongst the many things that need to be tried, including French is, if it's while we're fixing up universities there is this parallel structure around the institutions, the opportunities for quality assurance, to contest. So that massive flow of research funding if we can't fix science within the straight away, within the institutions, within universities; one of the other levers governments do have is to, to protect the integrity of science, is to make it more contestable. And you in the past have talked about different measures, there was a lot of talk out of the US about Blue Teams-Red Teams, President Trump is now setting up his own counsel of advisors, there's different models out there. But what excites you about those opportunities?

[Dr. Peter Ridd](#)

50:46

Well, I mean there are two big problems here, one's the universities, one's the science organizations. They're both equally hopeless actually, but I can see how you can reform science because in fact it's already starting. I mean I'm saying the government should have essentially an audit team that runs through the Auditor General's department, not the Science Department, that would take those 12 or 20 papers on the reef or on the Murray-Darling or whatever and actually subject them to proper peer review. And you could do this very quickly, of course the Chief Scientist probably is not terribly keen on that because they're still in a bit of denial about what their replication crisis means. But I'm actually very hopeful that we can actually turn this around on the science, the science institutions. But the universities, I can't see it.

[Scott Hargreaves](#)

51:37

Yeah, let's start with the easy stuff like fixing science, then we'll get to universities. We'll circle back and fix universities.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

51:44

Yeah, yeah.

**Scott Hargraves**

51:45

Peter, this has been absolutely brilliant, thank you so much for joining us. All the best with the next steps in your battle. We've all been following it with tremendous interest and know that you have friends all over Australia who are getting behind you in this in spirit, if not even more directly. Thanks for coming in, mate.

**Dr. Peter Ridd**

52:08

Well, thanks, and thanks for all those people who have helped and even just friendly emails. It's made all the difference in this battle, actually.

**Scott Hargreaves**

52:15

No, brilliant. And a big thank you as always of course to my fellow panelist, Chris Burgh from RMIT University, Gideon Rozner live from Brisbane, oh sorry, live from Melbourne in this case. And also our wonderful team; James Bolt and Saul Mascatel. You've been listening to Looking Forward, a product of the IPA. If you want to join or donate, get around our end of financial year appeal; [IPA.org.au](http://IPA.org.au). We'll be back with one of the regular episodes of Looking Forward very soon, thanks again Peter.

**For media and comment:** Evan Mulholland, Director of Communications, on 0405 140 780, or at [emulholland@ipa.org.au](mailto:emulholland@ipa.org.au)