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English-born American theoretical physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson.

by: Leighton Smith

Does the death of a giant intellect damage the collective IQ of the planet? The passing of physicist Freeman Dyson, 96, over the weekend gives rise to the question.

Born in Britain, he arrived in America in 1947 at age 23. He spent most of his career as a professor of physics at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. At Cornell University, New York, he worked on nuclear reactors, solid-state physics and biology. It was there he worked with another giant in physics, Richard Feynman.

Dyson's credentials were beyond reproach; a theoretical physicist, professor emeritus of Mathematical Physics and Astrophysics and he also indulged in matters of human destiny.

In recent years, with time obviously running out, Dyson was a sought-after interviewee. And with valid justification. There was an overlap with Einstein at Princeton and in a 2016 interview he was asked whether he knew Einstein. "No" was the answer, "and he didn't encourage young people to get to know him. He never came to seminars, never came to lunch. We always saw him walk by every day. He was tremendously busy with affairs of the world, so he was very much in demand. People came every day. Important people came to visit, he just didn't have time to say hello to the kids. He didn't enjoy teaching."

The irony is that when Einstein died in 1955, Dyson was considered "Einstein's successor".

In the late 1970s, a number of scientists from various disciplines were involved in early climate change research at the Institute of Energy Analysis. Dyson was particularly interested in carbon dioxide and plant life. The structure and effect of clouds was also on the agenda. Their research was based on experimentation but that was about to change.

Climate scientists were increasingly moving to computer-modelling. Dyson's criticisms were astute: "The models are extremely oversimplified. They don't represent the clouds in detail at all. They simply use a fudge factor to represent the clouds." There is no record of Dyson's opinion of "world best practice".

He was, however, a sceptic to the end. Here we have one of the world's greatest scientific minds, peak intellect: "I think any good scientist ought to be a sceptic."

Here's a little more, in commenting on American climate journalism: "They're absolutely lousy. That's true also in Europe. I don't know why they've been brainwashed."

Dyson wrote a number of books. My favourite, The Scientist as Rebel, was published in 2006. As the publisher describes it: "He looks with a sceptical eye at fashionable scientific fads and fantasies, and speculates on the future of climate prediction, generic engineering, the colonisation of space. He also reflects on broader philosophical issues, such as the limits of reductionism, the morality of strategic bombing and nuclear weapons, the preservation of the environment and the relationship between science and religion."

All written in easily accessible language. Genius made easy!
Now, let me introduce Byron Sharp, Professor of Marketing Science and Director of Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, University of South Australia: "I've been a greenie since I was a child. I've raised money and marched to save the whales. I searched out all the pockets of native bush on our farm. I became a vegetarian. As an adult I bought hundreds of acres of native bush land and set it aside to regenerate ..." You get the picture. Solar panels, sold the car and went without for years.

Then, when Al Gore's movie came out, Sharp rallied his colleagues at the E-B Institute to explore ways to help. "I thought we might contribute insights into consumer behaviour as well as mass communication effectiveness. Some of my colleagues pushed back. They said that Al Gore was exaggerating, that he sounded more like a religious zealot than a scientist and pointed out numerous errors he presented," he argued.

"But the forecasting scientists in the institute told me that the forecasts of global warming were not to be trusted. They pointed out that climate scientists were not forecasting scientists, that climate scientists were ignorant of the established principles that help improve the very difficult business in complex conditions and that their forecasting approaches were a very long way from best practice."

Sharp's essay "How I changed my mind ... about global warming" is very rational. He concludes: "I've gone from being a climate alarmist to a climate realist. I hope that both 'alarmists' and 'deniers' will do likewise."

So, does the death of a giant intellect damage the collective IQ of the planet? At this moment in time, you bet it does. However, Byron Sharp's story softens the impact.

Professor Sharp was born in Auckland, grew up in the Ness Valley, Clevedon, and graduated from Auckland University.
The last word goes to Dyson: "The quest for knowledge would be - must be - infinite in all directions."
Censorship is an impairment on knowledge.