

Out of the Box

The dispassionate objectivity of scientists is a myth. No scientist is simply involved in the single-minded pursuit of truth, he is also engaged in the passionate pursuit of research grants and professional success. Nutritionists may wish to attack malnutrition, but they also wish to earn their living in ways they find congenial¹.

Twenty years ago I said to John Rivers 'I wish I had said that', and he replied 'you will, Geoffrey, you will. But with a reference!' Later John used his position as Editor of Nutrition Notes and News in the context of the 1984 Brighton IUNS Congress, to complain about the evident indifference of the profession to starvation and other relevant events in the outside world. He was approached by the venerable white chief of the Nutty Soc (as he and Caroline Walker referred to the Nutrition Society) and relieved of his editorial responsibilities^{2,3}.

And now the venerable Barrie Margetts has asked me to write a column for *Public Health Nutrition* which, given his fabulous success with the journal, I expect to be tucked away on pages 239–240 of the next issues, next to the inside back cover, where in other journals astrology or *My Day* columns are placed. I thought a nice title would be *Gad* because according to Partridge⁴ – himself citing Jane Austen – 'on the gad' means 'constantly making visits and gossip'. Of course there are other meanings, as in 'gadzookery' and 'gadfly'⁵, but Barrie prefers *Out of the Box*, and I comply.

Last time I saw Phil James I asked him why he was gadding about calling me a troublemaker, not because of the obvious reference to kettles and pots, but because surely this was a compliment? We live in a world that can only be made a better place partly by means of overturning conventional wisdoms of what still remains the dominant group within nutrition and food science and policy. Take protein policy, for example⁶, and Jackson A, personal communication. . .no no, not now, later. . .

Can the titanic paradigms, that are the basic causes of the burger joints opening every week on some street in Brasília where I now live, be shifted? 'Shift' is too gentle a concept; if not sunk, they need to be scrapped. Them's my sentiments.

So *Out of the Box* will be part gossip column: if you meet me in the bar at a conference and say something interesting, you may get quoted.

I will also be rhetorical. A highlight of 2002 for me was the approach of an Italian female scientist in the São Paulo meeting of the International Association for the Study of Obesity (whose business is booming, as the global waistline expands) in the ***** + * Intercontinental Hotel, who said to me 'Professor Cannon, you are so passionate!'

(I should explain that professors are a lire a dozen in Italy; as John Waterlow once said to me, the title should probably be reserved for what he called real professors, currently in charge of departments of academics).

There again, part of the job of the column will be to introduce unusual ideas, remembering that nutrition is a confluence of disciplines. This trailer ends with another quote from John Rivers, from *Nature* in 1979, with Philip Payne⁷. The first sentence does not need much modification, a generation later. If the second sentence had become true, there might be less need for gadzookery.

At present where nutrition policies exist at all, they have been evolved by senior administrators in closed cabal with leaders of the health professions. Such cabals will not survive for long.

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References

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- 2 Rivers J. Fame and famine. *Nutrition Notes and News* 1985; **8**: 1–2.
- 3 Rivers J. The hollow men. *Nutrition Notes and News* 1985; **9**: 1–2.
- 4 Partridge E. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. London: George Routledge, 1937.
- 5 *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: University Press, 1993.
- 6 Cannon G. Nutrition: the new world order. *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, in press.
- 7 Rivers J, Payne P. Why eating should carry a government health warning. *Nature* 1979; **291**: 98–9.

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