

## Elon Musk is causing problems for the Royal Society

### His continued membership has led to a high-profile resignation

ISAAC NEWTON was a self-interested tyrant. James Watson, a Nobel laureate, spouted racist and sexist notions all his life. These men nevertheless managed to keep hold of one of the British scientific establishment's highest baubles—fellowship of the Royal Society, the oldest scientific academy in the world. The latest member of that club to be accused of unbecoming behaviour is Elon Musk, the richest man in the world and, now, a confidant of President-elect Donald Trump. His continued inclusion—despite what some other scientists have called “anti-scientific” behaviour—has led to a fracas.

The situation came to a head on November 25th when Dorothy Bishop (pictured), a renowned neuropsychologist at the University of Oxford, announced that she had taken the rare step of resigning from the society in protest at its refusal to oust him. In a blistering post on her personal blog she declared that, because of what she saw as Mr Musk's tendency to spread misinformation and attack scientists online, she felt she could no longer show her fellow fellow the courtesy required by the society's code of conduct.

Mr Musk was elected to the Royal Society in 2018 along with 49 other fellows. Although not a scientist himself, he was honoured for his extensive record of technological innovation: SpaceX, his space-travel company, delivers more material into orbit than any rival, public or private; Tesla, another of his firms, has pioneered the manufacture of electric vehicles.

As transformative as his business endeavours have been, it is his behaviour on X, the social-media company he owns, that troubles Dr Bishop and her sympathisers. “He seems to have moved to a position of being blatantly anti-science,” she says, which sits uneasily with the requirement imposed on fellows to uphold high standards in their work and conduct.

In her blog post she highlights his “downplaying” of climate change, occasional amplification of vaccination hesitancy, and his persistent attacks on individual scientists, notably Anthony Fauci, who led the Trump administration's response to the covid-19 pandemic. (The Economist's analysis of Mr Musk's social-media activity finds a sharp increase in political posts in recent years.) Now that Mr Musk looks likely to co-run Mr Trump's new Department for Government Efficiency, an advisory body that may wield influence over the allocation of scientific funding, Dr Bishop fears that he could have a detrimental impact on American scientists. (Mr Musk was approached for comment.)

She is not alone in her concerns. In August a group of 74 fellows, including Dr Bishop, sent a letter to the Royal Society's governing body expressing their hope that Mr Musk would be removed after making what they regarded as inflammatory comments on X about the summer's riots in Britain. The society later informed the signatories that its lawyer had not found Mr Musk to have broken its code of conduct. According to Dr Bishop, though, the society will look at the case again—probably at a closed meeting currently scheduled for November 29th.

For its part the society says it is saddened by Dr Bishop's resignation, but reiterates the need to follow procedure. Precedent is thin on the ground. John Flamsteed, Britain's first Astronomer Royal, was expelled for not paying his dues (or, perhaps, for his disagreements with the tyrannical Newton) in 1709. Rudolf Raspe, a German geologist, was kicked out for embezzlement in 1775. In the intervening century and a half, however, no member has suffered a similar fate.

To Dr Bishop, Mr Musk's political power and social-media reach make this a much more serious affair. But even if others were to follow her lead, a handful of voluntary resignations from among the society's 1,800-odd members may not produce the desired momentum. If the society did expel Mr Musk, it would need to prepare for accusations of political bias and, potentially, a lawsuit. It does not take the most dazzling minds in science to spot those warning signs.

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