To be great is to be misunderstood. Ralph Waldo Emerson wanted this aphorism applied to “every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh”. Now, it may be stretching credibility too far to eulogise Barry Owen Jones - lawyer, teacher, politician and BP Pick-a-Box superstar - as ‘pure’ or even ‘wise’, but he certainly has the tinge of greatness and more than his share of misunderstanding.

Barry Jones’ reputation as a know-all is well-established, though over the years he’s changed his tune a little, taken down his arrogance a peg or two. Sometimes he can be very funny, though it’s usually an ironic, even sardonic, wit that he employs. His message is frequently misread, and sometimes it’s of his own doing.

A while back he thought he would have a “friendly” dig at Australians’ propensity to be “dim”, evidenced, he said, by people’s slowness in responding to an automatic teller or a green traffic light. Naturally, the friendly quip was reported as another slight on the national character. It must also be said that he can scarcely resist a joke at the audience’s expense. He can’t help himself. At the recent launching of the Australia Council’s Unlocking the Academies, he slipped in mischievous references to former prime minister H.V.Evatt, electrical engineer Sir MacFarlane Burnet and Nobel-Prize winner in medicine Sir John Monash “as a further test of the collective dimness, by which he might convince himself of the proposition that Australians have a very shallow understanding of our recent history” and which AAP reported as fact.

The media made up its collective mind about Jones years ago - an unrepenting eccentric. He has, of course, his own explanation for the label: someone once bestowed the title - perhaps it was that memorable day he produced a magneto from his coat pocket during Question Time to demonstrate some obscure meteorological point - and ever since the reputation has been recycled through the press clippings files. “Eccentricity is simply defined by the press gallery as being somebody who talks about different things to the subjects most people talk about,” he says. And most people talk about sport, including “the great helmsperson”, Bob Hawke, who, Jones generously acknowledges, “knows a lot about it”. In a portfolio like science, there are many intangibles to be addressed, and sporting comparisons here are not as easy to come by as in other portfolios. (See Matters Arising in this issue for Gary Wickham’s explanation of paradigm shifts in sport.)

He can understand the media critics and their labels, but he is incapable of reshaping that image. It’s his perceived - even proper - role to goad, to chide Australia out of its cumulative inertia. Anyone can see that, can’t they? Sleepers Wake!, indeed. He probably does these things because he cares, because he wants to set Australia on the road to glory, to develop the potential that he sees. He’s been talking up Australia as the intelligent country for some years now, and you get the impression that he takes some credit for Bob Hawke’s belated proclamation of Australia as the “clever” country, though it’s daubed with the usual Jones’ wit: “I’d always said we ought to make Australia the intelligent country but that was too hard to spell.”

But push as he might, he can’t budge or cajole us into action. Think of his excitement when CSIRO came up with the notion of gene shears and his frustration when, after 18 months, no Australian company would buy the idea, even with the incentive of a 150% tax deduction! By contrast a French firm didn’t need any persuasion. According to Jones, that company responded to the announcement of the discovery within two days, saying “it’s right, we’re going to get into it”. We do seem to be beyond hope.

It’s an irony for the Hawke government that, even though he was dumped as science minister earlier this year, Jones is still regarded as the government’s scientific seller. It’s irony, too, that while his chastising of scientists as “wimpish” publicists has turned them into effective lobbyists, he can’t cure himself of his own unfortunate public relations. He’s angry, rather than bitter, at being dumped...he can understand it all but he can’t do anything to change his own act, albeit an act that has mellowed over the years.

Who knows how long Barry Jones will continue to play de facto science minister. He’s not talking about his prospects, though it’s rumoured that he’s been offered a number of university chairs. If he settles on such a course, he might come closer to that other Emerson recipe for greatness: “great men are they who see...that thoughts rule the world.”

Kitty Eggerking.