

Don't cry for me, Australia!

MAX WHITTEN says that **CSIRO's leadership is in crisis.**

On 15 May John Howard launched *Fields of Discovery*, which describes some of CSIRO's great achievements over the past 50 years, especially in agriculture and astronomy. Its author, Brad Collis, describes CSIRO during this period as a goose laying many golden eggs.

Indeed, commentators have sometimes speculated that CSIRO's contribution to the nation's economic, social and environmental well-being was a key factor in the diverging fortunes of Argentina and Australia during the 20th century.

John Howard boasted that our cricket team had just been voted the best in the world. He proceeded to tell his largely CSIRO audience how he looked forward to the day when CSIRO could join our cricketers as world leaders.

Well, Prime Minister, you don't have to look forward: just look around you. CSIRO is a world leader. That was Collis' point.

Later that same day, John Kerin, the new Chairman of CSIRO's Stored Grain Research Laboratory, released an economic analysis of SGRL's work, showing that each dollar invested in the laboratory had returned more than \$20 in benefits. A vital export industry has remained competitive and our food is safer. Clearly, CSIRO still delivers.

Two years ago, Jonathan Shier and Geoff Garrett were imported to ginger up the ABC and CSIRO, respectively. Shier's failed attempts to "remake" the ABC are familiar to many.

It appears that Garrett is heading down the same path. On 22 May, CSIRO's Garrett told a large audience of senior R&D boffins in Sydney: "If it ain't broke, break it". That seems a

risky strategy for a business producing golden eggs!

Garrett hails from South Africa, with good credentials as the boss of CSIR – CSIRO's equivalent, but minus agriculture. To survive in the changed political and economic environment there, CSIR ramped up its external earnings under Garrett, partly by reinventing itself as a consulting firm.

At home, the Australian Tax Office has received a boost of \$1.6 billion, but CSIRO's budget is contracting despite its proud record. The indisputable facts indicate a serious loss of research capacity within CSIRO. Garrett's predecessor, the late Malcolm McIntosh, slowed the erosion of resources slightly, but at a price. He stifled CSIRO's chiefs and scientists from public comment.

The situation today is much more serious. Things are happening inside our global leader of public good research that demand debate. For instance, CSIRO's successful National Awareness Program has been abandoned and its principal architects gone. Half the divisional chiefs are looking elsewhere for jobs. Internal surveys revealed many top managers are severely stressed. New chiefs are offered 3-year appointments, hardly a recipe for attracting top quality research leaders and building the future.

CSIRO has largely lost its corporate memory after a steady stream of high-level departures from its headquarters. Informed insiders say that CSIRO's request for a deferral of its triennium funding stems more from an incapacity to argue its case than the prospect of lean pickings in the current climate.

In a bid to increase external earn-



Max Whitten in front of a poster of blowflies.

ings, CSIRO researchers now seek solutions that have more to do with corporate survival than the national interest. For instance, CSIRO actively lobbies for genetic engineering technology, with its promise of intellectual property and revenue streams. By contrast, CSIRO is not joining a current bid for an organic farming Cooperative Research Centre. The pickings were deemed too lean compared with GM crops.

The promise of massive increases in external earnings might have landed Garrett the job, but the strategy could shift CSIRO from being a powerhouse for public good research towards just another consulting firm.

Unfortunately, the Howard government is increasingly hostile to alternative opinions. We see this through measures taken within the bureaucracy to "program" witnesses in the Senate inquiry into "children overboard". Our Public Service has the hallmarks of a Political Service.

In this general climate of intimidation, it is not surprising that we see no public debate from within CSIRO about its changing nature and declining fortunes.

We might lament the passing of the old CSIRO, but as for the new CSIRO we could well say: "Don't cry for me, Australia".

Max Whitten was Professor of Genetics at the University of Melbourne, and Chief of CSIRO's Division of Entomology, from 1981–95. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academies of Science and Technological Sciences & Engineering and an expert on blowflies. Views expressed in *conScience* are those of the author.