

Staff Cut as CSIRO Head Embraces "Security"

On 27 June, CSIRO's Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett emailed staff telling of great times ahead: "Innovation is central to our business. Innovation is about change and change is about people". Then: "We expect redundancies over the year to be slightly higher than the six-year average of 220". And: "The redistribution of monies to fund Flagships and Emerging Science Areas, will result in some project changes".

Six days later, the axes started falling, with announcements of up to 250 jobs going. Virtually the entire 70 staff in Sydney's Minerals & Exploration labs are going, either out or to the division's headquarters in Perth.

Staff Association President, Dr Michael Borgas, reported "deep shock" among staff: "The government's program of neglect and long-term cutbacks has caused the biggest crisis in CSIRO's history," he said. Due to the new Flagship ventures "CSIRO is being forced to cannibalise itself to stay alive".

Meanwhile, CSIRO's magnesium research, transferred to its Light Metals Flagship, has fallen into a deep hole. The Australian Magnesium Corporation, to which CSIRO loaned \$70 million of government funds, has sputtered spectacularly to the ground. CSIRO's vaunted claims of big financial returns from its licensed technology have vanished.

Ten Questions on Notice (Q202–211) from Kim Carr, Labor's Shadow Minister for Industry and Science, have put CSIRO on edge over the implications of curious dealings within the Forestry & Forest Products Division. Picking up July's *Razor*, Carr also asked (Q221): "CSIRO Director Comms: what backgrounds and quals are essential? Why does the ad fail to mention quals in science, science journalism or comms?"

Ignored by mainstream media, the most significant shift in CSIRO's role and standing was buried in Howard's announcement on 27 June of a Science, Engineering and Technology Unit being established in the new National Security Division of his department to coordinate scientific support for counter-terrorism: "Staff will be seconded to the coordination unit from a range of relevant agencies including the Defence Science and Technology Organisation, DEST, the CSIRO, ASIO and the Australian Federal Police."

Here Garrett has, willingly or unwillingly, accepted denial

of CSIRO's birthright. Science for "security" (alias "defence") is never benign and CSIRO's Act specifically excluded this from its charter (*Razor*, April 2003, pp.44–45).

Last year Howard launched Brad Collis' outstanding history of CSIRO, *Fields of Discovery*, but has ignored the core message that the need for secrecy on some research led to the creation of CSIRO so that non-military research was open to public inquiry and its researchers were able to collaborate openly. Collis shows how this enabled a science agency in a small country to attract the brightest minds and achieve international heights.

Government Control Eroding Independence

The ascendancy of John Howard has also eroded academic independence to pursue bold new lines in research. This is for the worse for a nation that badly needs continual injections of challenging ideas, even within the confines of the commercially driven mantra of current policies.

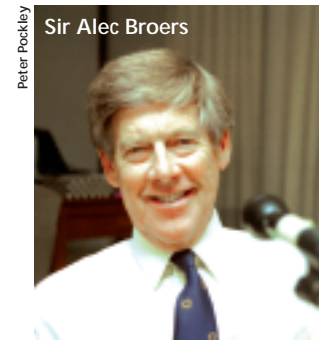
Howard set himself against creating any new statutory authorities, and whatever legacy he leaves is the poorer for it. Establishing such bodies once heralded a government's commitment to services and values worthy of public support. Instead, authorities have been scrapped or allowed to wither and power diverted to a manifestly partial public service.

Statutory authorities once reflected the inestimable benefit of placing long-term trust in committed professionals working in the field, appointed along with some prominent citizens who brought outside views to run a show at arm's length from short-term political imperatives.

Now, however, those being appointed to reviews (with no statutory power) are first put through a fine sieve. This is consistent with the political screening of the platoons of ministerial staffers who, in turn, carefully sift information to and from their bosses. One "adviser" told me the job was to ensure everything from the office was consistent with Liberal policies and attitudes.

When the government dare not abolish a body like the ABC, it provides periodic lessons in how control is exercised through drastic funding squeezes. CSIRO staffers know all about that, too!

For a time, Howard promoted the idea of a lesser level of independence through a new category of "Executive Agencies", for which an organisation was partly "corporatised" (i.e. given responsibility for earning money) but kept under direct ministerial control. Now, he is personally discouraging even his own idea.



the Australian Science and Technology Advisory Council independently assessed the state of their areas, published its advice to government and administered public funds along broad guidelines.

Labor replaced the TEC in 1988 with the National Board of Employment, Education & Training, but Howard quickly got rid of that. Everything now goes in and out of the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). There is tight control of staff and membership of the multitudinous "reviews" and so-called "research" by "consultants". Release of information is highly restricted. For example:

- last year's National Research Priorities review ended in a confidential note to Cabinet that the government refuses to release;
- the Senate Estimates Committee asked for the Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, to answer questions, but DEST said he is barred because he is not considered a public servant and is responsible only to the Minister for Science;
- the running sore of nuclear issues is conducted by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) which, far from being an "independent regulator" as regularly claimed by ministers, is a part of the Department of Health. Unsurprisingly, ARPANSA has never ruled against anything the government presents for "decision"; and
- the Research Collaboration Review on the capacity of universities and CSIRO to be supported by external income is fiddling at the edges.

Sir Alec Broers, the Australian-educated Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, UK, has warned that even the most successful universities (like his) cannot expect to earn more than a very small fraction (3–5%) of their costs from commercialisation of research. Dr Richard Jefferson reinforces this in his *conScience* column on page 43.

The Star of Nairn Rises

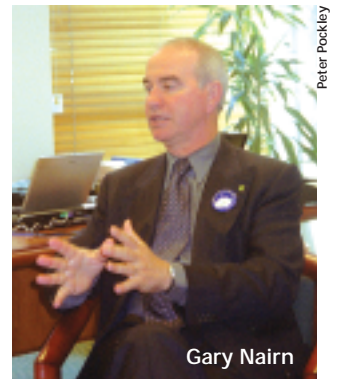
One saving grace of the Coalition government has been the new bipartisan House of Representatives Science & Technology Committee chaired by Gary Nairn, Liberal Member for Eden-Monaro. Nairn has a good feel for the sector,

Researchers on Tap

The effect of this unflagged, determined shift of power is most apparent in higher education and research. Statutory bodies like the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and

having been a professional surveyor, including working on the giant particle accelerator at CERN near Geneva.

The Committee's first report is politically cautious but is nudging the government to increase funding for some industry programs. Nairn is quietly being touted as a future Minister for Science.



New Zealand Rejects Australia's Example

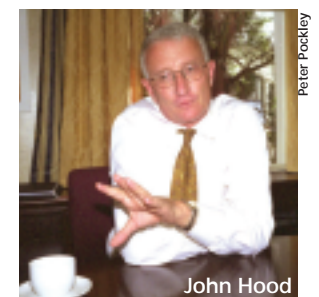
The folly of pushing massive "reforms" of higher education and research along ideological lines has been amply demonstrated by fallout across the Tasman. In the early 1990s, the conservative National Party government of New Zealand dogmatically claimed "world-first" originality when telling its universities they had to become "competitive" by generating more money from non-government sources to make up for reduced government support. These sources were even more ephemeral than in Australia, and NZ universities were strangled for a decade.

In parallel, the Kiwis abolished in 1991 their esteemed Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) and cut it into nine Crown Research Institutes. These were (and still are, under Helen Clark's Labour government) companies owned by the government but directed to give priority to making profits. Researchers, essential in the long run to NZ's skills and economy, suffered terribly from both moves.

Clark's minister responsible for universities, Steve Maharey, has started to reverse the downward slide by establishing a statutory Tertiary Education Commission this year, headed by Dr Andrew West. This is charged with all the functions of Australia's defunct body.

Further, the Minister for Research, Pete Hodgson, has obtained a significant increase in research funding to make up for cuts under his predecessors.

New Zealand does not lack talent. Dr John Hood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland, has been recommended for appointment to the equivalent post at the University of Oxford, UK. Hood, a former Rhodes Scholar and industrialist, has been the most assertive proponent of public support of university education.



Senator Kim Carr