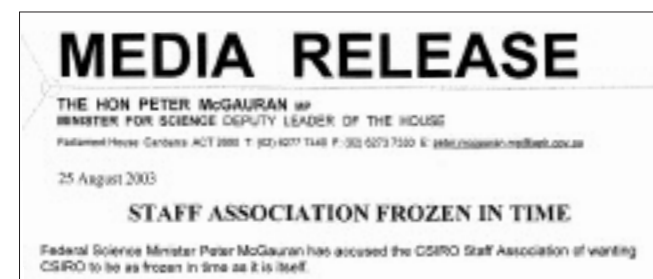


CSIRO on Thin Ice

Dr Michael Borgas' cutting critique of CSIRO's "restructuring" in September's *conScience* column stung the government and bureaucracy. It was the first public statement of the major concerns of staff, especially over the contentious Flagships scheme pushed by Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett.

As with prior criticisms of CSIRO this year, no external or internal statement came from Garrett or CSIRO Chairman Catherine Livingstone. Garrett instructed senior staff that only he may talk to the media on budget or staff matters, and it was Science Minister, Peter McGauran, who reacted publicly.

On 22 August McGauran proclaimed: "The Staff Association's claims are wrong". He cited an increase in funding from 2000–01 but did not mention the real cuts made from 1996. Three days later he attacked the CSIRO Staff Association (Borgas was not named) for allegedly "wanting CSIRO to be as frozen in time as it is itself", signalling, it seems, a hard line on industrial relations. Quite how this will rally disaffected staff behind the Flagships is puzzling.



Meanwhile, long-delayed answers to 70 Questions on Notice have been tabled. As *Australasian Science* went to press, a CSIRO source revealed that answers to 10 sensitive questions on commercial dealings in CSIRO Forestry were being "edited" in McGauran's office.

The answers tabled reveal that, 5 months after Prime Minister John Howard officially launched six Flagships, they are stuttering into being. Energy Transformed has only \$190,000 for this year and Oceans Wealth has half that while it "develops a business plan" (E230_04). More promised Flagships have not materialised and none of Garrett's cherished partnerships through "Team Australia" has been announced.

Light Metals, the sole Flagship established with existing industrial partners, no longer lists research on magnesium or potential revenue from the Australian Magnesium Corporation following AMC's dramatic collapse (E235_04). Its Director, Dr Tony Filmer, was appointed for only 2 years and CSIRO does not pay his salary (E236_04). He has been seconded from Rio Tinto's Research & Technology, headed by Dr Robin Batterham, who works part-time as the nation's Chief Scientist. Questions about the salary package and any firewall on intellectual property are buzzing.



Dr Tony Filmer in happier days with an experimental ingot of magnesium.

Razor-Sharp Research

Razor has analysed CSIRO media releases issued between September 2002 and August 2003 to judge the relative importance of the organisation's work, as filtered through CSIRO management. Among 226 media releases, 21 announcements (9%) were about policy and management, several being defensive and most in business-speak.

Indicative of a massive shift in values and performance, 68 releases (30%) promoted unpublished technological claims, whereas only nine (4%) announced publication of original research in international journals (two each in *Science* and *Astrophysical Journal*, but none in *Nature*).

There are no mentions of Howard's December direction of CSIRO research towards "security", yet scientists report a flurry to flag existing projects and propose new ones to fit a new "Secure Australia" program (not yet a Flagship) in the hope of attracting directed funding. As CSIRO is chartered specifically not to conduct "defence science", Garrett will inevitably be called to reveal all work and finance under this rubric.

The CSIRO web site has a section on media comment, but entries cease from 9 June 2001 when Garrett axed CSIRO's highly regarded National Awareness Program.

In order to promote CSIRO commercially as a "brand", Garrett created the position of Manager, Brand & Market

Communication (\$63–85K). However, the government decreed on 23 July that all departments and agencies should replace all logos with a Coat of Arms and "Australian Government". Garrett submitted a request for exemption on 29 July but, if this is not granted, his first appointee, Lilian Harrison, won't have a brand to market.

Summing up the true trends in CSIRO's position under Howard, a seasoned analyst of R&D financing says: "Very simple: less money, fewer folks, less output".

All the Way with the USA

In August *Razor* looked at Howard's method of administration, whereby ministers conduct so-called "reviews" under tight direction and departmental control. While the reports delivered mostly by "consultants" may have value in assembling facts and figures, their recommendations can never be treated as independent, as is claimed by ministers.

Dr John Carmody of the University of NSW says this approach is also affecting "the ways in which our universities are governed and managed" (*conScience*, p.43), while April's *conScience* columnist and Editor of science policy web site *the-funneled-web.com*, Dr Alex Reisner, sees parallels with directions in US science policy.

Trenchant criticism is emerging in the US of President George W. Bush's direction of the science agenda through politically pliant appointments to deliberative bodies. A



Henry Waxman

40-page report to Congress by senior liberal Democrat Henry Waxman has attracted coverage in *The New York Times*, *Science* and *Nature* (www.politicsandscience.org).

Congressman Waxman claims: "The Administration's political interference with science has led to misleading statements by the President ...

altered web sites ... suppressed agency reports ... and the gagging of scientists". With detailed references he lists 20 scientific issues affected by "the undermining of science", including global warming, HIV/AIDS, lead poisoning, food safety, environmental health, sex education and breast cancer.

Resonating in Australia, Waxman says Bush "has repeatedly manipulated the advisory committee process to advance its political and ideological agenda," including appointing "unqualified persons with industry ties, stacking advisory committees and opposing qualified experts".

Several senior US scientists have backed Waxman's line, but the White House (like Canberra) has responded with

weasel words: "The administration reviews the best available science to make decisions on what is best for the American people".

CRCs Repositioned as Investment Vehicles

A relevant comparison is a "review" of the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) scheme, which was set up by Labor in 1990. Prompted by industry "stakeholders", the 226-page report by Howard Partners of Canberra recommends de-emphasising the "bottom-up" foundation of the CRCs, whereby scientists conduct research and seek to generate "public good" or commercial applications from their findings.

Instead the report makes 24 detailed recommendations that would drive the CRCs "top-down", responding to government and industry agendas through a departmental sieve. This style change is attracting severe concerns within the remarkably productive and proudly innovative CRC sector, but is consistent with the way CSIRO is already being micro-managed politically and bureaucratically.

The "reform" is exemplified by this key recommendation: "The Programme should be clearly positioned as an 'investment' vehicle in which research is seen as a means to an end ('an end use'), not an end in itself".

This obtuse gem is what "consultants" deliver for what is rumoured to cost several hundreds of thousands of dollars – worth many Australian Research Council research projects. And you can multiply that by a dozen similar "reviews" of R&D and university policy that are underway!

Senior scientists holding the honorary but influential post of Visitor of a CRC are particularly "insulted" (as some wrote to McGauran) that the consultants want to abolish their roles as independent reviewers to both CRC Boards and the government secretariat. One contributor to the "review" complains that discussing this with the consultant was like talking to a brick wall as he had already made up his mind.

CSIRO is attracting criticism for following a short-term imperative of generating external income that, when obtained, is not dedicated to long-term research. But, with 71 centres the CRC sector is too diversified and dispersed to attract publicity about a similar directive (the "review" has received none), making it easier for the government to change the system.

While McGauran "welcomed" the review and supported the CRC scheme as a whole, his statement said nothing about: what the government might do with it; any procedure for considering comments; a timetable; or who would assess them.

So much for the brave new world of opaque government!