

Who Cares About Science Now?

Eight years after gaining office and immediately cutting support for universities and research, the Howard government has still to come to grips with the dire consequences. On assuming the Education and Science portfolio early in 2001, Dr Brendan Nelson's tacit acknowledgment of "problems" (but never "crisis") led to a spate of "reviews". However, action has been limited.

Nelson's late concessions to the minor parties in the Senate over his "reform" package for universities were only marginal. Shamefully, decisions on research have been progressively deferred until the May 2004 Budget, despite research being agreed as a crucial purpose of higher education. Meanwhile, CSIRO was put in limbo.

Prof Frank Larkins, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, calculates that \$1.58 billion is needed to restore government support for universities to the levels relative to GDP prior to the 1996 cuts, let alone to improve their quality. "Australia has had the largest percentage decrease (11%) in public investment in universities over 5 years of any OECD country (21% average increase)," he said.

At year's end, the government produced the "main report" of the year-long "Mapping Australian Science & Innovation". At 473 pages and weighing a hefty 3 kg, this largest-ever survey of Australian science should have produced something more readable and persuasive. The map may collate many facts to inform policy decisions, but its prime effect has been a further year's delay in dealing with the hard questions.

The bureaucratic editors cut off the figures quoted in the report at 2000. This avoided the well-established conclusion that the 2001 Innovation Statement's added support of \$2.9 billion (to 2006) did nothing more than halt Australia's slide relative to GDP and allow OECD averages to continue to climb away.

In Batterham's last review of the "Science Base" in 2000, he made specific recommendations on programs and funding. Although the government has continually spun its Innovation Statement as being truly big, Batterham's proposals were slashed.

This time, his riding instruction was not to make any recommendations. He expresses 21 "key findings" in general terms. None is surprising or generates real pressure for change. For example, his sixth key finding is: "Collaboration has grown between researchers in universities and publicly funded organisations and firms and other research users". Wow! The report has failed to produce something that anyone would read, except under direction.

This expensive exercise cannot be judged against any possible "outcome". Everything has been left to Cabinet – and other crass priorities will take over in an election year.

A comparison with the leaked 350-page draft dated 20 August (*Razor*, Nov/Dec 2003) supports suspicions that the government ordered a wholesale rewrite to limit its potential for political embarrassment.

Ministers claimed the report showed that research is turning upwards as a result of government "initiatives", and levels of support for some R&D areas have risen lately, but from a deep trough, and the report cannot hide a hefty drop in infrastructure. The Coalition hasn't yet reached the levels Labor had steadily built up by 1996.

In pre-Howard times inquiries (not "reviews") were established at arm's length from government. External experts were appointed to conduct them independently and they made and championed recommendations. Now, academics and researchers have been conned into a string of futile exercises that have been driven and controlled by politicians and tame bureaucrats. The voices of science have been silenced.

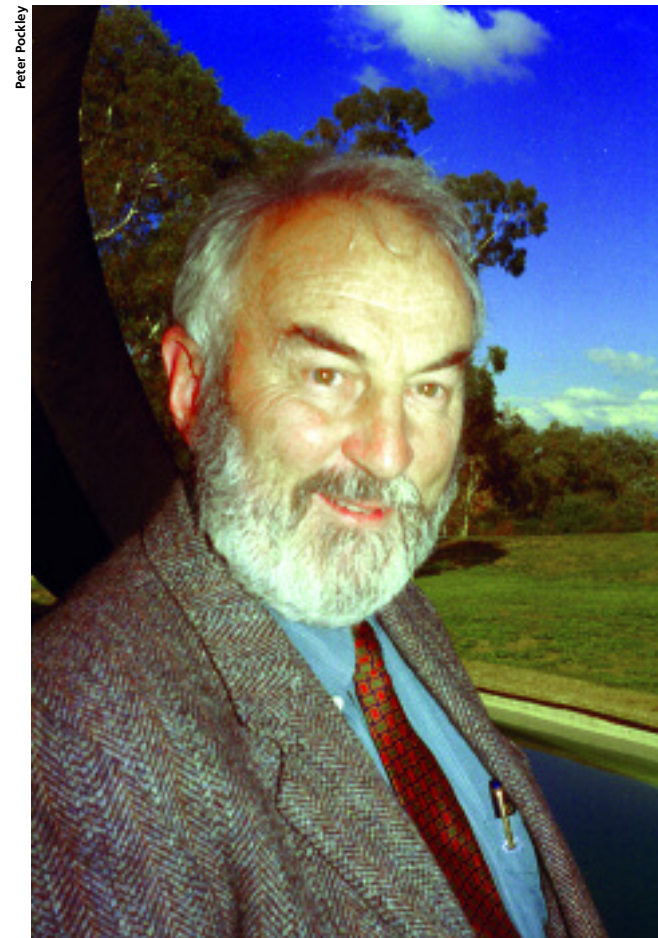
Whitten Reloads at CSIRO

In a *conScience* column in July 2002, former Chief of CSIRO Entomology, Dr Max Whitten, detonated a continual debate about CSIRO's directions. Lately he has re-emerged with more trenchant criticisms in the media.

At *www.the-funneled-web.com*, Dr Alex Reisner's wide-ranging journal on science policy (22/10/2003), Whitten attacked the push for commercialisation of CSIRO's work by exemplifying "some of the accomplishments of but one creative scientist in CSIRO's Division of Entomology, Dr Jim DesMarchellier. [He showed] the different ways that inexpensive research can create real economic benefits, without putting immediate 'commercialisation' first".

On ABC TV's *Inside Business* (9/11/2003) Whitten highlighted the collapse of the Australian Magnesium Corporation, into which CSIRO had invested \$75 million of taxpayers' funds. "Somebody convinced the Commonwealth to put in \$150 million. They convinced the Queensland government to put in another \$150 million and I believe this was all driven by the overhyping of technology that was coming out of CSIRO".

And in *BRW* (20/11/2003) Whitten wrote: "CSIRO's great communicators have been replaced by belligerent spin doctors who have alienated many journalists". This comment, confirmed by *Razor's* experience and contacts, follows disgraceful actions by CSIRO's management. The nation's top science agency should not have trashed



Dr Max Whitten at the Australian Academy of Science, of which he is a Fellow.

decades of science communication as an informed practice and responsible profession.

In 1964 Sir Fred White, CSIRO's Chairman (and also chief executive), along with other science heavyweights insisted that the ABC appoint a person with scientific qualifications to the first post specialising in science in the Australian media. CSIRO gave the new chum (yours truly) tremendous support and free access to all its laboratories and scientists.

From this small beginning an expanding band of science reporters developed in all media, and many scientists emerged in CSIRO and universities confident that their ability to expound and debate their research was supported by top brass.

Lately, the knowledgeable and committed National Awareness Program staff in CSIRO have been pushed out and replaced by operators with no credibility in or knowledge of science, let alone experience in communicating research. The screening, monitoring and "corporate image management" by today's manipulators is deplorable.

Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett has floundered with his creation of a highly paid Directorship of Communica-

tions who does not require a background in science. Di Jay, from Medibank Private, failed and has been followed by Donna Staunton, a former lawyer with the Tobacco Institute of Australia, as a consultant for many months and now as temporary Director (*AS*, Nov/Dec 2003, p.42).

Questioning by Senator Kim Carr, Labor's shadow minister for science, in Senate Estimates (5/11/2003) has revealed that one proposed full-time appointee had been a political staffer for former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett. While not named, it is known that the proposed appointee had no science background. After CSIRO vetted his appointment with Science Minister Peter McGauran and other "stakeholders", the appointment was not consummated and CSIRO began another search after wasting \$75,000 in headhunters' fees.

Carr tabled some other penetrating questions that appear difficult for management, including:

- why Ian Dean, a staffer in South Africa's CSIR under Garrett as President, earned \$658,000 over the past two financial years for consultancy services to Garrett at CSIRO; and
- whether Chief Dr Paul Cotterill (and unnamed family members) and Dr Sharmane MacRae of CSIRO's Forests & Forest Products Division were involved in importation and commercial dealings in germ plasm material.

Science Enrolments "Rot" Under Howard

At the Crossroads or 'Round the Bend, a seminal study of trends in university science from 1989–2002 by Dr Ian Dobson of the Centre for Population & Urban Research at Monash University, was commissioned by the Australian Council of Deans of Science. Dobson concludes: "The decline in science [enrolments] between 1989 [the first year of the Dawkins reforms] and 1997 [the first full Howard year] has continued into the new century.

"The downward trend in the teaching of many areas of traditional science has now been with us for a full decade. In terms of the years selected for this study, 1993 was the zenith for chemistry, earth sciences, mathematics and physics... For science students, their overall interest in mathematics and physics has been in decline since 1993, and in earth sciences and chemistry, the rot set in 1997." Dobson also found: "Declines in 'hard' science at university are strongly correlated with what has happened and is still happening in secondary education".

The inability – or disinterest – of Howard and Education Ministers Amanda Vanstone, David Kemp and Nelson to arrest the slide in science education is tragically evident.