

## CSIRO's Struggle for Survival

The future of CSIRO hangs in the balance as implications sink in of a proposed shift towards competition with other research “providers” at the expense of “block funding”. CSIRO Chief Geoff Garrett has not garnered a single statement of public support from CSIRO’s “stakeholders” in science, industry and universities.

It has been left for CSIRO scientists to do the hard thinking through their Staff Association. Acting Secretary, Dr Pauline Gallagher, has enunciated clearly the nature of the threats to the capacity of CSIRO to be a full-scale national agency. She identifies a number of gross inconsistencies between the government’s actions on R&D and the reviews’ recommendations. Her major concerns are that:

The [Collaboration] report fails to deal with the low level of funding for scientific research overall as a major impediment to collaboration; the insecurity of contestable science funding driving talented researchers out of careers in Australian science; the multiple functions the public sector research agencies have to meet in delivering their outcomes; the inability of Australian business to contribute in a substantial way to the research effort and collaborations; and most of all, the unmeasured value of scientific activity and science workers as part of Australian communities.

CSIRO Staff Association President, Dr Michael Borgas, is triggering a debate about CSIRO’s fundamental purposes by relating its research to society as a whole, an approach that is long overdue from other leaders of the scientific community. Borgas wrote in the Community and Public Sector Union publication *The Works* (Autumn 2004): “CSIRO is struggling to maintain long-term public good activities. A renewal to sustain science excellence is overdue”.

It is ironic that the fiercest critic of CSIRO’s management was the sole voice expressing support for its embattled scientists. Labor’s Shadow Minister for Science, Senator Kim Carr, said:

Labor fears that [the reviews’ recommendations] will mean the inevitable dissolution of the nation’s peak, industrial, public interest research agencies – the CSIRO, AIMS and ANSTO. This is short-termism of the worst kind from the Howard government. The government is offering up the CSIRO for dismemberment to make up for their failure to provide sufficient research dollars for the nation’s universities.

## Seeing Through Smoke

A week after *Australasian Science* pressed CSIRO’s management to confirm the appointment of Donna Staunton as Director of Communications (April 2003, pp.37–38), CSIRO

staffers were informed via the organisation’s intranet but were given no information on her background. Amanda Meade commented in *The Australian* (18 March) that it was:

Curious that the CSIRO has chosen a woman, Donna Staunton, who spent the best part of a decade as a hired gun for the tobacco industry, to be the new director of communications. No mention of her time as vice president of the Philip Morris Group, or as the CEO of the Tobacco Institute.

Staunton does not shrink from declaring her former posts on her business’ website, where she offers expertise on “Government Relations, Strategic Communications Advice, Issue & Crisis Management and Reputation Management”. There is no mention of any work with science, nor does her list of clients declare her work for CSIRO since May 2003.

But Prof Ian Lowe, *New Scientist*’s Australian science analyst, has supported *Australasian Science*’s “strong editorial comment” on Staunton’s engagement:

In private, senior CSIRO and ex-CSIRO scientists have been expressing genuine concern to me... I agree [with] queries [on] both the process of Staunton’s appointment and her inexperience in science communication. (10 April, p.49)

Scientists and reporters have been asking why management did not issue a public statement, as it had for the arrival of Di Jay as the first Director (16 November 2001) and Richard Forbes as the Media Manager (30 August 2002). According to Borgas:

Ms Staunton’s appointment hasn’t registered significantly with our members generally. Most of them don’t know anything about her. The turnover of outstanding people from Corporate Communications has been worrying and has damaged the communication of our members’ research to the Parliament and to the public.

## Value for Money?

Staunton’s earnings have emerged from an answer to the first of 58 Questions on Notice to CSIRO by Carr following the Estimates hearing on 18 February (E767\_04):

CSIRO entered into a contract with Staunton Consulting Ltd (Principal: Donna Staunton) on 27 October 2003 for Ms Staunton to provide services as Acting Director, Communications. The intention was for this arrangement to continue until a permanent appointment was made to this position. The fee under the contract was \$22,000 per month (excluding GST) on the basis of 4 days worked per week. This equates to an approximate daily rate of \$1375. Any direct expenses for travel and associated costs incurred by Ms Staunton for travel approved by CSIRO in the course of providing these services are reimbursed by CSIRO.

If expanded to a 5-day working week, Staunton would now be collecting a whopping \$330,000 per annum. CSIRO



has omitted to quantify the considerable travel costs incurred while Staunton shuttled between offices in Canberra and Sydney.

Garrett will surely be forced to justify this phenomenal cost. On top of \$100,000 for headhunters Korn/Ferry International (not Spencer Stuart, as reported last month), this would have paid for the salaries of several top scientists.

Despite CSIRO management’s repeated refusal to provide the “Board-approved Communications Strategy”, for which it has heaped praise on Staunton, *Razor* has obtained a full copy of the 28-page document dated “2003–2007”. On reading this flaccid, extended series of dot points *Razor* wonders what can be so sensitive about it.

*Razor* has also obtained a remarkably similar CSIRO document entitled *The Communication Revolution*. This strategy, dated “27/08/01” and prepared by previous CSIRO staff “communicators”, was also approved by the Board.

The latest “strategy” declares that CSIRO aims to “position the Chief Executive, Executive Team and Executive Management Council as open and transparent leaders” (p.22). *Razor* has requested demonstration of this through an early interview with the newest member of that Council, the Communications Director.

*Razor* has also asked Garrett for “elucidation of what is significantly new in the 2003 document”. No answer had been received as *Australasian Science* went to press.

## The Empire Grows

On 3 April, CSIRO advertised the positions of Manager of Communications and Manager of Public Relations, each at \$87–131K. These are staff posts, unlike the position of their Director. But in common with Staunton’s position there are no requirements for candidates to have science-related qualifications or experience in science communication.

When *Razor* consulted CSIRO’s website for details of duties and criteria for appointment, each job was headed boldly in red: “Please note that this position is no longer accepting applications”. The closing date was given as 28 March, 6 days before the newspaper advertisements appeared. The print advertisements said that both jobs would be located in “Canberra or Sydney”, but the website

said “Canberra” (only). The salary for Communications Manager on the website was listed as “\$87K–96K” – at the lower end of the range listed in the print advertisements.

## Media Releases Weak on Original Research

*Razor* has extended its survey of CSIRO’s media releases (*AS*, October 2003, pp.44–45). The results show how thin CSIRO’s publicity is on original scientific content.

The first count of 226 releases from September 2002 to August 2003 has been extended by 138 releases from September 2003 to March 2004, covering Staunton’s time as Director. The proportions in each category remain remarkably consistent across both periods.

Of 364 releases over 18 months, staffing (42 releases; 12%) and organisation (38; 10%) had no scientific content and another 270 had some science but cited no original publications. Of these, 33% (121 releases) covered claims, potential and events such as launches. Technology and commercialisation came second on 13% (46), followed equally on 12% by environment (45) and agriculture (43). At the bottom were resources (11; 3%) and human science (4; 1%).

Standing out were a mere 14 releases (4%) that cited publication of original research in peer-reviewed journals.

Is this a consequence of basic science being insufficiently valued by “management” and the new PR machine, or an indication that CSIRO’s research is weakening as scientists are forced to do contract jobs?

In the end, while CSIRO scientists may indeed publish many papers in journals and at conferences, we aren’t hearing about them under the new communications regime. It is no wonder that CSIRO under Garrett has been struggling to retain its once-iconic status.

## Senate Moves on Chief Scientist

Following the government’s refusal to allow its Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, to answer questions before the Senate Estimates Committee and Senator Bob Brown’s call for an end to his “double role” (*conScience*, March 2004, p.43), Brown has led the next step by moving in the Senate (to be voted on 11 May):

That the following matters be referred to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee for Inquiry and report by 24 June 2004: (a) the functioning of the Office of the Chief Scientist; and (b) potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist.