

CSIRO's Garrett Taking a Walk on the Shier Side

When rumours about the massive restructuring plans of CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, first emerged publicly in a coruscating *conScience* column by former CSIRO Entomology Chief, Dr Max Whitten (*AS*, July 2002, p.16), Garrett's purges were likened to those perpetrated on the ABC by its former CEO, Jonathan Shier.

This resonates more strongly now. Shier's excesses were so damaging that even John Howard's Cabinet cleared him out before the 2001 election.

It is a looming tragedy for CSIRO that people inside and outside CSIRO are now rumbling with similar talk, amplified by the revelations in June's Senate Estimates (see pp.12–13).

Tobacco Statement "Disingenuous"

Razor has been covering dramas involving CSIRO's communications unit since May 2002, when Garrett sidelined its head, the talented and experienced science writer, Julian Cribb, in favour of unqualified and inexperienced PR flacks.

Another festering effect on CSIRO's reputation arises from the enthusiastic endorsement of former tobacco lobbyist, Donna Staunton, by Garrett and his Deputy, Dr Ron Sandland (see pp.12–13). Sydney University's Public Health Professor, Simon Chapman, has repeated to *Razor* his belief that the reason for Staunton's public reticence is "almost certainly that the [tobacco] industry required its senior staff to sign hush clauses" (*AS*, April 2004, pp.37–38).

Garrett and Sandland had either disingenuously accepted Staunton's so-called "publication", in a private letter to Chapman, of a retraction of the assertion that smoking is addictive, or had failed to check it in their "rigorous appointment procedure". If they had, by Sandland's admission, "we would not have gone ahead with the appointment".

It is incumbent on its top executives to disassociate CSIRO from this black spot and publicise how they came to believe her change of view had been widely published.

They also should declare how Staunton, a neophyte in scientific and journalistic matters, came into their fold. The widely circulating suggestion is that she was engaged on Garrett's personal recommendation following contact through the Global Foundation. Staunton is a Director and Garrett a member representing CSIRO since it joined in 2001.

They have fallen silent on *Razor's* repeated requests to interview Staunton. To clear the smoke and to be in line with CSIRO's Board-approved Communications Strategy, written by Staunton, which commits senior executives to be "open and transparent", Garrett and Sandland should make themselves and Staunton available for open interview.

Staunton's Web Site Active but "Company" Not Listed

Hansard transcripts of Senate Estimates hearings on 2 June reveal that there's still more!

Senator Kim Carr – Is Ms Staunton still a consultant?

Garrett – No, she has joined the CSIRO staff.

Carr – I can tell you that as at 5 minutes to 4 her web site indicated she was still operating as a consultant. If you care to get someone to check I think you will find it is still operating.

Sandland – I am sure that is an oversight. I shall attend to it forthwith.

Indeed Staunton kept her web site active in promoting her services as a consultant ever since she began with the CSIRO in April 2003. The site was active for more than 3 months after she became Director at 95% of her time, and it was not unplugged even after Sandland's assurance on 2 June. Equally odd is that she did not declare CSIRO as a client on her site from April 2003 to February 2004 inclusive, when her work with CSIRO should have been occupying 80% of her time, nor since then.

CSIRO told the Senate that Staunton's first and later contracts were awarded for her services through her company, for which "the Principal [is] Donna Staunton".

Razor has checked and this company does not appear on the Australian Securities and Investments Commission's register of current or former (deregistered) companies. There is a record only of a registered business named Staunton Consultancy. This is another example of slack checking by CSIRO's heads before Staunton's first engagement and during the "rigorous appointment process".

Blackballed for "Scurrilous Piece of Junk"!

Acute sensitivities were displayed in an email of 1 April from Sandland when he wrote to *Razor* regarding a revelatory article on Staunton's appointment (*AS*, April 2004, pp.37–38).



Staunton's web site was still active on 15 June when *Australasian Science* went to press.

I have just seen a copy of the latest edition of *Australasian Science*. I am personally highly offended by the tone and presumption of your article. In this context, I am not willing to respond to your requests for information, and I must reluctantly question whether your credibility as an objective and informative science journalist is at risk. The tasteless and innuendo-laden cartoon that appears in your publication is surely the nadir of Australian science journalism. I cannot understand how a journalist whose integrity I have valued could have sanctioned such a scurrilous piece of junk.

Razor wrote to Garrett on 20 May:

It was civil of you to introduce me to Donna Staunton in the corridor of Parliament House on Thursday 6 May after your having to abandon hosting the Prime Minister's announcement of Backing Australia 2 in the CSIRO Discovery Centre.

You'll recall that, on taking my hand, Ms Staunton said: "Oh, you're the person who writes about someone without meeting them". I replied: "But, two requests have been made to interview you and these have never been answered." This exchange occurred in the presence of another writer for *Australasian Science*, Simon Grose.

Please refer to my emails and faxes to you of 8 and 20 April.

Once again, therefore, I repeat this request for an interview in the very near future. I do so in the spirit of the Communications Strategy 2003–2007, which Ms Staunton prepared and was approved by the Board. Among its stated aims is to "position the Chief Executive, Executive Team and Executive Management Council as open and transparent leaders" (page 22) and I would expect you would wish Ms Staunton, as a member of the Council, to uphold this in practice.

I also propose an early, open discussion with Ms Staunton in a public forum on issues in science, research "governance" and science communication.

Garrett replied on 24 May (minor editing):

Let me, again, refer to my last response to you, of 8 April (please note that I responded promptly); here I indicated that Ron's email to you of 1 April is clear around this organisation's response to you and your requests for information.

Let me reiterate our position very clearly: we do not deem it appropriate to respond to any journalist or any publication that would sink to the brand of journalism so aptly articulated by Ron in his email. I am copying this email on to your editor.

Editor Guy Nolch responded strongly on 28 May:

Your decision to stonewall *Australasian Science* both validates our past criticisms of the media performance of CSIRO management while simultaneously violating CSIRO's new communications strategy of positioning CSIRO's executive team as "open and transparent leaders".

Peter Pockley's article on the appointment of Donna Staunton was not "presumptuous". It exposed Staunton's professional background as a tobacco defender and lobbyist, which CSIRO had tried to hide in its despatches even though this was her most significant experience in the decade prior to her appointment.

Staunton's appointment is an endorsement by CSIRO of the tobacco industry, and signals CSIRO's desire to employ the methods Staunton used to put the interests of the tobacco industry ahead of the interests of public health. In this respect the cartoon accompanying Peter's article is fair comment.



A "scurrilous piece of junk" or suitable to decorate a wall?

To describe the cartoon as "tasteless" is an overreaction. Indeed, we even received a call ... on behalf of Staunton requesting a hard copy of the cartoon to hang on her wall. From this I can only presume that Staunton is proud of her past and did not find the cartoon tasteless at all.

CSIRO is a public entity and is ultimately answerable to the public. It is disappointing that its leadership is avoiding its public responsibilities by stonewalling media outlets that raise criticisms of its leadership.

Razor responded to Garrett on 1 June, copying it to CSIRO Chairman, Catherine Livingstone.

I totally concur with Guy's reply to you by email of 28 May.

You have embraced and expanded on Dr Ron Sandland's assertions of 1 April about my reporting on the contracted engagement of Ms Donna Staunton as Director of Communications. I note that neither of you has cited any specifics in justification of your withdrawal from providing information to me.

I maintain my reporting and commentary has been reasonable, substantiated by the evidence and in the public interest. As reporters and editors, our work is displayed and tested openly and, thus far, you have not challenged my items in the public domain.

CSIRO's leadership had been instrumental in persuading the ABC to pioneer science reporting in 1964 and to treat the appointment of people qualified in science as of paramount importance.

Independence in reporting science in its broad context was valued by your predecessors and was reciprocated, with manifest benefit to CSIRO's reputation.

Sadly, these seem to be guiding principles no longer. Blackballing of reporters – by the heads of a public agency and, especially, a national scientific one – is unprecedented and deeply concerning for the future of the demanding vocation of science communication (not the same as "corporate public relations").

My questions seeking facts on several matters in CSIRO (including on Preventive Health) remain with you for answer, as does my request for an interview and public discussion with Ms Staunton. I have now confirmed this in print. I look forward to the day, sooner rather than later, when you and senior managers resume open communication with me again.

On 10 June Garrett's simple response was: "Your comments are noted".