

Batterhammer on Scientific Advice

In 1989 Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke made the first appointment of Chief Scientist. Among other achievements in his 3 years Prof Ralph Slatyer, a noted environmental researcher, was the central figure in designing and creating the innovative Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) scheme that linked research by universities, public agencies and industry. He had Hawke's ear.

Slatyer's successors – the late Prof Michael Pitman (1992–96), Dr John Stocker (1996–99) and Dr Robin Batterham (since 1999) – have also been well-qualified and regarded. But, controversy over how the government obtains and acts on scientific advice emerged in 1996 when the new Coalition downgraded the post from full-time to 2 days per week.

Prime Minister John Howard's many squeezes on science began with a meagre \$40,000 per year for Stocker, which only paid for 2 days per week, and a change from direct responsibility to the PM to responsibility to the Industry & Science Minister (and later the Education & Science Minister).

The Australian Science & Technology Council, a statutory authority that produced authoritative analyses on policy, was scrapped and replaced by ministerially driven "reviews" under departmental control. Scientists appointed to reviews were sworn to secrecy and forbidden from making specific recommendations on funding. Reports were mostly buried and had little impact.

Batterham's advocacy has been in private. Science Minister, Peter McGauran, refused him permission to appear before Senate Estimates hearings, saying he is a contractor and not responsible for administering funds. While his two terms eventually brought a halt to a funding decline, all analyses point to a static state for R&D under Howard – the gap between Australian and OECD average expenditure on R&D in relation to Gross Domestic Product has grown every year under the Coalition (AS, June 2004, pp.41–42).

The June inquiry by a Senate committee into the Chief Scientist was a rare occasion when Parliament has examined science politics and administration in some depth. Greens leader, Senator Bob Brown, moved to examine "the functioning of the Office of the Chief Scientist and potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist".

The second issue arose from Batterham's continuing role as Chief Technologist for resources giant Rio Tinto, which Brown and others allege leads to a conflict of interest with his membership of bodies that recommend funding for the CRCs, for instance.

In the 2004 CRC round, several environmental and renewable energy applications were rejected while "geo-



sequestration" of CO₂ from coal-fired power stations was handsomely supported. Batterham made a spirited defence of his position in writing and orally, explaining to the inquiry his support of Howard's rejection of the Kyoto Accord on greenhouse gases.

Batterham's stand distinguishes him from numerous environmental scientists, notably marine scientists urging acceptance of the Kyoto agreement following an alarming decline in the Great Barrier Reef's corals due to global warming. Likewise a group of 17 Federation Fellows boldly wrote to Howard in similar terms on 18 May and offered free involvement in formulating policy. Yet the government has ignored all but a couple of vocal geologists who deny that human activity is heating the globe.

After the hearing Brown said: "No one, not even the Department of Science's lawyer, has asked for, seen or been given the details of the 'firewall' that Rio Tinto claims it has placed on Batterham protecting him from his influencing policy decisions [in the company's interests]". Brown said Batterham's position is "untenable" and called for his resignation.

Senator Kim Carr, Shadow Minister for Science & Research, who chaired the inquiry, does not go this far. He told *Razor* he sees the issues through a prism of ethics and philosophy applied by scientists. Indeed, Prof Seamus Miller of Charles Sturt University and the Australian National University presented a substantial broadening of the definition of various conflicts of interest. He concluded that Batterham is subject to conflicts, though not financial.

Carr says: "Returning the post to full-time would be the only way to counter the community's level of distrust in research that involves social change".

Government Backs CSIRO's Smoking Gun

When McGauran answered questions on notice (#2871, 2872) about CSIRO's selection of former tobacco lobbyist, Donna



Staunton, as its Director of Communications, Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett and Deputy, Dr Ron Sandland, may have thought they'd escaped the controversy over their claimed "rigorous appointment process" and choice.

McGauran's answers to Brown were almost identical to Garrett's and Sandland's responses to Carr in Estimates hearings 2 weeks earlier. There, *Razor* instantly recognised that some answers were incorrect or incomplete, and others were found so on investigation. By acknowledging his personal involvement in the selection process, McGauran has implicated the government directly in CSIRO's decision.

"Ms Staunton is a highly regarded communication professional with strategic communication experience in complex organisations and with strong networks across all levels of government and industry," he said. "There is no conflict of interest." He can't have checked the executives' assertions that *Australasian Science* demolished in July (pp.12–13, pp.44–45).

Following our reports, Brown tabled more questions on 7 July asking McGauran to "provide a copy of the statement made by Ms Donna Staunton in 2000 in which she accepted that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major cause of preventable illness in Australian society", and further asking: "To whom was this statement made, and how and when was it distributed?"

Brown asked both McGauran and Tony Abbott, Minister for Health: "In relation to the dual role of Ms Donna Staunton as Communications Director of CSIRO and private consultant, do you consider it appropriate that Ms Staunton as Principal of Staunton Consultancy has clients including Pfizer (major pharmaceutical company) and MIA Group (leading provider of imaging services) while working 4.75 days per week as Communications Director for CSIRO?"

"What arrangements have been made to avoid conflicts of interest arising from her private work and her CSIRO position?"

Expensive Lesson in Spin

CSIRO's executives tried to blast *Australasian Science* with, first, a memo on 8 July from Staunton to communications staff in which she reported: "We are currently drafting a response to the criticisms raised by *Australasian Science*... [to] be published in the upcoming Monday Mail".

The 12 July circular emailed to all staff included a demonstration by Garrett and Staunton of the black art of "spin" – and how to spend big on "strategic communication experience" gained in the tobacco industry to deflect well-documented revelations, yet get nowhere:

- never mention any fundamental facts or issues, nor explain your case (e.g. serious errors to the Senate; Staunton's background; non-publication of her nicotine addiction denial; the favoured appointment "process"; the fact that only 4% of 364 news releases issued by CSIRO cite original, published science);
- describe articles as "misleading and/or factually incorrect" without specifics, hoping recipients have not read them;
- write in rhetorical generalisations; and
- present half-truths as "facts" and fail to tell the real story.

Twenty CSIRO communicators – 10 of whom are "corporate" and report directly to Staunton – followed their bosses' line in a simultaneous email to the Australian Science Communicators (ASC). Eight of these had spent 8 days framing Garrett's and their reactions. They claimed "60 emails and more than 125 questions" had been received from *Australasian Science* over the previous 2 years, but did not cite detailed support on the ASC email list for *Australasian Science*'s reports and conclusions from independent science writers.

Meanwhile there are more important issues at the coal-face, like 23 staffers being shown the door at CSIRO's Textile and Fibre Technology laboratories in Geelong and 10% of staff being cut from Divisions while much of the vaunted "new" Budget money for Garrett's pet Flagships has flowed out to external "partners" and not back to CSIRO staff.

President of the CSIRO Staff Association, Dr Michael Borgas, is concerned with "the pressure on our scientists to toe the corporate line and be reticent to give frank and fearless advice. Our members feel let down by the way things have developed. Double standards have been applied to senior appointments that have no proper job descriptions and scientists at the lower levels where excessive rigour is applied."

Garrett wrote to staff that our independent coverage has been "a sadness to me", but we continue to express, in the public interest, our own sorrow that CSIRO's staffers are fed high-level spin while the media are fed weak items as "great science".

We shall deal with anything substantial from CSIRO next month and we repeat our request for Staunton to "come out".