

Silence on Science

In October 2003, Prime Minister John Howard appeared to be listening to his favourite scientists (in medicine) when the Investment Review of Health & Medical Research was set up. Under its chairman, John Grant, the final report was completed for a scheduled release in March 2004 but, despite repeated requests by scientists, this has not happened, even in time for the election on 9 October.

From the moment on 6 May when Howard flicked away *Australasian Science's* question on national targets for R&D support (*AS*, June 2004, pp.41–42), he flagged that he had no intention of raising issues about science and its funding in the coming election. The tightly constrained package, Backing Australia's Ability 2, was all that Cabinet Science Minister Brendan Nelson could squeeze out of an unsupportive Treasury and Finance. BAA2 fixes the future to 2011.

Howard then rubbed salt into the wounded hopes of scientists when he snubbed his own Science Prizes in September (*AS*, October 2004, p.1, 44–45). Frustrated, 17 leading medical scientists pleaded to Howard and Labor leader Mark Latham in an open letter “to present their policy vision and forward financial commitments for Australia's health and medical research”. They advocated internationally competitive funding because “the future health, education and intellectual capital are under threat without proper investment”.

Howard reportedly dismissed them by claiming they were “adequately resourced”. After 8.5 years of falling or static funding in relative terms and “reviews” of R&D across the board that got nowhere, scientists now know they are on the outer.

Labor had a start on the Coalition with Shadow Science Minister, Senator Kim Carr, providing a detailed set of initiatives to Latham in early July. But, as with almost all other policies, Latham sat on this until the campaign was well underway and left it to Carr to release it 11 days before the poll, giving it no chance of sinking into the electorate's consciousness as an issue of substance. Media attention was focused on the party leaders, and the issue died.

Amid many promises on the billion-dollar scale, though, Labor did not offer much in new funding. Latham had not accepted economic arguments that the tax concession for industry needed to be restored to 150%. This would have differentiated Labor by rejuvenating the private sector's commitment to productivity through innovation from R&D, which had slumped after Howard cut the concession to 125% in 1996.

Nonetheless, Carr's other plans received warm and positive responses from research and university bodies, with the exception of the Academy of Science, which remained silent. The Coalition did not bother to respond when Labor released its detailed R&D policy.



McGauran, Nelson and Howard at the launch of BAA2.

McGauran Out, Family First In

Howard has now dispensed with a separate, though junior, Minister for Science. Peter McGauran tried to make it appear that CSIRO and the Cooperative Research Centres would serve “the national interest” better by becoming predominantly commercial operations, directions that were dictated from on high. McGauran has been dispatched from the science portfolio and will now spend his days hosting ceremonies in the never-never land of Citizenship and Multi-cultural Affairs.

Brendan Nelson did not overtly exercise his power over science in the past term. Now he has become solely responsible for both large issues and detailed administration of science despite being busy bedding down his controversial changes to universities and stemming the rout of technical training.

Nelson will have his work cut out to recover from the distrust of this government among scientists. Opening conduits to scientists who are not cowed by the “managerialism” that overwhelms research institutions will not be easy following the departure of Nelson's well-regarded science adviser, Dr Thomas Barlow, after completing his term through the last government.

If Family First, which Howard embraced with mutual exchange of preferences in the poll, exerts its influence in the Senate, Nelson could be confronted with an implicit challenge from the party's power base in the fundamentalist Assemblies of God (AOG). Like its American counterparts, AOG is not only deeply conservative on moral and ethical issues but espouses creationism as the literal interpretation of the Bible (see *Editorial*, p.1). The Christian

Right in the USA never ceases campaigning in state legislatures to overturn the teaching of evolution in schools and replace it with “creation science”.

Cancer of Security and Commercialisation

The ultimate demonstration of the government’s folly in forcing CSIRO to embrace the short-term imperatives of commercialisation (enthusiastically promoted by its Chief Executive, Geoff Garrett) has been the collapse of the billion-dollar Australian Magnesium Corporation. The cost to taxpayers of CSIRO’s over-hyped magnesium technology has required the Federal government to write off \$90 million of subsidies to the company, \$75 million of it via CSIRO. Both Federal and Queensland governments also advanced \$150 million each to the company.

Unable to attract sufficient income from commercial contracts, CSIRO’s Sustainable Ecosystems has closed the unique, 20-year-old animal facility it used to breed tamar wallabies, among other species. This made the national marsupial genome project possible, but CSIRO cannot afford to participate. The biochemical laboratory associated with the animal house is threatened with closure unless it can obtain unlikely external funding.

Also lacking external income is CSIRO Exploration & Mining, which has suffered deep cuts to its laboratories and staff. Garrett’s reward to its Chief, Dr Neil Phillips, was to pay \$100,000 for him to undergo a management course at Harvard to improve his non-scientific skills. However, a sustained rebellion from some staff and a documented refusal by BHP Billiton to work with him culminated in his abrupt removal in the week of 18 October.

While Garrett has been spinning that “morale surveys” have shown widespread acceptance by staff of his massive reorganisation and redirection of CSIRO towards short-term commercialisation, the CSIRO Staff Association contradicted his line by welcoming Labor’s policy of renewing CSIRO as predominantly a “public good” agency.

Buried in the security policy of the Coalition, released only in the final week of the election and unreported, was confirmation of the government’s push to reverse CSIRO’s once-treasured and statutory responsibility as a purely civil agency of science. Without deliberate “branding” by CSIRO’s current crop of unqualified and overpaid spin merchants, the public reputation of CSIRO had evolved naturally over decades from research that was dominantly and manifestly for the public good. Now, under Howard, CSIRO has been fundamentally neutered by the government’s policy on science and technology for “national security”, quoted here in full:

Establish a special collaborative research and development programme between the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO), the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation to further their work on counter terrorism related projects. Projects will focus on chemical and biological protection, intelligence support tools, explosive detection, biometrics and counter measures for civilian aircraft from shoulder fired missiles (MANPADS). This programme will be established using the existing resources of these three organisations.

By definition, the work and outcomes will be shrouded in secrecy. Equally serious is that CSIRO’s “leadership” is having to fund it from existing appropriations with no defined limits, meaning that the 20 specialist Divisions will be milked for funds, as they have already been in carving out CSIRO’s six Flagships.

Public Constraints Diminishing Science

In the long period leading from the first to the fourth election that Howard has won, the scientific community as a whole must bear collective responsibility for not effectively articulating broad-ranging public values in issues involving science.

This has not been helped by the constraints imposed on CSIRO’s responsible and once-proudly independent scientists. Three scientists were disciplined by their Chiefs when they dared to add their names and CSIRO affiliation to a petition of 101 scientists, published in *The Australian* on 15 September, calling for an end to old-growth logging.

CSIRO’s marine scientists have also been “constrained” on the scientific advice and interoperation they can provide to the government’s conservation plans for Australia’s oceans (*conScience*, p.43). Likewise climate scientists have been told not to engage in debate on climate change and never to mention the Kyoto accord on greenhouse gas emissions. There are also reports that CSIRO’s four members (out of 11) on the independent Wentworth Group on water conservation have been forbidden to use CSIRO’s name in public statements.

Looking back over a tumultuous year for CSIRO, *Australasian Science*’s repeated challenges to its new-styled, but unscientific, “corporate culture” have gone unanswered by its Director of Communications, who remains silent in public after 18 months on high pay with the organisation.

Razor sends Christmas greetings and thanks to readers, especially many in CSIRO who have supported our independent reporting and analysis over the past 3 years.