

Aussie Research to Slide Further Internationally

Any gloss on Dr Brendan Nelson's success in squeaking his university "reforms" through the Senate hours before Parliament rose for 2003 was tarnished when universities were forced to admit far fewer new entrants in 2004 than previously because of deferred provisions of the package.

As with the over-hyped "Innovation Statement" (aka "Backing Australia's Ability") 3 years ago, Treasury ensured that Nelson won no new funding for this academic year and only \$75 million more for 2005. In both cases, Finance "back-loaded" the packages over 5 years, with significant increases coming only in the final years. By then, increasing costs, salary increases that government won't fund, demands for matching government grants and inflation will have eroded the "boosts" claimed at the outset.

No wonder the Vice-Chancellors wanted "new" money to be brought forward to this year. No surprise that the government brushed it aside.

Most of the government's "reviews" of R&D have been buried. None has been independent of political control, nor has any made a public impact by daring to make firm recommendations for specific funding.

The parameters of the pre-election May Budget have already been set. Depressingly, after 8 years of John Howard's regime, indications from inside government are that research will get nothing new. Scientists seem to have exhausted their influence.

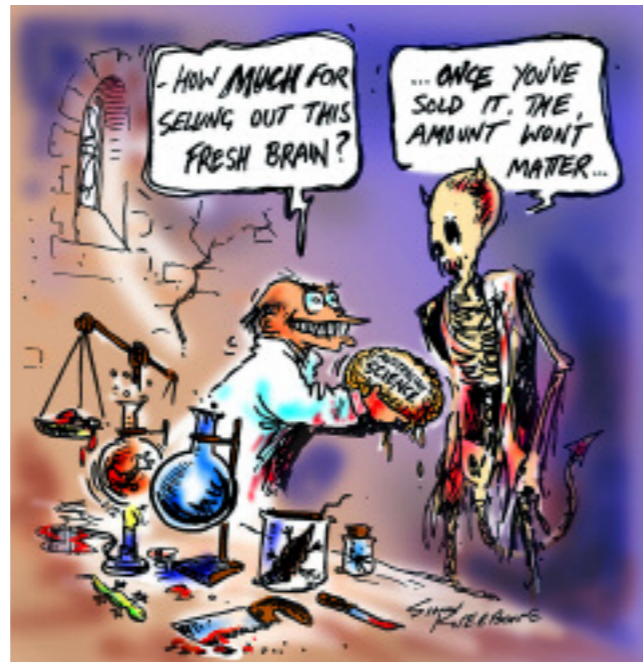
Lessons from Overseas

Australia should be learning from comparable nations through successes with R&D in Canada and the failures emerging in New Zealand.

New PM, Paul Martin, has appointed Canada's first Chief Scientist in Dr Arthur Carty, who headed the National Research Council (their equivalent of our CSIRO) for a decade. After coping with harmful cuts (like Australia's), Carty lifted support by impressive volumes, contrasting with the erosion of staff, capacity and achievement in CSIRO. Canada has set a target for funding of R&D to grow to 3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2010.

A top chemist, Carty has been appointed full-time, like the UK's chief science adviser, Prof David King, and remains very active in research.

Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, began in May 1999 on a part-time basis (sharing his job as Rio Tinto's Managing Director of Research & Technology) and was reappointed for another 3 years in May 2002. The government's protection of Batterham and his advice from



any form of public scrutiny has become a running issue (see *conScience*, p.43).

In France, 5300 scientists, including heads of public research institutes, have threatened to resign unless their government increases the research budget, unblocks frozen funds and reverses substantial cuts in jobs for postgraduates. They have extracted a promise from President Jacques Chirac to raise the current spend on R&D, 2% of GDP, to near 3% in 7 years. Yet, the European Commission says this is not enough and has recommended a doubling of research funding over the same period.

Under Howard, Australia has slipped on the OECD table of nations to a mediocre level of 1.54% in 2000–01. Vice-Chancellors are advocating: "Australia should set a target for R&D of 2% by 2010 and 3% by 2020".

John Howard Cloned!

Another John Howard is at work on reshaping R&D in Australia. As reported in *Razor* (October 2003, pp.44–45), the government contracted consultants Howard Partners Pty Ltd of Canberra to "review" the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) program.

JH II has shocked scientists in the "public good" CRCs (those not charged with being primarily commercial) and those applying for renewals or new centres with his dismissal of their place in the program. Although the government has yet to announce any decisions on his recommendations, he is acting for them and tells CRCs to concentrate on commercial goals. In a revealing memo to a potential applicant, leaked to *Razor*, JH II writes as though he had not been central to the report:

The CRC evaluation completed last August recommended that the program be more sharply focussed on economic/industry outcomes, that CRCs be industry-driven, and that pure "public good"-related research not be part of the program in future. It also recommended better engagement with SMEs [small to medium enterprises]. These recommendations have been accepted and the program guidelines and selection documentation have been altered to reflect them.

Instead, Australia should be heeding the dismal experience of New Zealand's scientists. Their national DSIR, a mirror of our CSIRO, was broken into nine profit-oriented Crown Research Institutes (CRIs) 14 years ago by a National Party government hell-bent on privatising every public body in sight.

The Labour government of PM Helen Clark retained the CRIs and is now the recipient of an angry Open Letter from CRI scientists who slam the resulting "loss of research capability and undermining public confidence in science". They say: "The CRI system emphasises short-term profitability at the expense of fundamental long-term research. Scientists' intellectual freedom is increasingly restricted, job security is limited and pay is low (compared to the private sector or overseas research salaries). Research careers are also compromised by commercial work which is not recognised by the wider scientific community."

We wait for Australia's science leaders to dramatise their parlous lot by taking action similar to their French and Kiwi counterparts.

CSIRO: A "Company" not Needing Scientists as Directors

CSIRO scientists are bewildered by the emphasis and cost of senior "managers" who are charged with exerting great influence over them but are not required to have knowledge of science, let alone any experience in a scientific organisation. Three instances have been revealing.

1. THE MATE

CSIRO Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett has overseen payment of \$700,000 in 14 contracts to Mr Ian Dean for work in "human resources", enough to support three or four senior researchers. An old colleague from South Africa's CSIR, which Garrett headed, Dean also drew \$1800 in travel allowances while staying at Garrett's official residence in Canberra and was given the use of a car while consulting in the Forestry Division 100 metres' walk away. He also attended numerous major sporting events as CSIRO's repre-

sentative – at CSIRO's cost – the "benefit" said to be "networking".

This affair had been boiling internally for more than 2 years. A report by CSIRO staff that was attached to an answer to a Question on Notice by Labor Senator Kim Carr admitted: "It has been accepted that this process of engagement of Mr Dean, through a decentralised process of decision-making, was flawed. The matter has been discussed in full with the CSIRO Board, who have required a review of the use and engagement of consultants with a view to policy amendments."

Garrett was overseas when a storm broke in the media over "jobs for the boys". Mike Whelan, CSIRO's Chief Financial Officer, claimed on ABC Radio that Dean's contracts were in accord with guidelines and he had "delivered value for money". There was no mention of scientific benefit.

2. THE CULTURE BOSS

CSIRO reveals its new self-image in the management-speak description for the position of Executive Director, People and Culture, by describing itself as "The Company". The appointee will work directly with Garrett in leading a "change agenda" for "people development across several divisions", and will model "the right organisational culture". Nowhere is "the right culture" or "change" explained or defined.

3. THE COMMUNICATIONS CZAR

After more than a year, and at a cost of at least \$70,000 in failed headhunters, CSIRO had not appointed a Director of Communications when *Razor* went to press. Instead CSIRO has kept former lawyer and tobacco industry advocate Donna Staunton on contract to implement a "Board-approved communications strategy" that management refuses to release for public scrutiny.

The strategy may be evident in hard-sold claims of "world-firsts" and huge revenue from CSIRO "breakthroughs" that warrant questioning. For instance, after protracted disputes over priority for a biotechnology technique dubbed "gene silencing" or ddRNAi, an agreement between CSIRO, Benitec Ltd and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries was announced on 8 December 2003. Claims were made of "Australia's lead in the global commercialisation" and "market opportunities worth billions of dollars". This may be fine science, but no mention was made of intense global competition with this technique from the USA where, 12 months earlier, Dr Andrew Fire and colleagues of the Carnegie Institute scored the journal *Science*'s "Top Breakthrough of 2002".

The strategy also failed to "manage" the bad press resulting from the Ian Dean affair.

A report on CSIRO's "security" work in science to combat terrorism is on pages 41–42.