

Tough Times as Election Looms

A month after the Coalition government arrived 8 years ago, its intentions to take control of public institutions through big funding cuts came in science. In his first stint as Science Minister, Peter McGauran stunned the astronomical community with a dramatic announcement.

Australian astronomers had achieved high regard internationally from their acceptance by the European Southern Observatory as partners in the four giant 8-metre optical telescopes ESO was building in Chile. Shortly before the election the Labor government of Paul Keating had endorsed this.

Four months later, in the first Howard/Costello budget, universities, science, cultural institutions and the ABC – representing the “elites”, as Howard branded them – were punished for the alleged financial sins of Labor. After the shock, it took astronomers years of fresh negotiations to obtain a less favourable deal for limited access to the two 8-metre Gemini Telescopes in Chile and Hawaii.

As *Australasian Science* goes to press, the scientific community is still awaiting the final batch of reviews on the government's funding of a successor to the 2001 *Innovation Statement*, which had been trumpeted as the “largest ever” package for R&D but, in reality, barely stopped the slide caused by cuts from 1996. Universities and the Australian Society for Medical Research have now called for billion dollar boosts to the research budgets for basic research for the public good.

Razor has confirmation of a battle being waged over budget details as the Department of Education, Science & Training and its Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, face serious opposition from other departments and their ministers, notably Industry. Education wants more money for research in universities and CSIRO, whereas Industry is pushing for greater support for the commercialisation of science.

Headlines that science will win big in the Budget are speculation. Cabinet's sights are set on re-election, at any cost to the taxpayer, and science is not rating in Howard's stated priorities for extra funding – aged care, health and defence. Any fresh funding for R&D will have to be finely dissected to see if any of it is truly “new”.

Science has not been helped by the controversies continuing to swirl around the Chief Scientist since Senator Bob Brown's *conScience*, the editorial and *Razor* in *Australasian Science* last month. In Senate Estimates in February it emerged that Dr Robin Batterham had told Labor science spokesman, Senator Kim Carr, in person that he was happy to face questioning by the Senate Committee. McGauran put a stop to that. His defence of Batterham (see p.42) does

not mention his ban.

Carr said that the next stage would be to establish a Senate Committee to examine the post of Chief Scientist, including its controversial part-time nature. Brown is associating the Greens with the move. Meanwhile the scientific community, not to mention the national interest, is weakened politically by being denied access to Batterham's advice that, for all we know, may have been valuable and persuasive.

UK Science Surges

While Australian scientists have been kept waiting an unconscionable time for relief from the funding cuts of the late 1990s, their compatriots in the UK have found a willing supporter in their own government. The move to boost funding significantly was first flagged last year by Science Minister Lord David Sainsbury (*Razor*, May 2003, p.44).

Now, last month, the increase has gone even higher and, in another contrast that shames Australia, the commitment continues for 10 years. The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Treasurer) and #2 in Tony Blair's Labour Cabinet, Gordon Brown, has hiked the increase to \$2.9 billion (A\$7 billion) per year in 2005.

The Trade Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, who has carriage of most of research funding, will have a ready ear in her Australian Labor counterparts as she is Australian-born (the daughter of the redoubtable former senior public servant, Sir Lennox Hewitt) and educated.

A major aim declared by Brown is to lift the static number of undergraduates studying science. So far, the Australian government has been paralysed by the trend downward here following its increase in HECS for science courses.

CSIRO under Senate Fire

After an absence from the Senate Estimates hearings last November, CSIRO Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, faced another torrid session of the Committee on 18 February, followed by a series of penetrating Questions on Notice that he has to answer this month.

The pressure over his handling of revelations concerning the engagement of his former South African colleague, Ian Dean, for “human resources” consultancies did not let up. Garrett has not indicated what measures there were of Dean's “value for money” to CSIRO. While Dean no longer works for CSIRO, his bill has blown out to \$740,000, enough to pay for several scientists.

In the hearing, and in an email to staff on 23 February, Garrett defended Dean on the grounds of his claimed inter-

national reputation and that all engagements accorded with rules on tenders. An implication in the questions is that Garrett may have ignored internal advice that the jobs should have gone to tender.

A hot potato relates to the “downsizing” of the Exploration & Mining Division, with the Sydney laboratory being closed and all geochemistry research stopped. Garrett said that the resources industry had been consulted and approved the plan. However, this is disputed by evidence known to *Razor* that many resource companies and the Geoscience Council had protested the move.

Then, detailed explanations are requested on why CSIRO Plant Industry dramatically destroyed all of its experimental plants with the wheat streak virus last year, as well as Garrett's willing agreement to CSIRO's involvement in “security science”, which is contrary to its charter (*AS*, March 2003, pp.41–42).

Issues about alleged commercial dealings over the importation of genetic material in the Forestry & Forest Products Division and its destruction remain unanswered.

Former CSIRO Entomology Chief Dr Max Whitten has entered the fray again with a vigorous attack on CSIRO's shift of priorities from basic research to commercialisation imperatives. The headlines in the *Financial Review* (1 March) and *The Funneled Web* (1 March) reflected his concerns: “Public good loses out in CSIRO restructure” and “CSIRO – an experiment gone wrong”.

CSIRO's Deputy Chief Executive, Dr Ron Sandland, opened his response in the *Financial Review* (3 March) by saying Whitten's comments “reflect the fact that it is nearly 10 years since he left the organisation”.

A Toss from FASTS to CHASS

When the Coalition government launched its raft of reviews of its support for R&D, the focus was entirely on science and technology. This led inexorably in November 2002 to the ultimate statement of “national research priorities” omitting the equally important, though less well recognised, humanities and social sciences.

Practitioners of these disciplines were outraged and were not mollified by assurances that their areas would be reviewed later. Then President of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Prof Leon Mann, expressed their feelings in a *conScience* column (*AS*, July 2003, p.43). Scientists, however, were amazed when the priorities announced by PM John Howard included a fourth priority – which the scientific panel had not submitted but was inserted by Cabinet – that gives priority status to research in “security”, a Howard mantra.



Toss Gascoigne directed the annual Science Meets Parliament.

Eventually, the government has amended the priorities to mention the humanities and social sciences, but with wording far from memorable and of doubtful help. The government has yet to deliver significant, ongoing funding for cash-strapped scholars and researchers in any discipline, science or otherwise.

Humanities scholars and social scientists recognised the need to get their lobbying act together, following the 19-year lead of the “peak” lobbying group, the Federation of Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS). Presidents of FASTS have been vocal for the cause of science in Canberra, and for nearly 9 years benefited from a savvy Executive Director in Toss Gascoigne.

Now, Gascoigne has shifted from FASTS to become Executive Director of CHASS, the fledgling Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. CHASS received a modest grant from Nelson for a steering committee to be chaired by Curtin University historian Prof Tom Stannage. CHASS will be launched in July (www.chass.org.au).

An annual lobbying mission will follow this like Science Meets Parliament. Universities have already copied FASTS by staging in March the second of their Universities Meet Parliament missions.