



Students invade CSIRO's Discovery Centre. Photo: Peter Pockley

## CSIRO's PR and political headaches

The venue for Prime Minister John Howard's launch of Backing Australia's Ability 2 (BAA2; see pp.41–42) was meant to be kept secret but, when we in the media and other guests assembled at CSIRO's Discovery Centre in Canberra on 6 May, the venue was overrun by 40 students protesting noisily, though peacefully, over hikes in university fees.

The arrangements by CSIRO's management were so lax that the group easily entered the building, which was not protected by staff in even a relaxed way. Eventually, Howard did not show. CSIRO's Chairman, Catherine Livingstone, Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett, Communications Director Donna Staunton, and Media Manager Richard Forbes were in crisis mode as TV crews recorded the protest.

CSIRO HO had circulated the venue to staff on the previous day, against government orders, claiming that the occasion was a tribute to CSIRO's importance. Forbes, who had resigned the day before and left CSIRO at the end of Budget week, stood arms akimbo to stop the students penetrating to the lectern for Howard's speech.

These amateurish arrangements were overseen by the highly paid Staunton, who claims to have experience in "risk and reputation management". Instead CSIRO copped a PR embarrassment of the highest order as Howard was forced to make his announcement in the unscientific surroundings – but security – of Parliament House.

## Staunton meets *Razor*!

After we decamped to Parliament House, *Razor* encountered Garrett in a corridor. Civilly, he introduced Staunton, the controversially appointed Director of Communications (AS, April 2004, p.1, 37–38). On shaking hands she declared:



Catherine Livingstone and Geoff Garrett arrive in CSIRO's Discovery Centre before their PR disaster erupts. Photo: Peter Pockley

"Oh, you're the person who writes about someone without meeting them". *Razor* replied: "Two requests have been made to interview you but these have never been answered."

*Razor* has repeated this request and expanded it to an invitation to debate issues in science and its communication, and in respect of CSIRO, in a public forum.

Under Staunton's guidance after BAA2 and the Budget, Garrett burst briefly from his former shell to promote the Budget as "fantastic news" and "a huge win for science and the CSIRO". Once again, the claim that the announcements are "great" is far from the reality (see pp.41–42).



Donna Staunton leaves CSIRO's Discovery Centre without hosting the Prime Minister. Geoff Garrett is behind. Photo: Peter Pockley

As the Flagships have yet to prove the claims made for them, most CSIRO divisions are clearly struggling to maintain the quality and range of their research. Divisions that have minimal "fit" with a Flagship, like Exploration & Mining and Forestry, are suffering most. Although a heavy discipline of silence is imposed on staff, their frustration seeps out via intermediate sources and the CSIRO Staff Association.

The sad thing for erstwhile supporters of CSIRO is that, whatever the outcome of the election, the greatest cost of Garrett's massive restructuring and strange appointments has been the evident loss of bipartisan support for the erstwhile national icon.

Comments in the influential *Financial Review* are significant. Science policy writer, Peter Roberts, has described CSIRO as being "guilty of over-hyping its technologies, partly to justify its continuing funding" (8–9 May, p.22). And Education Editor, Tim Dodd, observed that one result of Labor's attacks is that the government (which appointed Garrett) had to be seen to back him (10 May, p.30).

However, *Razor* has it on authority that senior figures in government are disturbed by the turmoil in CSIRO.

This is one reason that Garrett's claims of a "win and vindication against critics" have been so slim in reality. Another is that Education Minister Brendan Nelson's strong bid for significant increases in R&D funding fell on deaf ears in Cabinet, resulting in the modest scale of the BAA2 and Budget packages for R&D.

## Academy of Science's 50th Anniversary

It's a pleasure to end this column on a positive note with a tribute to the Australian Academy of Science on celebrating its 50th anniversary. *Razor* has been involved with the Academy ever since becoming the first scientist to take up a post in the Australian media four decades ago. Leading lights like Sir Fred White (then Chairman of CSIRO) and Sir Mark Oliphant had persuaded the ABC to establish the post of science broadcaster with a qualified scientist. A mutually supportive relationship developed, with each party respecting the professional independence of the other.

Academy support was especially valuable when ABC management tried to close the Science Unit by charging its Head with misconduct for daring to speak about ABC science programming at the ANZAAS Congress in 1972. The action caused public uproar and was dropped by the ABC's commissioners after the election of the Whitlam government.

It was thus most satisfying to be present at the Academy's dinner in Parliament House in May to see Dr Norman Swan



Norman Swan in his office in the ABC's Science Unit.

receive a rare Academy Medal in recognition of his prolific and outstanding work as a broadcaster in the ABC's Science Unit. (Robyn Williams is a Fellow of the Academy.)

On accepting the Medal, Norman received the loudest ovation of the night when he extolled the value of basic research. Clearly, he touched a nerve among leading scientists who feel embattled by the government's favouritism of commercially driven R&D.

Perhaps as a sign of the times, the Academy has changed the way it appoints its President. Jim Peacock – who until last year was Chief of CSIRO Plant Industry and, now in official retirement, is still paid by CSIRO – is the last President to gain office by a nod of the head from his predecessor and not by a vote of Fellows. (He is 2 years into a 4-year term.) Since its foundation by Royal Charter – presented by the Queen to 16 Foundation Fellows on her Royal Tour in 1954 – the Presidency has rotated between Fellows in the Academy's two sections – Physical and Biological Sciences.

At the Academy's AGM last month, Fellows made a call for nominations for President and a ballot by Fellows. It will be interesting to see who gets up in 2006!