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Last month's Federal Budget offered a fistful of dollars for researchers yet it wasn't merely enough – \$5 billion over 7 years sounds generous until you compare it with Australia's gross domestic product. And as the economy continues to grow over the term of the Backing Australia's Ability 2 program, the proportion that Australia puts back into R&D will flatline.

In recent years that proportion has slipped to 1.5%, which compares unfavourably with the OECD average of 2.3%. And by the time the program expires in 2011 that stagnant 1.5% will have been doubled by the 3% commitment made by Canada and some European countries.

Backing Australia's *ability*? The package is backing future mediocrity.

The government gave a staggering display of arrogance in the week before the Budget when it axed the Solar Cooperative Research Centre (CRC). Science Minister Peter McGauran defended its closure, stating that CRCs must now demonstrate that they will contribute substantially to Australia's industrial, commercial and economic growth.

McGauran should spend some time at the Australian National University's Centre for Sustainable Energy Systems, where Prof Andrew Blakers could acquaint him with a number of solar projects that are being commercialised (see pp.34–36). For instance, his highly efficient Sliver solar cells use one-tenth of the normal amount of expensive pure silicon, significantly reducing the cost of solar panels. The technology is being commercialised by Origin Energy.

Nevertheless the Coalition government continues to favour a fossil fuel industry that is approaching retirement age while turning its back on the birth of the solar age. Since 1997 it has turned off the lights of the Energy R&D Corporation, the CRC for Renewable Energy, the Renewable Energy Commercialisation Program of the Australian Greenhouse Office and now the Solar CRC. Only three universities retain more than 10 staff and PhD students in renewable energy research.

At the same time, fossil fuel research has become a boom industry in itself, with funding available for the CRC for Clean Power from Lignite, the CRC for Coal in Sustainable Development, the CRC for Greenhouse Gas Technologies, the Rio Tinto Foundation, CSIRO Energy Technology and CSIRO's new Energy Transformed Flagship.

McGauran defended criticism of the Solar CRC's demise by deflecting responsibility for the decision to an independent panel of experts. And here is the rub: one of the key decision-makers was Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, who is also employed by mining giant Rio Tinto, a significant beneficiary of Federal R&D funding.

The timing of the announcement smacked of arrogance – on Budget day the Senate was due to debate Batterham's "potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist".

ABOUT THE COVER

Researchers at the Australian National University have made the world's first demonstration of information sharing via teleportation. The potential benefits include improved security for spy and financial computer networks and the development of a quantum internet system that is faster, more reliable and more secure (see pp.14–16).



Jamie Tufrey