

## Come in Spinner

John Howard's determination that Australia become an unprovoked co-invader of Iraq has been condemned for the spin that he, ministers and staffers put on the justifications and resulting chaos. "Truthfulness in government" has become an issue for the coming election.

Mimicking the government, CSIRO's Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett is reported to have wanted "someone good at spin", and discarded the effective National Awareness Program team he inherited. He did not require either of his two appointees as Director of Communications, Di Jay and Donna Staunton, to have any background in science or experience in communicating it to a range of audiences. "Corporate communications" for CSIRO has delivered the spin Garrett wanted but has damaged the standing of CSIRO, as evidenced by his lack of vocal public supporters.

Garrett claims to "have undertaken numerous interviews with national print and electronic media", but his appearances have been few and attracted little attention. He is known mostly for the controversies swirling around his "reforms".

Garrett proclaims that this research organisation must become a "business", even a "company", and run on "corporate" lines. For a "leader" of science, his rare addresses have been about reorganisation, as if this were the main game.

Despite his protestations about *Australasian Science's* critical assessments, Garrett's words and silences have revealed standards unbecoming of a national agency that should be upholding principles of science, where evidence and openness prevail. These indicate an organisation intent on discarding its roots for an uncertain future. This is why coverage and comment on the machinations driving CSIRO have been a matter of public interest for Australia's sole science monthly to publish.

## More Management, Less Science

It is seldom that an appointment process is as revealing of broader issues than in Garrett's antics over communications. In his prize entry for best spinner he can cite his protection of staff and media from the details of Donna Staunton's decade defending the tobacco industry and her subsequent 2 years with AMP Ltd. While this silence continues and Staunton does not articulate and openly debate CSIRO's "great science" (her assertion on 8 July), the tobacco stain will smear the organisation's erstwhile standards of reliability and truth according to evidence.

Staunton is part of a massive increase in the number of staff in CSIRO's Limestone Castle – management numbers



have swelled by 40% in the past 3 years. While producing surveys and reports, their labours do nothing directly to advance research.

Some have been recruited externally, like the new Director of People & Culture, Peter May, a non-scientist from an accountancy firm who is charged by Garrett with managing "cultural change" to make entrepreneurs out of scientists. The advertisement for his position gave no rationale or measures for "change".

As for entrepreneurialism, on 2 August Garrett and Science Minister, Peter McGauran, issued media releases declaring that "targets" for external earnings from CSIRO's intellectual property had been met, with \$22 million earned in 2003–04. But this income was absorbed by at least the cost of the expanding company of "marketing managers". Despite questioning by *Razor* and in the Senate, the exact cost of all marketers, some of whom earn higher salaries than research scientists, has never been revealed.

Likewise Garrett continues to suppress the details of Staunton's salary and the full expenses of maintaining her offices in Sydney and Canberra. He has only confirmed her contract earnings of \$227,837 for 4-day weeks (\$284,796 full-time equivalent) over the 11 months prior to her appointment to staff.

There has also been silence over the ongoing failure of CSIRO officials to correct statements made in Senate Estimates on 2 June about Staunton's appointment (*AS*, July 2003, pp.12–13). Greens leader, Senator Bob Brown, has

put McGauran on the spot for repeating CSIRO's spin in an answer to his first questions in the Senate:

Question on Notice 3075: (1) Can a copy be provided of the statement made by Ms Donna Staunton in 2000 in which she accepted that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major cause of preventable illness in Australian society? (2) (a) To whom was the statement made; and (b) how and when was it distributed?

## Be Careful of the Company You Keep

Staunton has not countered *Australasian Science's* exposés directly, but called in a favour from her former boss at AMP, Paul Batchelor, who wrote a letter to the Editor advising of an error in the published account of Staunton's employment record. *Australasian Science* had named Andrew Mohl as Chief Executive of AMP Ltd at relevant times instead of Batchelor (*AS*, July 2004, p.13), but Mohl did not replace Batchelor until after Staunton had left AMP. This error has been corrected on our website, but has no bearing on our reports and criticisms of CSIRO's processes.

Batchelor resigned on 24 September 2002 after leading AMP to a financial and corporate crisis. While his letter supports Staunton's appointment by CSIRO, his testimony – from a non-scientist for a science agency to engage another non-scientist – can be judged against his tumultuous record of "corporate governance" (in which CSIRO claimed Staunton was expert).

Batchelor also claimed that Staunton "resigned" from AMP, but AMP management was "unable to disclose details of Ms Staunton's departure due to terms of an agreement". Batchelor has broken this agreement, which he negotiated, by declaring she had "resigned" and not been retrenched. With the agreement now available for examination, CSIRO should determine whether Staunton received an Eligible Termination Payment that, under taxation law, is available only on retrenchment.

AMP management advised *Razor* that other points in Staunton's record at AMP remain correct, as printed. Clearly, CSIRO managers never checked her record when appointing her to staff. This "communicator" and senior executive has not been an "open and transparent leader" on the issues.

## Independence Day for CSIRO Communicators

CSIRO's communications centre buzzed with coordinated activity after the publication of our July edition, with Staunton telephoning directions to seven staffers to dig for

dirt to discredit our revelations. Four days after Staunton wrote to 150 "communicators" on 8 July foreshadowing "a response to the criticisms raised by *Australasian Science*," 20 of them circulated their own attack on this magazine and "the journalist" to 659 recipients of the Australian Science Communicators (ASC) email list. The communicators claimed they were independent of "any 'official' CSIRO viewpoint".

On that same day Garrett lashed *Australasian Science* in his weekly bulletin, Monday Mail, which is emailed to 6500 staff. The CSIRO communicators then republished Garrett's response on the ASC list without any qualification or disclaimer, thereby endorsing everything he wrote. Both statements were textbook examples of spin.

When questioned about the use of a Hotmail address to circulate the CSIRO communicators' letter, Darren Osborne (editorial adviser to Staunton) wrote to the ASC-list on 13 July, explaining: "We elected to use a non-CSIRO address to show that the letter was not a directive from the CSIRO Executive... We also decided to forward Geoff Garrett's email through this address."

But their claims of independence don't stack up. The Hotmail account was addressed "CSIRO Communicators"; the 20 communicators identified themselves as CSIRO officers; some of the signatories had prepared material for the Garrett/Staunton statement; and all had used CSIRO's name and facilities for their two broadcasts.

By republishing Garrett's assertions, the communicators had trotted out the "company" line, and they are individually and jointly responsible with Staunton for the contents. These self-proclaimed "professionals" had no Chinese wall between them and Staunton, and they are silent over the manifestly erroneous claims made about her appointment by their bosses to the Senate.

What they published was not the "response to the criticisms raised by *Australasian Science*" that Staunton had foreshadowed on 8 July. The sole instance Garrett cited in his Monday Mail was that "Mr Pockley" declined to visit Adelaide to report on the new Preventative Health Flagship. He did not mention that illness and other sound reasons had prevented a trip to Adelaide or that requests to interview key scientists by phone had been declined by CSIRO. Indeed, CSIRO refused to answer 14 questions submitted by email about claims made for the Flagship. This record is in writing.

Phone and email had previously been used effectively for features on CSIRO's Light Metals Flagship (*AS*, June 2003, pp.23–26) and CSIRO's "Security Science" (*AS*, March 2004, pp.41–42). And in place of our independent report on the Preventative Health Flagship we published a three-page article by a CSIRO member (*AS*, Nov/Dec 2003, pp.32–34).

Garrett ignored this in his Monday Mail. He committed an egregious distortion of the facts and a calumny.