

CSIRO Communications in Turmoil – Again

Peter Pockley documents the latest upheaval in a long-running saga that reveals the current style of running the nation's once-great research agency.

CSIRO advertised for a Manager of Communications in April 2004 and filled the post on 9 August with Norman Abjørensen, who brought a broad range of relevant experience in media, public relations and lobbying. Twenty weeks later he had gone after vigorous verbal and written attacks on the competence, experience and style of his boss, the controversial Director of Communications, Donna Staunton, and CSIRO Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett.

Abjørensen, who receives his PhD on political leadership from the Australian National University this month, confronted Staunton at a Christmas party on 9 December. His resignation email on 17 December began: "I find I am unable to continue to work in an organization that daily flouts its vaunted core beliefs. If integrity, honesty and openness are fundamental to the way we operate, then why are they so lacking? Trust is also conspicuous by its absence."

He referred to an "abysmal knowledge of the media" and the management's lack of response to "the reasonable criticisms" aired in *Australasian Science*. He wrote that while these are "increasingly shared by a majority of the scientific community", such critics have been "blackballed or discredited, not answered".

On 21 December Staunton delivered a two-page letter replete with counter-attack and defence. "The repeated statements in front of a number of junior staff [at the party] about your coming to CSIRO being 'one of the worst career moves you have ever made' was also highly unprofessional," she wrote. "I asked you whether your comments that

you made at the Christmas Party may have been the result of intoxication. You denied this was the case". Abjørensen strongly repeated this when questioned by *Australasian Science*.

Staunton offered counselling, and concluded: "I can only hope that you choose your next role very carefully". Abjørensen walked out and his former employer, the Pharmacy Guild, rapidly invited him back as National Campaign Manager.

Staunton sent a brief email to communications staff that night announcing Abjørensen's resignation. "His team will miss his contribution and I indicated this to Norman," she wrote. "I also wished him well for the future." There was no hint of his written and verbal criticisms, nor did Staunton's sentiments in her email to staff appear in her earlier letter to Abjørensen. He sees this as a prize example of the spin and cover-up that he abhorred.

Strange Practices

Australasian Science had not spoken with Abjørensen before or during his time in CSIRO. Last month he told the magazine that he had perceived a "negative, dysfunctional, attitude" in CSIRO's leadership towards communications, both internal and external, only 4 days into the job.

When resigning, Abjørensen questioned the processing of tenders for "Media Training", for which Staunton has responsibility. A small (7 cm) advertisement was published in only one local paper, *The Canberra Times*, on 21 August 2004 but no closing date was advised, contrary to normal practice.



Donna Staunton: CSIRO's uncommunicative queen of communications.

Only on CSIRO's web site could interested applicants learn they had merely 6 working days to submit detailed submissions. Five months later, some applicants had received no response.

Staunton has been seeking a replacement for Abjørensen, but only for 1 year, which avoids the need to advertise the position. This mimics two contentious engagements Garrett made without tender. The first – of Garrett's South African friend, Ian Dean, who earned \$740,205 for "staff development" – drew heavy criticism for flouting normal procedures. Then there was Garrett's engagement of Staunton on a lucrative "rolling" contract in April 2003 at \$22,000 per month despite her lack of experience in science or its communication.

A former insider comments: "This adds up to a consistent pattern by senior CSIRO management in stretching government regulations on tenders and the letting of contracts".

Communication Plans

One senior CSIRO researcher of international repute wrote to *Australasian Science*:

I see continued collapse in this division, and one can only hope it is a short

cycle. The present gobbly gook that passes for serious science is enough to give Don Watson material for more books on management jargon. The most respected scientists here either cannot wait for retirement or are moving for jobs elsewhere. At some point the scientific capital will run out and practical people will realise that talk is no substitute for hard science.

One example of Garrett's "gobbly gook" came on 7 February in his Monday Mail to staff, where he wrote that C-Sharp (one of his slogans for "One CSIRO") "aims to develop transparent investment processes which will better align 'on the ground' science insights with our strategic view of how CSIRO can continually increase our relevance and have the greatest impact for Australia".

Several insiders whom *Australasian Science* asked for translation agreed: "C-Sharp means precisely nothing at all".

Two recent documents produced by Staunton and staff illustrate the verbiage that characterises CSIRO's leadership.

Since the launch of Garrett's six Flagships in 2003 they have received negligible attention among scientists outside CSIRO and virtually nothing in the media. Now, a 37-page "Flagship Marketing Communications Plan 2004-2007" names "Media" as part of CSIRO's supposed cheer squad by including it among its "Stakeholders".

CSIRO's purview is extraordinarily narrow, merely recommending: "Selective media briefings to The Australian Financial Review and The Australian [with] Peter Roberts from the AFR and the Editor of the Australian's Higher Education Section". CSIRO believes it can buy attention by "placing small advertisements in these supplements to coincide with the articles".

Surprised to learn this from *Australasian Science*, Roberts said that, while he was not authorised to comment on behalf of the paper, "I was surprised at being considered for special treatment by CSIRO. I receive very little information

from CSIRO on the issue of Flagships or any other issue."

No other media outlet or reporter is mentioned, not even the ABC. Staunton has abandoned coverage in the vast majority of press, television, radio and magazines.

A second document, "Future C Communication [sic] Plan", lays the key responsibilities for delivering "messages" with Garrett, Staunton and Mehrdad Baghai, CSIRO's "business" head. However, 4 years into office, Garrett is virtually unknown, as are Baghai and Staunton (who has neither given interviews nor directly contacted reporters – a silence criticised by Abjørensen).

Meanwhile, CSIRO is conducting an expensive "National Market Research Study" to "gauge stakeholder knowledge and perceptions of CSIRO". They want to interview "CSIRO's Media stakeholder group", including the ABC's Robyn Williams. But when Williams asked about the meaning of the mangled English in their briefing, a staffer wrote: "In CSIRO we are trying to develop a unified ideology". When Williams asked Staunton to explain CSIRO's criteria in communications projects she said: "We need value for CSIRO". Pressed, she added: "This means money for us".

Public Engagement Discouraged by Threats

In November, Staunton launched CSIRO's "Policy on Public Comment by CSIRO Staff Members" after a few bold scientists made mild comments on the environment and global climate change in the lead-up to the Federal election in October.

While her salary has now been pinpointed at \$330,000 per annum, more than double that of CSIRO's most senior researchers, her latest policy reverses the "transparency and openness" espoused by her "Communications Strategy, 2003-07"

Staunton spelled out a set of rules requiring staff to gain formal authority before speaking or writing in public, with



Peter Pockley

Norman Abjørensen: back with his job after 20 fraught weeks in CSIRO.

ultimate approval to come from her, and threatened disciplinary action for any breaches. Scientific staffers tell *Australasian Science* that "the policy is working – with silence as the result," and label it variously as "authoritarian... a damper... inhibiting".

In fact, Staunton had rewritten a 1997 set of guidelines but omitted its positive preamble, which reflected the open spirit of CSIRO's abandoned Operation Ambassador program:

Communication is a part of our charter. It is encouraged by the Organization and it is seen as essential for the successful adoption of the outcomes of our research... Our reputation rests significantly on public awareness and approval of our scientific achievements. Staff are encouraged to communicate with industry, government, the public and media, effectively and responsibly.

Further, there are reports of some members undergoing detailed, personal questioning. Other public servants recognise this as a government prerequisite for security clearances. *Australasian Science* has long warned that CSIRO's purely civil science and independence is being diminished as Garrett leads it into "security science".

By regularly explaining and debating environmental issues, several CSIRO scientists had been widely recognised – along with "CSIRO" – as national treasures. Now, the public would be hard pressed to name a single CSIRO scientist or "leader".