
Three More Years for CSIRO Chief

But the government has distanced itself from Geoff Garrett's reappointment and foreshadowed the dismantling of CSIRO. Simon Grose reports.

The Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, had CSIRO on his mind recently. In speeches to the Dame Pattie Menzies Foundation in Melbourne and the Sydney Institute in April he ventured the long-term vision that CSIRO's Canberra divisions would be subsumed into the Australian National University (ANU). "If you take a half century view of it, I will be surprised if CSIRO and ANU do not ultimately become one institution," he told the Sydney audience.

Floating the same idea to audiences in the nation's biggest cities means it was no off-the-cuff aside. It was probably in the same week that he approved the reappointment of CSIRO's chief executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, for a 3-year term. At the end of that week he

conscious move to distance himself from a decision recommended to him by the CSIRO Board.

This interpretation can only be strengthened by the fact that Garrett has deserved to be described as "embattled" throughout most of his initial 5-year term and would therefore gain from a show of ministerial endorsement, and that Nelson is a very energetic and politically sensitive operator.

The upshot is that Nelson gave CSIRO a pat by approving Garrett's reappointment, as well as a punch by foreshadowing a Canberra merger with ANU. The thinking behind the punch provoked criticism by several Canberra commentators, and caused ANU spokesmen to squirm in front of television cameras as they sought to

comments revealed at least a dissonance between that line and his personal vision. As he pointed out to his Sydney audience, nine of CSIRO's now 19 divisions have facilities in Canberra where it employs 1400 people, almost one-quarter of its national total. Given that its headquarters is also in the national capital, the notion that its Canberra functions and facilities should be taken over by the ANU can only be seen as a recipe for its demise.

And the Canberra merger model that Nelson invoked – based on the geographic contiguity of the ANU and CSIRO's Black Mountain complex in Canberra and his assertion that CSIRO has superior expertise in commercialising Australian research – is not unique. Sydney is the only Australian capital where similar geographic and functional synergies are not easily obvious between CSIRO and research universities. Examples are the Monash University/CSIRO Clayton campus in Melbourne and the Waite campus in Adelaide where CSIRO, the University of Adelaide and South Australian state research institutes are gathered together.

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headed off to Chile and Brazil on an education trade mission, leaving his deputy, Gary Hardgrave, the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, to make the announcement in a press release on the Friday before the ANZAC long weekend.

Ministers have very busy lives, so it is unwise to read too much into the tea leaves of their actions. However, the fact that Nelson did not arrange to announce the reappointment himself to demonstrate his confidence in Garrett could be interpreted as a

distance themselves from the proposal without distancing themselves from their minister.

But those most concerned were people who work within CSIRO. "That would be the end of CSIRO," was how one former senior CSIRO executive interpreted Nelson's vision. Another former staffer had a darker response: "It wouldn't really matter much. CSIRO is so dead in the water these days."

Coming from a minister who regularly attests that the government has no plans to break up CSIRO, Nelson's

So it is not unlikely that universities around the nation have taken note of Nelson's vision and begun thinking about how they, too, could gobble up any bits of CSIRO in their neighbourhoods.

One thing Nelson's Canberra vision ignores is the profound potential for culture clash between universities and CSIRO. The emphasis in ANU's research is towards the fundamental end of the spectrum while CSIRO's has always been towards the applied end, an emphasis that has been strength-



ened under Garrett's leadership and endorsed by the government. Trying to bind these two together would be a fraught exercise that would threaten to undermine any possible synergies and result in an amorphous national research landscape.

Nelson declined invitations to address these questions in the weeks following his comments.

There is scope for synergies between CSIRO and the ANU. Consider CSIRO's astronomy division, the Australia Telescope National Facility (ATNF), which operates telescopes at Parkes, Narrabri and Coonabarabran and is headquartered in Sydney. Currently included in CSIRO's structure under "IT, Manufacturing and Services", it is perhaps the most anomalous CSIRO division given astronomers' long-standing cultural separation from the commercial world and the larger organisation's determi-

nation to dive deeper into it.

Tossing the ATNF into the ANU's Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics, which runs the Mount Stromlo and Siding Spring Observatories, would fit with a lot of managerial theory about cost savings, core businesses and national centres of excellence. They could rename it Astronomy Australia, the ANU could continue to run it as a fundamental research unit and CSIRO would have freed itself of a non-earning, non-core function.

Opportunities exist for such targeted, strategic structural reform of Australia's public research sector. However, Nelson seems to have been infected by the bug that causes people with power in that sector to conjure notions of sweeping changes that will somehow solve its perceived problems.

CSIRO has been chronically infected with this bug for at least 20 years as successive governments and managers

have been obsessed with changing the structure of CSIRO to get the best out of it. The fact that Garrett's "new" Flagship approach to research priority-setting and funding is developing to emulate the organisation's previous Institute structure in form and function shows how circular and ultimately pointless this quest is.

A "good" structure does not deliver good outcomes. Bad management and unhappy workers in any structure will deliver poor outcomes while good management and motivated workers will do better in any structure. Success in research and its application is – as in most areas – usually due to a combination of the human qualities of people in a team, good ideas, luck, external imperatives, and other factors that have little or no relation to the formal structure in which people operate.

Garrett has exaggerated the notion that structural change is the answer to CSIRO's perceived poor performance, substituting it for effective real time management on his watch. His predecessor, Dr Malcolm McIntosh, did the opposite. He swiftly flattened the structure, made it a low-key issue (allowing him to change things with little hubbub), created a "get-on-with-it" culture and – crucially – won the confidence and respect of his staff. His creative and nimble managerial intelligence enabled him to do that. Garrett's managerial approach is derivative and ordinary by comparison.

If he stays on until his new term ends in December 2008 he will undoubtedly claim that he has done the hard work of restructuring CSIRO, and that the promised gains from the pain will soon begin to flow. Nelson will also probably have other responsibilities by then, either in another portfolio or in opposition.

But the notion of major structural change as a panacea for improving the performance of Australian researchers in CSIRO and elsewhere will not go with them. It's a tough bug.