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At a time when the Federal government is awash with revenue from the growing economy and GST, it has again returned its surplus to the community through tax cuts rather than putting it towards long-term priorities. Australian science is at the crossroads while the government remains aloof to the turmoil continuing in several disciplines and organisations.

While CSIRO Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, was granted a 3-year extension on his contract, the government's handling of the long-anticipated announcement was made at arm's length (see pp.42–43). Kept back until the ANZAC Day long weekend, Science Minister Dr Brendan Nelson was overseas for the announcement, casting Garrett adrift with only a junior minister to issue a media release. On his return, Nelson declined to make a statement to *Australasian Science*. However, CSIRO's standing was revealed in two speeches in which Nelson foreshadowed the dismantling of CSIRO, saying that its Canberra divisions could be merged into the Australian National University.

Matters did not improve for Garrett in subsequent weeks. Eminent CSIRO ecologist Prof Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe used the launch of his revised textbook *Life of Marsupials* as a platform to join the chorus of dissent against CSIRO's leadership (see p.4). Describing a decline in CSIRO's standing in wildlife research, he said that three CSIRO ecologists with "outstanding talents" were "surplus to requirements" despite the fact that "their combined salaries were less than that being paid by CSIRO to one communicator with no scientific background".

Chemistry, too, is in the doldrums. The President of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute (RACI) and Deputy Chief of CSIRO Molecular Science, Dr Greg Simpson, says that young people are becoming less attracted to studying chemistry at university. More than half of the companies surveyed for RACI's *The Future of Chemistry* report predicted an imminent shortage of chemists, with many already having difficulty in recruitment.

The report mirrors concerns in the physics community. Dr Gerry Haddad, Chief of CSIRO Industrial Physics, has bemoaned a 75% decline in physics graduates from 1989–2002. Meanwhile, the best graduates are being "lured overseas by their hip pockets" (*AS*, Jan/Feb 2005, p.43).

Haddad blamed a lack of scientific qualifications among science teachers, and Simpson agrees: "I am concerned that school students are failing to see the relevance of science to their lives because of a shortage of qualified and motivated teachers to expose them to the excitement of current science," he says. "This contributes to the declining number of science graduates."

These criticisms have been vindicated in a study by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (see p.13). *Who's Teaching Science?* found that two in five secondary school physics teachers have not completed a physics major, and most of these did not study the subject beyond first year. One in four chemistry teachers and one in seven biology teachers did not complete third year in the area they are teaching.

Australia's future prosperity depends on the education of the next generation of taxpayers. If we can't afford this in times of prosperity, will we ever?

ABOUT THE COVER

The prevalence of childhood asthma in Australia increased from 19% to 46% between 1964 and 1990. Infants and children are more vulnerable to pollutants found in high concentrations in our homes, many of which are responsible for respiratory diseases like asthma (see p.14).



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