

CSIRO "Moving Forward" But Where To?

After a 12-month stand-off following their publicised ban on *Australasian Science*, CSIRO's top two bosses agreed to an interview with Peter Pockley, who had found himself at the centre of debate in Senate Estimates in February.

It has been a roller-coaster year for the once-iconic CSIRO and its staff, beginning with speculation about whether its Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, would be reappointed from next January when his current 5-year term concludes.

A bare 10 minutes before offices closed on the Friday before the ANZAC Day long weekend, junior government minister Gary Hardgrave announced Garrett's reappointment for 3 years from December 2005. The timing was a move to minimise reporting, and it rated only a brief mention. Nelson was in Chile, and on his return he declined to comment on this most senior appointment in Australian research to *Australasian Science* correspondent Simon Grose, who concluded that the

government was distancing itself from Garrett (*AS*, June 2005, pp.42–43).

Recovery through Interview?

Garrett and Sandland agreed to an open interview with *Australasian Science* on 27 June, and posed willingly for photographs. It was a civil but spirited affair, opening with Garrett's sincere wish that dialogue be resumed and offering to respond to subsequent questions. This sentiment was reciprocated.

While there was no prior agenda, Garrett and Sandland were prepared with notes on areas they expected would be raised. Both were keen to present highlights of CSIRO's research, which they classify as "great science" (see p.41).

They cited statistics to support their

view that CSIRO scientists are publishing widely in peer-reviewed journals: 1836 papers in 2003 compared with 1631 in Garrett's first year of 2001. However, the number of papers published in the "top" journals of *Nature* and its affiliates, *Science* and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, declined from 18 to 12 in the same period.

They were also intent on defending CSIRO Communications' record over the content of its media releases. In a survey of 364 releases issued over 18 months from September 2002 to March 2004, *Australasian Science* found that they were exceedingly thin on scientific content. Of these, 163 (45%) had no original scientific content, 149 (41%) cited no publications, 38 (10%) had no science content and only 14 (4%) cited papers in peer-reviewed journals as authority for the claims made. Among these, 121 (33%) were about organisational change, plans, events and people (*AS*, May 2004, p.45).

CSIRO took the criticism to heart and now conducts its own survey using basically our criteria. Out of 224 releases in 2004, 98 (43.8%) were on scientific advances and discoveries, 22 (9.8%) on authoritative comments and reports, 73 (32.6%) on events and publications, 16 (7.1%) on CSIRO organisation and 15 (6.7%) on CSIRO people.

A check since then, though, has shown a significant decline against the record under the National Awareness Program that Garrett closed in 2001. The number issued then averaged 300–320 releases per year of which 200–240 were on science, revealing a marked decline in CSIRO's public output of science.

The executives were asked to identify which of last year's 98 releases on science had cited publications as authority for information, as our impression is this has only rarely been included. As we go to press, this breakdown has not been supplied.

A particularly troubling case was a release on 4 April claiming "a world-first discovery" by producing health-



advancing omega 3 polyunsaturated fats in land-based plants. This was presented as a great advance that illustrated the advantages of Garrett's program of six Flagships, countering a low approval rating for Flagships of 36% in the latest survey of staff morale.

Garrett and Sandland acknowledged a problem with the low acceptance of their Flagships but put it down largely to inadequate "internal communications" that they are working hard to address. They said approval, and indeed enthusiasm, for the Flagships was high among the 20% of researchers directly involved so far.

Australasian Science had expressed interest in the omega 3 announcement for a story, but found the 350-word release lacking in specific information, especially the absence of any supporting publication. When Dr Bruce Lee, Director of the Food Futures Flagship, was asked about this it emerged that the work had not been published. Lee would not reveal where or when it would.

On 22 May, *the-funneled-web.com* reported critically on CSIRO's procedures after finding that the paper was not accepted for publication by *Functional Plant Biology*, a CSIRO Publishing journal, when the release had been issued on 4 April. The paper was not accepted until 29 April and was published on 18 May.

With no paper available to check the claim of a "world-first", *the-funneled-web.com* found closely related discoveries published last year by groups in Bristol and Hamburg, and concluded: "Dr Garrett's Flagships appear to be an odd amalgam of hokum and pressgang". *Australasian Science* asked Lee to comment but none has been forthcoming.

In interview, Garrett and Sandland said the release was timed for a grains conference, but I advised that if CSIRO had submitted the paper to *Nature* or *Science* and had publicised it prior to publication, the organisation would have suffered a publicised black ban on future papers. Independently, this writer has learned from senior CSIRO scientists that "publication by news release" is a matter of deep concern about standards.

Other issues broached in the interview included the new but mysteriously named entity "ensis" (see p.13), possible new Flagships, "security science" and the low vote by staff (29%) supporting Garrett's reorganisation. The interview concluded with a list of other issues that warrant exploration: external earnings and their costs, research for public good versus private benefit, Board responsibilities and collaboration with the Australian National University.

Also pervading the interview were the roiling issues associated with

CSIRO's communications to the wider world. The executives were well aware of this context from developments since our March 2005 issue.

CSIRO's "Smoking Gun" Runs for Cover

While Garrett's standing has not been helped by the marked absence of any prominent champions expressing support for CSIRO and its leadership, there is an equal vacuum of positive comment about Donna Staunton's role as Executive Director of Communications.

In a Senate Estimates hearing on 16 February, Labor Senator Kim Carr grilled Garrett on aspects of Staunton's appointment and challenged him to declare her salary, which had been reported as around \$330,000 per annum. This is \$52,000 more than the Prime Minister and three times what senior research scientists earn. Garrett declined to divulge the salary but the figure has stuck.

When asked to justify the ban on communications with this magazine, which they publicised on 12 July 2004, Garrett and Sandland went on the defensive about their refusal to answer our questions on institutional policy, funding, reorganisation and Staunton's appointment. In three pages of Hansard devoted to the exchange, Garrett confirmed that Staunton had advised him when imposing the ban. She was the only individual he identified.

He and Sandland claimed to be offended by a cartoon accompanying an article that had exposed Staunton's 10-year work as a lobbyist and defender with the tobacco industry (*AS*, April 2004, pp.37–38). However, they failed to mention the content of the article or cartoon, thus continuing their attempts since Staunton's formal appointment in March 2004 to hide her background from CSIRO staff and the media.

The exchange with Carr generated stories in mainstream newspapers and led to penetrating Questions on Notice

GARRETT'S PICK OF "GREAT SCIENCE"

For the head of the nation's largest science agency, Dr Geoff Garrett has been castigated for talking in public mostly about organisational changes in a style of obtuse "management-speak" that confounds listeners. In the interview he was asked to provide examples of the "great science" that he claims characterises CSIRO. Here are brief notes from his pick.

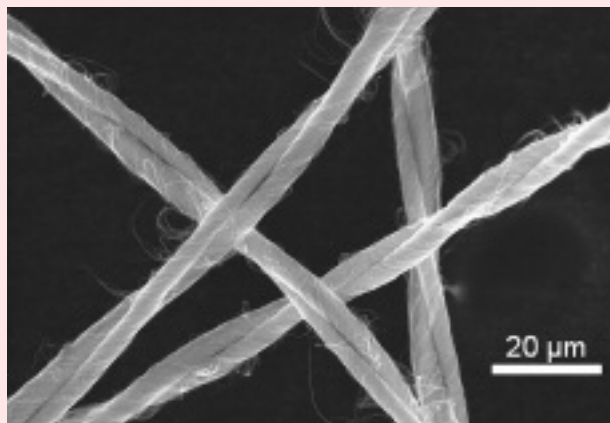
Greasing the Colour Switch

Research in the Molecular Science Division could make possible better tinted glasses that can change from light to dark more rapidly by attaching slippery silicone chains to dyes that change rapidly from light to dark (*Nature Materials*, March 2005).



Termites Feed through Good Vibrations

Studies by CSIRO Entomology of vibrations from termites as they feed on wood may allow researchers to interfere with their ability to select wood (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, March 2005).



Spinning Yarns of Carbon Nanotubes

These new materials have been hard to spin into fibres without "glues". Theoretical studies by CSIRO Textile and Fibre Technology now lead to commercialising fine yarns of length and strength (*Science*, 19 November 2004).

from Carr and Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja.

With the government assuming majority control of the Senate from 1 July, the Estimates on 1 June may well have been the last for opposition senators to grill public servants over the administration of public funds at length. But Nelson will now have to answer Questions on Notice about CSIRO in the two Houses.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) took up the issue of this unprecedented black ban. CSIRO then spun a "doosra" by denying that the ban ever existed, even after *Australasian Science* published the email exchanges that confirmed the ban (*AS*, July 2004, pp.44-45).

The MEAA went into bat on the broad ground of freedom of access by the media to publicly funded institutions, issuing statements on

25 February and 18 March and writing in protest to CSIRO Chairman, Ms Catherine Livingstone, concluding with a call for an open inquiry into the circumstances. The mounting pressure seems to have had some effect as Livingstone wrote to the MEAA on 4 April saying that Garrett "asked Donna Staunton to make contact with you and Dr Pockley".

The MEAA topped off their advocacy by giving CSIRO a special commendation in its George Orwell Awards for those who have done the most to suppress press freedom (*AS*, July 2005, p.4).

On 29 March, Staunton wrote to me seeking "a meeting". She stated no particular reason, later only saying that CSIRO wanted to "move forward" with the magazine.

On the same day Staunton wrote to *Australasian Science* Editor, Guy Nolch, complaining that the magazine failed to

consult with her for a report in our March 2005 edition (pp.30-31) and citing six alleged "inaccuracies".

Nolch pointed out that this was "disingenuous" as it was her first contact with the magazine in her 2 years with CSIRO. In subsequent correspondence he clarified that an interview was mandatory to resolve this and other matters.

We have conceded only one of Staunton's claims and have detailed information to counter her other allegations. Despite her threats to take the magazine to the Press Council, we remain willing to publish both sides after Staunton agrees to an open interview on these and other matters in her taxpayer-funded areas of professional responsibility.

Staunton (with new Media Manager, Marilyn Chalkley) met MEAA representatives on 6 June, having indicated they did not want me present. But, she

continues to shy away from repeated calls to be interviewed since April 2004. While Garrett and Sandland back her stance, she remains a self-imposed prisoner in her CSIRO offices in Sydney and Canberra. CSIRO scientists are expressing outrage, though privately for fear of retribution.

Repressive Policy on Public Comment

While resolutely refusing to deal with the media herself, Staunton's "Policy on Public Comment by CSIRO Staff Members" has generated a festering feeling among staff about her role as final arbiter of any contact with the media and disciplinarian over any breaches of the tight rules.

CSIRO's executives claimed in Estimates (1 June) that the policy – the only major action to be served to staff over her name – "is simply a revised version of a previous organisational policy that has been in place for a number of years". But Wendy Parsons, who until 2001 was Deputy Director of CSIRO's National Awareness Program, demolished this spin about spin in *The Canberra Times* (9 June) by documenting seven new prohibitions and restrictions to stop CSIRO scientists from being "encouraged to communicate", as the executives claimed. On 13 June she also refuted Sandland's 11 June response that scientists have not been censored or gagged by the new policy.

An intriguing precedent relates to Staunton's background. Clause 7 of the policy prohibits CSIRO staff from using CSIRO "stationery, e-mail systems, etc



Dr Geoff Garrett in interview with Peter Pockley. Photo: Peter Pockley

... name or logo ... in which a private opinion is expressed, and which may give an impression that the comments are authorised by CSIRO".

The double-standard here comes from Staunton, who as an AMP employee on 20 December 2000 used AMP Ltd letterhead and her title as an executive in a private letter distancing herself from her well-documented claims as Director of the Tobacco Institute of Australia that nicotine is not addictive (*AS*, July 2004, pp.12, 44). She has neither spoken nor written on this since then.

While CSIRO's executives quoted this letter in Estimates (2 June 2004) to justify her appointment, in answer to Question on Notice E819_05 (tabled late in May

2005) they acknowledged that CSIRO officers did not ensure that their headhunters, Korn/Ferry International, had made a rudimentary check on whether AMP had approved of, or knew of, Staunton's use of their name and her position to issue her statement.

Clause 4 of the Policy on Public Comment states that for any comment "made in a private capacity... it must be clearly stated that it is a personal view". This is precisely how Dr Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe, then an honorary fellow in CSIRO's Sustainable Ecosystems, prefaced his remarks on launching a book about his life's work and that of numerous other CSIRO scientists, *Life of Marsupials*, at the Division on 4 May: "The views expressed in this speech are those of Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe alone and do not represent those of CSIRO in any way" (*AS*, June 2005, p.4).

Despite this clear adherence to guidelines, divisional Chief, Dr Andrew Johnson, roundly caned him for "disloyalty" over his critical remarks on the new directions of the division.

Tyndale-Biscoe left CSIRO on 30 June. *The Canberra Times* (2 July) reported that Johnson did not organise any farewell but would "probably write a formal letter".

Once free, Tyndale-Biscoe wrote feelingly about the changes in CSIRO (*AS*, July 2005, p.43) and described Garrett's changes as a "disaster" on ABC Radio (4 July).

Garrett's CSIRO may be moving forward but it has left behind the principles and people who made it recognisably "great".

SENATE GRANTS POCKLEY'S RIGHT OF REPLY

In a rare move, *Australasian Science's* Senior Correspondent, Dr Peter Pockley, obtained permission from the Senate Estimates Committee on Education, Science & Training at its hearing on 1 June to table documents and personal statements to counter "adverse comment" by CSIRO executives to the Committee that he believed had been "misleading, incorrect or incomplete" (Committee report to the Senate, 20 June). Pockley prefers not to comment further as he leaves taxpayers to judge the dispute for themselves on the basis of the documents. The dossier is under parliamentary privilege, like that accorded to Garrett and Sandland in their oral evidence and written answers, and is being made available to the public via the Committee's web site (www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/estimates/index.htm).

Guy Nolch