

Suppression of Science Sacrifices the Future

Suppression of scientists' views is about more than a supposed line between science and policy, and it threatens Australia's survival, says Geoff Davies.

The real issue underlying alleged censoring of CSIRO scientists' public statements is a long-standing bias in the policies of CSIRO and government and their intolerance of unwelcome scientific evidence.

For two decades or more CSIRO has provided only small and erratic support to technologies that capture renewable energies or use available energy much more efficiently while giving large and stable support to fossil fuels.

The same imbalance is evident in broader government policy. By one recent estimate, fossil fuels received at least \$9 billion per year in subsidies while efficiency and renewable technologies received no more than a few hundred million dollars, chiefly through the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target (at 2%, a puny aim by international standards).

More generally, government R&D support goes heavily to projects favoured by large existing industries, such as geosequestration, nuclear power, industrial agriculture and genetic engineering. More immediately available, cost-effective and safe options like energy efficiency, modern solar technologies and productive polyculture of various kinds are left begging and Australians' options are foreclosed.

CSIRO should be leading the search for the safe, efficient, Earth-friendly and productive industries of the future rather than binding us to doomed dinosaurs or to expensive, high-risk technological fixes favoured by existing interests.

Critics of government policies are routinely ignored or dismissed with epithets like "emotional", "hysterical", "disgruntled" or "living in the past". Fundamental scientific objections, questionable evidence supplied by vested interests, obvious practical difficulties and serious financial questions are thereby excluded from policy formulation.

On top of the policy bias, CSIRO scientists are kept on a very short leash through job insecurity. The problem started with Labor's introduction of a 30% target for external earnings, but has become acute under the regime of Howard-appointed Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett. At least seven distinguished senior atmospheric and environmental scientists have been discarded, annual staff turnover is around 20%, and 93% of new appointments last financial year were short-term.

Distinguished senior scientists don't need patronising lectures about the mythical "line" between science and



Geoff Davies explains some of the finer points of his specialty: plate tectonics and mantle convection. Photo: Brad Ferguson, ANU

policy. Australia doesn't need the Environment Minister, Senator Ian Campbell, repeatedly spruiking Australia's misdirected efforts to reduce greenhouse emissions with statements like: "Australia is doing more than most countries... We're respected internationally."

Such claims are unsupported and inexcusable as the government's policies will double Australia's CO₂ emissions by 2050 rather than cutting them by the 60% required to stabilise greenhouse warming.

What emerges is that scientists whose professional judgement is contrary to government inclinations are ignored, denigrated, undermined and censored in the name of economic fundamentalism and the interests of the big end of town. This problem needs to be seen as part of the larger corruption of our political process by big money.

However, it's not just that a lot of taxpayers' money is potentially wasted, nor even that our democratic process is subverted. Climate change fundamentally threatens our environment, and possibly even the survival of our society.

The suppression of science and scientists puts the lives of future Australians at risk so that deceitful governments can cling to power and the rich can get richer, temporarily.

Dr Geoff Davies is a geophysicist at the Australian National University and the author of *Economia: New Economic Systems to Empower People and Support the Living World* (ABC Books, 2004). conSCIENCE is a column for Australians to express forthright views on national issues. Views expressed are those of the author.