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In May last year Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, resigned from his part-time role amid allegations of a conflict of interest due to his other part-time role as Chief Technologist for resources giant Rio Tinto. It took 9 months to find a replacement for Batterham, but close observers were not completely surprised with the appointment of leading CSIRO scientist Dr Jim Peacock on 28 February.

The process involved in the appointment reveals much about science during the Howard government's 10 years in office. Answers given in Senate Estimates on 15 February reveal that Peacock was not the first name submitted last year by Education & Science Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, to Cabinet. But when Nelson's preferred nominee was rejected, the appointment committee re-examined the short list.

Peacock's credentials in science were impeccable, having been Chief of CSIRO Plant Industry for 25 years and President of the Australian Academy of Science since 2002 (his term expires in May). Peacock could not be ignored on the short-list of around 30 applicants.

Peacock entered the second round with a history of mutual respect, if not friendship, with Howard. This is a reasonable criterion when political support could be crucial to any real achievements for science through this post.

While Peacock retired in 2003, he was re-engaged as a CSIRO Fellow until December 2005. The standard salary for this grade is \$150,367–\$169,404, but CSIRO will not reveal his exact pay. There has been no announcement of what Peacock was doing inside CSIRO during his tenure, or of any extension of that role beyond last December, yet a CSIRO spokesperson has told *Australasian Science* that Peacock has been working "full-time" and "leading key science initiatives across CSIRO".

When asked for some details the spokesperson said: "Working with the Chief Executive, Jim Peacock has been involved with such activities as Divisional Science Reviews, the new Science Investment Process and the appointment of leading mid-career scientists to CSIRO divisions. Also, he is continuing his research on the control of gene action through epigenetic processes and research aimed at improving crops. Jim will be roughly half-time at CSIRO."

Thus, Peacock's CSIRO responsibilities at the "corporate" level will still be substantial and interwoven with his part-time duties as Chief Scientist.

Dr Max Whitten, a former colleague of Peacock as Chief of CSIRO Entomology, warned of the dangers of this dual role. "The question will arise whether Jim's loyalties will be to CSIRO as a whole or to Plant Industry," he told *ABC Science Online* on 1 March. "Will he be prepared to give Howard and his government full advice on issues that are not in line with government policy?"

Green groups are also likely to undermine Peacock's impartiality, too, as he has been a strident advocate of genetic modification and has also called for a debate on the use of nuclear energy.

These are immense challenges for Peacock to acknowledge and address publicly.

COVER STORY

Fleas can jump 150 times their own length due to a remarkably elastic protein called resilin that only loses 3% of its energy. CSIRO scientists have cloned the gene for resilin and are working to manufacture the protein in a form that could find its way into heart valves and spinal disc implants (see pp.17–18).



Photo: David McLennaghan, CSIRO