

Carr Charters Course to Sideline Censors

BY PETER POCKLEY

A bureaucratic attempt to regain government control over scientific debate has been short-circuited by a proposed charter to protect the rights of scientists to make public comment.

The first scientific controversy to erupt under the new Labor government revolves around government control of public comment by federally funded scientists. Only a fortnight into power, the Innovation Department, which now includes Science, sent an edict stipulating that media releases issued by the science agencies (CSIRO, ANSTO and AIMS) and the Cooperative Research Centres would first need to be checked by the department and minister, and possibly the Prime Minister.

While in Opposition the new Minister responsible for science, Senator Kim Carr, had been a vociferous critic of the Howard government's political interference with scientific research, especially on controversial issues like climate change. Thus immediate criticism of the Department's demand harked back to the rows over CSIRO management's heavy-handed disciplinary ban on its scientists talking about their research and any implications for government policy. After significant pressure CSIRO eventually ditched its old "Policy on Public Comment" and freed its scientific staff to talk to the media.

While some portrayed the Department's latest edict as the work of a junior public relations officer, Department Secretary Mark Paterson confirmed and defended it on ABC Radio (21/12/07):

It's about ensuring a consistency of message. If you've got key themes that a government has gone to the people on in critical areas in terms of its platform, it is not surprising. It is unexceptional that a government would want to be aware of a message that is being put out... This is not about constraining comment or independent observation in an academic area... It's about institutional media releases, which is quite different.

FURIOUS REACTIONS

Paterson appeared to be overly enthusiastic in toeing an imagined government line and copped the flak, including a reportedly sharp response from CSIRO demanding the direction in writing. *Australasian Science* has submitted a Freedom of Information application to CSIRO for copies of the letters exchanged with the Department, but this request had not been met when the March edition went to press.

Notable science communicators issued responses through the Australian Science Media Centre. Prof Ian Lowe, President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, said: "We were entitled to think that the new government would return CSIRO to its critical role as an independent scientific agency. It is certainly not the role of CSIRO or other research organisations to reinforce whatever 'message' the elected government wants to promote. Their role should be to

inform public discussion by communicating the findings of research and scholarship."

Prof Rob Morrison of Flinders University labelled the move as "a dreadfully retrograde step, camouflaged by euphemisms. 'Ensuring consistency' involves controlling the message, whatever the denial."

However, CSIRO's senior management was backing Paterson and denying any change. Deputy Chief Executive, Mike Whelan, told ABC Radio: "The protocols don't look very different to those we've operated under [the previous government]. We encourage our scientists to talk about science. We don't encourage them to talk about government or opposition policy."

Morrison reacted: "There is no defence in the claim that 'it is not an unusual move, and similar things happened under the previous government'. They certainly did. Last year [2006] the CSIRO attempted to control its scientists' comments, was heavily and publicly caned for it and had the grace to admit it got it wrong. Now it is being forced back along the same suspect path."

Carr had begun to distance himself from his department secretary's stance, and reportedly said the injunction was "badly worded and ill-informed" and a "miscommunication". But in a damning critique, veteran science writer and commentator Julian Cribb slammed the move in *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*



(9/1/08) as a “Gilbertian farce” or a “stuff-up”. Cribb cited the greenhouse and salinity debates, where scientists who warned of damaging effects were “attacked by politicians who preferred not to know”. He called on “the Rudd Government to reject the encroachment of censorship on science and make a public statement of principle about the importance of freely sharing new knowledge with all”.

PROTECTION OFFERED

One week later, Carr delivered a broad-ranging proposal for a “Charter to protect scientific debate”. In his statement on 16 January, Carr wrote:

The integrity and independence of public research institutions, and the right of their researchers to contribute to public debate on their areas of expertise, will be protected by new charters. Australia needs the best scientific advice it can get to tackle the many issues we face as a nation.

Public research institutions, and the dedicated professionals working within them, have a right as well as a responsibility to represent the findings of their work and to actively participate in public debate. The value of scientific endeavour and importance of vigorous and transparent public debate, unfettered by political interference but subject to peer review, is something I have advocated for my entire public life.

Carr said the charters will be developed in consultation with public research institutions including CSIRO, AIMS and ANSTO.

Cribb expressed delight: “As things stand a lot of our science goes offshore and is adopted by other countries before Australians ever get to hear about it. This is because science communication has been discouraged by government and by many institutions in this country. Senator Carr’s statement is a really important step forward for Australian science.”

The President of the Federation of Scientific and Technological Societies, Prof Ken Baldwin, stated:

It is critical that there be a clear statement of the rights and obligations of scientists and researchers in organisations like CSIRO... It is inconceivable that there can be sensible policy on climate change, water use, biosecurity, obesity or ageing without the input and open discussion of good science... The idea that publicly funded scientists and researchers have rights and obligations to participate in public debates also has profound implications for science education and research training.

The Group of Eight Universities called for the charter to be extended to universities and academic researchers. Its Chair, Prof Alan Robson, said: “The legitimacy and integrity of universities depend upon acceptance by governments and the

community that academic work must be carried out in an open and independent environment, with staff free to reveal and challenge ideas in accordance with internationally accepted norms such as peer review”.

Australasian Science put a set of questions to CSIRO. The response that came from Whelan, who runs “Operations” (including finance), indicated that the matters were considered administrative rather than scientific. Asked to “confirm, deny or qualify with specific facts and contextual comment the reports on this matter in the media” he would only say: “The verbal and written advice received from [the Department are] consistent with CSIRO’s existing practices and policies... We look forward to working with the Department and the Minister’s Office in developing the proposed communication charter.”

Therein lies a challenge to Carr’s initiative. Any statement or commitment on scientific communication and debate only has credibility if it comes from a scientist and, in CSIRO’s case, from the scientific leadership. CSIRO’s record on this is poor. Although the organisation is now more encouraging to its scientists to engage with the media, Chief Executive Dr Geoff Garrett has never, in 7 years at the helm, led by example in communicating science and debating issues arising from research. There is a danger that Carr’s well-meaning charter can be easily weakened by a bureaucratic approach.

The President of the CSIRO Staff Association, atmospheric scientist Dr Michael Borgas says: “My understanding is that the new government is committed to open and transparent government, but this is pushing back against a bureaucratic culture opposed to this. We expect to have to defend and argue for more open and independent science from CSIRO.”

Senator Carr was unavailable for interview before *Australasian Science* went to press but has committed to be interviewed for our April issue.