

Sustainability Bandwagon Is Unsustainable

BY THOMAS BARLOW

Research organisations following the craze for sustainability research initiatives should be careful they don't become fashion victims.

I am not averse to following fashions: in the 1970s I had my yo-yos and wore corduroy; in the 1980s I kept time with a Swatch Watch and solved the Rubik's Cube; in the 1990s I walked around in Camper shoes and read a Michael Crichton novel; and today I own an iPod and have a pair of glasses with no rims.

I am no Diogenes. Far be it from me to deride faddist behaviour, being as susceptible to social trends as the next person, but I feel compelled to voice misgivings about the current national obsession with "sustainability".

Don't get me wrong. I am all for sustainability. I sing a hallelujah chorus every time I think of corporate Australia's newfound fascination with the concept. Is there any ASX-listed company left that doesn't mention "sustainable development" in its annual report?

I have apprehensions, though, about the sudden popularity of sustainability as a theme for research activity. Across Australia, universities and research agencies are diligently planning centres, institutes, schools, departments and other initiatives with a sustainability theme.

Some programs reflect long-standing capabilities. Murdoch University has hosted an "Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy" since the 1980s. Other institutions have been fostering capacity in this space in a considered way over many years. But there are also organ-

isations that appear to be undergoing a conversion to the importance of sustainability research that is as rapid as it is rapid.

Nearly a decade ago the folks at CSIRO (not usually appreciated for being ahead of the fashion curve) rebadged their "Division of Wildlife and Ecology" as the "Division of Sustainable Ecosystems". Researchers in other organisations are now being encouraged to follow their lead.

Unfortunately, to "be adorned in the first style of fashion" does not necessarily imply that what you are doing is significant. Just look at the mixed bag of nanotechnology research initiatives now peppered across Australia.

In my experience, the criteria used within most research organisations to make investments in fashionable areas are usually less stringent than in making investments in unfashionable areas. The more popular an area is, too, the less attention tends to be given to competitiveness.

A biologist at one large Australian university recently informed me that his senior leadership has been pressuring him to move into coral reef research, in line with their newfound desire to build a "sustainability brand". Never mind that they had absolutely no background in the area or that others, in more tropical locations, are already doing plenty of excellent reef research.

No matter how worthy, every novel



Dr Barlow is the author of *The Australian Miracle*, published by Picador.

Photo: Courtesy Thomas Barlow

initiative also brings its own opportunity cost.

If you were building a big energy research institute on the back of the oil crisis in the 1970s you may have regretted your lack of capability in biotechnology by the 1980s. If you were investing in a superconductivity centre in the 1980s you may have bemoaned your failure to invest more in information technology going into the 1990s. If you backed bioinformatics or genomics in the 1990s you may have wished a decade later that you had put the same money into climate research, nanotechnology, earth sciences or – surprise, surprise – back into energy.

Usually by the time a field has become fashionable you are already too late if you don't already have a presence. There is no reason to imagine that the same won't be true for sustainability research.

A genuinely sustainable society needs research institutions working across a diversity of areas. Before putting faith in the bandwagon, Australia's research leaders would do well to remember that, while many sustainability initiatives will be worthwhile and some institutions will do well out of this theme, many also will fail.

Dr Thomas Barlow is a research strategist and policy analyst based in Sydney. *conScience* is a column for Australians to express forthright views on national issues. Views expressed are those of the author.