

It's Ziggy's Way or the Highway

CSIRO blows it on academic freedom.

Dr Ziggy Switkowski regularly advocates the adoption of nuclear power in Australia when he makes speeches around the country as chairman of the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO). Dr Clive Spash, who until December was an economist with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, wrote a single scholarly research paper questioning the effectiveness of emissions trading systems in reducing carbon emissions.

By publicly disagreeing with Australian government policy, both contravened the *Public Research Agency Charter* that their organisations co-signed with the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Kim Carr.

Dr Switkowski was ANSTO's signatory to a charter which says that its researchers "should not be asked by government to defend or debate government policy; nor should they seek to engage in such debate, as this is not their role". CSIRO's charter, signed by former chairman John Stocker, decrees that CSIRO employees "should not advocate, defend or publicly debate the merits of government or opposition policy".

Dr Switkowski serially defies the charter he signed with apparent impunity. No complaints or dressing downs have come from Carr.

Dr Spash, however, was under the gun.

Since February 2009 his managers negotiated with him to amend his paper so that it would not contravene the charter.

When he allowed it to be published online in late November it became clear why those negotiations were fruitless. Its overarching theme is that emissions trading is inferior to both a carbon tax and direct regulation as a means of reducing carbon emissions.

This is not a loopy point of view but one that is shared by many economists and climate activists. Despite being published with an author's note that it is "an independent piece of research which has no association with the CSIRO or the Australian government", CSIRO's chief executive Megan Clark was having none of that. In a letter to Carr she said that the work reported in his paper was undertaken while Spash was a CSIRO employee and that his "breaches of fundamental CSIRO standards will be dealt with through appropriate line management".

He saved them from this inevitably fraught and gruesome process by resigning in early December.

CSIRO's mismanagement of this issue was a mess. It has angered the Minister and alienated CSIRO staff for whom academic freedom is a matter of high principle. It showed an organisation that is timid in its relations with the government



Cover Story

Radioactivity may have helped to create the right conditions for life in the rocks that formed the planets in our solar system. Understanding the origin of this radioactivity could tell us how likely it is that life could exist elsewhere in the Universe (see p.14). Image: iStockphoto

and rigid in its procedures.

A nimbler organisation would have enabled Dr Spash to publish his views as an "independent" researcher. A bolder management would have been willing to back his right to do so, wearing the passing cloud of ministerial chagrin while basking in warm regard from the troops.

CSIRO needs to rethink the application of its charter, or stop hiring environmental economists and any other scientists with minds of their own.

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