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Subscription prices

\$64 (personal), \$93 (schools) and \$209 (institutions) inclusive of GST. Refer to the subscription form opposite for details.

Advertising information

Available on the web site.

Backissues are available for \$8 each (incl. GST) from the web site.

Published 10 times per year. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the publisher.

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Distributed by Gordon & Gotch Ltd

Printed by BPA Print Group, 11 Evans St, Burwood, Vic. 3125, Australia.

Print Post Approved PP 331379/0032. ISSN 1442-679X.

*RRP only \$7.40, inclusive of GST.

As global and regional temperatures continue to climb, with 2003 the sixth hottest on record in Australia and 0.65°C warmer than the 1961–90 average (see p.11), the heat is now being turned on Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, over his interests in the fossil fuels responsible for global warming.

When the Coalition was elected in 1996, it downgraded the Chief Scientist to a part-time position and appointed Batterham, the Chief Technologist with mining company Rio Tinto, into that part-time role. But concerns have grown about a potential conflict of interest between Batterham's position within the mining industry and his role as an independent scientific adviser to government. In particular, researchers into renewable energy technologies have been left out in the cold as Federal funding has been preferentially directed towards fossil fuel research.

For example, in its 1997 Budget the Coalition abolished the Energy R&D Corporation, a Commonwealth government agency that funded research into renewable energy. Funding for the Australian Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Renewable Energy was likewise terminated in December 2002.

The loss of these and other programs have stunted the development of what should be a burgeoning research field. Instead, only three universities retain more than 10 staff and PhD students in renewable energy research. They face limited options to take their initial research to a stage that will interest the private sector in licensing and commercialising the technology.

Yet while renewable energy research suffers a funding drought, the fossil fuel industry that is responsible for global warming is awash with research money. While the government saw no further use for the Renewable Energy CRC it still found funding for the CRC for Clean Power from Lignite, the CRC for Coal in Sustainable Development and the CRC for Greenhouse Gas Technologies.

In the private sector Batterham's employer, Rio Tinto, has received \$35 million in Federal funding for its Foundation for a Sustainable Minerals Industry. One of its research priorities is to investigate technologies to sequester carbon dioxide emissions.

Greens Senator Bob Brown speculates in *conScience* this month (see p.43) that these funds "will soon be dwarfed by a \$200 million government grant for a demonstration plant". Given Batterham's dual roles with Rio Tinto and as the government's scientific adviser on research priorities, Brown says that "Batterham should either resign his post with the government or with the company".

Whether the priority currently given to fossil fuel research over renewables is being orchestrated by Batterham's corporate interests or by an Australian government that has turned its back on the Kyoto Protocol is contestable.

What is not is that Australia must have a full-time Chief Scientist who is seen to be advising government on research priorities independently of corporate interests.

ABOUT THE COVER

The reconstructed face of the Kow Swamp 1 skeleton. Dating of morphologically distinct remains found at Kow Swamp in northern Victoria and Lake Mungo in south-western New South Wales has been hotly contested. Now new research has found that the Kow Swamp and Lake Mungo skeletons share a common ancestry, profoundly altering our understanding of the first humans to colonise Australia.



Peter Brown