

Australian Physics in Deep Schmuck

The long-term consequences of the neglect of public support for the fundamental sciences is being brought, at long last, to public attention as Australian physicists gear up for this International Year of Physics and gather for their Institute of Physics congress in Canberra in February.

The future of Australian physics and closely related “core sciences” (chemistry, mathematics and geology) is dire, as Dr Gerry Haddad illustrates in his *conScience* column (p.43). The statistics should deeply trouble those in government who have been inactive in responding to a crisis that has been brewing for a decade. Two points stand out in this welcome contribution to public debate.

First, Haddad puts the onus on his fellow physicists to take responsibility for articulating the virtues of studying physics towards a valuable, lifelong career.

Second, Haddad's contribution to *conScience* is only the second by a CSIRO staffer and the first by a senior one. He is Chief of the only CSIRO division devoted to physics. CSIRO Industrial Physics should be supported as a premier laboratory but is feeling the pinch.

To the best of knowledge, Haddad's is the first public lead in recent years by a senior CSIRO scientist in a matter of importance to the future of Australian science across the board. It should not need description as “unique and bold”, but it is. More strength to his bow!

Competition for Superlatives

CSIRO continues to demonstrate how swiftly a once-revered public agency can be overtaken by top-down managerialism and eroded through commercialisation into a marginal player in research by comparison with the collective universities.

Obedient to the government's woolly “priorities” through his tumultuous 4 years as Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett cleared out the experienced and public-minded senior staffers he inherited. With Labor losing the 2004 election, he seems poised for reappointment for another 5 years from 2006. Nonetheless, his “Big Hairy Audacious Goals” are already on shaky ground, as critics warned from the outset.

You know an organisation is in trouble when its “leaders” engage in

self-description. The rhetorical rot is evident throughout Garrett's “strategic plans” that are replete with “great science, cutting edge, world-class science and global reputation”. None of these proclamations has come from independent observers. Lately, Deputy Chief Executive Dr Ron Sandland added “exciting” to the lexicon approved for “corporate communications”, and Garrett is using “brilliant science” as his superlative.

Typically, a public agency resorts to advertising after failing to gain high visibility in the media. In November, CSIRO paid untold sums to print 85,000-odd copies of *Solve*, a glossy 16-page insert in the *Australian Financial Review*. As the 11 PR-type articles tout for business, the paper might have insisted on labelling it as an “Advertising Supplement”. The items cover projects that have merit but mostly have been around for a while. None cites recognition through a peer-reviewed international publication, just like the great majority of CSIRO's media releases.

A senior researcher volunteered to *Razor*: “After looking in vain for actual big hits by CSIRO's science, if the science is so great and exciting, why aren't independent authorities saying so?”

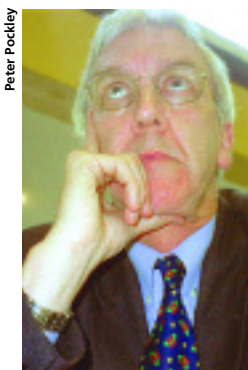
Pointing to how Chiefs are being sent to business schools instead of major research institutions for intellectual refreshment, the scientist said: “We must now conform to business directives from on high. This is no encouragement to creativity, and people of talent no longer aim to become Chiefs. In the same way that militant Bible-thumpers are so often devoid of Christian ethics, ‘brilliant science’ masks a lack thereof.”

Blokes First and Foremost

There are 11 members of Garrett's “Executive Team”, including himself. Four had no scientific background or experience in a research organisation when they were recruited from outside.

The 2003 “Communications Strategy”, for which Garrett paid a whopping fee to former tobacco executive and defender, Donna Staunton, aimed “to position the Chief Executive, Executive Team and Executive Management Council as open and transparent leaders”. These “leaders” have become like the “faceless men” of the old Labor Party Executive of the 1950s, wielding power while virtually nothing is heard from, or about, them. After 21 months with the agency, Communications Director Staunton has yet to write or speak publicly about science and CSIRO.

As an Executive Team member, Staunton is much the most senior female in CSIRO and the sole one in the Team. Of the 45 members of the Team plus the Executive Manage-



Peter Pockley

Geoff Garrett declines to answer any questions in an “interview” in 2002.



ment Council (34 Directors, Chiefs of Divisions and senior “managers”), six are female of whom three are among the 21 Chiefs.

The 2003–04 Annual Report, tabled in November, reveals that the 11 Team members are paid, in total, \$3.44–3.55 million. Garrett collects \$420–430,000 plus a house. Mehrdad Baghai, the “hot-shot” manager of commercialisation, is believed to get \$380–390,000 but he tells people he’s worth 10 times more. Deputy Chief Executive, Dr Ron Sandland, is probably on the third rung of \$350–360,000. Staunton and the seven others receive \$260–330,000. All get cars.

Staff scientists are cranky over the disparity of salaries between researchers and scientific managers who are at the supposed core of CSIRO (distinct from the burgeoning “business managers”) and non-producing executives. Research scientists earn \$92,437–\$102,272, senior principal research scientists \$110,297–\$138,481 and Chiefs \$144,584–162,888.

Bombast Bombs as Flagships Struggle

Since mid-2002, *Australasian Science* has been publishing reports and critical comment on CSIRO’s change to “corporate consultant”. Garrett tried to snuff us out, mid-2004, with a ban on answering our many outstanding questions with unspecific allegations that we were “destructive and unhelpful”. With no satisfaction, we now report a series of tacit admissions by Garrett of serious issues arising from his “restructuring”. We had aired all these in our pages, including from current and former senior CSIRO scientists.

In mid-November Garrett held a “retreat” in Manly, Sydney, of his Executive Team and Executive Management Council. His conclusions contrast with the hype with which he justified the changes. These should be deeply embar-

assing, but “reputation managers” will doubtless spin a different yarn.

Razor has evidence (the source cannot be named for fear of retribution) that, among some management guff, Garrett conceded that:

- CSIRO needs to become politically bipartisan;
- outcomes from the six Flagships are not on track; and
- CSIRO’s science is stagnant.

The senior staffer comments that relations with Labor had become disastrous and says that good, creative science cannot be delivered from top-down directives to order and on time.

Garrett also criticised that decisions and business operations are largely at a local autonomous level but with sub-optimal behaviour. This is an attack on the Divisions, as distinct from his favoured, centrally controlled Flagships. Despite this, two more Flagships are being selected from four proposals. Security Science is rearing again as the favourite for “meeting government priorities” (*Razor*, Nov/Dec 2003, p.45).

A fortnight later, the committee overseeing Flagships conceded two more disturbing trends. Their external earnings are lower than expectations and there is pressure to augment their shortfall by further reducing appropriation funds for the Divisions. (Flagships are now half-way towards their 40% cut from Divisional budgets.) Second, the gap between promises and achievements is blamed partly on some Divisions diverting staff from Flagship projects to work on their own “targets” for external earnings.

The PR Age

As CSIRO settles down in such a self-fulfilling cycle to a depressed level, its saga shows how “science communication” in Australia warrants a revolution in approach and, to be effective, must be driven by committed scientists.

For four decades the ABC and *Australasian Science* (and predecessors) have provided the lion’s share of depth and variety in coverage. The number of science reporters has been static for years and there are no opportunities for newcomers. Yet the army of PR-type operators has reached ludicrous levels, with up to 20 institutional flacks for every working reporter in the media. For instance, CSIRO has 150 “communicators”.

The flood of media releases has not persuaded major newspapers to provide a regular science section. Broadly speaking, institutional efforts have been ineffective in garnering any increase in the extent of media coverage or political support for science and its organisations.

Razor’s blade is being sheathed to concentrate on recording and relating science through the lives of some of the great investigators of nature. Sincere thanks to readers for supporting this column and its predecessor, PP.