

SCIENCE AGENCIES SUFFER

Scientists have been left in limbo after the new government's first Budget.

Details of the impact on science of the Rudd government's first Budget did not emerge until after the June edition of *Australasian Science* had gone to press, but the fallout since then has been serious for some science agencies.

After promising to revitalise CSIRO at the last election, the Budget pinched \$64 million over 4 years from the organisation. The CSIRO Staff Association vented its frustrations by issuing motions that "condemn" both the government for the cuts as well as CSIRO management for "heavy-handed and premature decisions and lack of consultation" over how it would meet the cuts (see p.15).

CSIRO staff are angry that the mantra of "responsible economic management" has not been applied to its own management, whose 11-member Executive are the organisation's most highly paid, earning at least three times the salary of senior scientists. Instead, 100 staff face the axe while agricultural laboratories will be closed and some Divisions merged.

The timing of the cuts is also poor, as CSIRO is searching for a new Chief Executive and prospective candidates will have to wonder about taking over an organisation that is struggling to make ends meet.

The Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) also completed its *annus horribilis*, having lost the use of its new OPAL reactor for 10 months due to a leak. It will now have to contend with a cut of \$10 million, and has announced that 80 staff will have to go.

The science community had not been expecting any largesse from the Budget as major reviews of innovation, R&D and universities are underway. These reviews will not conclude until half-way through the current electoral term of government, and a lot of water can pass under the bridge before then. Any significant "boosts" proposed by these reviews could easily be jeopardised by unpredictable short-term political issues.

Australia's scientific leaders cannot afford to stand back and put all their



Cover Story

A computer-generated image of a placoderm giving birth. On page 16 Dr John Long describes the day he examined a placoderm fossil and realised he was looking at three embryos and an umbilical cord - the earliest example of live birth on record. Image: Museum Victoria

trust in the present reviews to deliver substantial improvements to future budgetary support of research. The 2020 Summit was the most recent reminder of how the voice of science can be easily muted by more vociferous proponents of competing ideas and issues (*AS*, June 2008, p.1,6).

Politicians simply won't act if scientists continue to hold their tongue and rely on measured arguments to support the case for investment in science.

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