

CSIRO Threatens Staff Over Media Leaks

Peter Pockley discovers that staff who leak information to the media face investigation by the Australian Federal Police.

In May, the national research agency plumbed the depths of media and political attention with newspaper headlines like "Dissent in the labs" (*The Australian*, 29 May) and "CSIRO needs to be evicted from its silos" (*Australian Financial Review*, 6 June).

Its Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, responded to the media criticism in a memo emailed to all staff 44 minutes prior to a Senate Estimates hearing on 31 May. "We have undertaken a number of media interviews, in good faith, only to find in certain situations the resulting reports either erroneous or selective," he began. "There are two particular criticisms which have been made recently around our science quality and of our financial performance. Overall, the facts – that are generally publicly available – clearly support both the excellence of our science and our financial strength."

However, he did not mention some of the more embarrassing answers CSIRO had tabled 2 weeks earlier to 107 Questions on Notice arising from a Senate Estimates hearing on 15 February. These answers – almost 3 months late – included the revelation that salaries and on-costs for each of Garrett's 10-person Executive Team

exceeded \$1 million per annum. While his own salary has been precisely declared at \$478,980 plus rent-free accommodation and a leased Toyota Land Cruiser with operating costs, Garrett continues to refuse to declare the salary components of his Executive Team.

One senior CSIRO scientist told *Australasian Science*: "The management never seems to want the troops to know they had answered many of the criticisms plaguing Garrett and his top brass".

Australasian Science has been reporting on CSIRO's troubled communications since July 2002, particularly under the present Executive Director of Communications, Donna Staunton. Under questioning in Estimates, Garrett confirmed that two of Staunton's major duties and part of another have now been transferred to other executives (*AS*, May 2006, pp.32–33), and that no further duties had been added to fill the gap.

Deputy Chief Executive, Dr Ron Sandland, said that there has been no variation in Staunton's remuneration to reflect these changes. "The requirements of Ms Staunton in the revised role are still at the same high strategic

level," he said.

Under Staunton's direction, CSIRO's reputation suffered its biggest blow when the ABC's *Four Corners* revealed that the organisation had pressured senior scientists not to engage in public debate on climate change policy. Garrett subsequently set up an internal "Review on Public Comment". Under pressure in Estimates from Labor Senator Penny Wong, he said he had just received the panel's report and reluctantly agreed to release a summary. This had not occurred when *Australasian Science* went to press.

Intimidation would appear to be a key plank of this policy. A statement emailed from a communicator in "CSIRO corporate" to many CSIRO staff members on the morning of the Senate Estimates hearing delivered a blunt lesson from Head Office about the potential consequences of leaking information to the media, advising staff that CSIRO can ask the Australian Federal Police to investigate leaks from members of the Public Service.

The email said that these matters had been raised with the writer's supervisor and the Executive, indicating their support for this stance. The email drew attention to a current case that landed two journalists in a Melbourne court, where they faced jail sentences for contempt if they did not reveal their source.

Intimidation has been a hallmark of Garrett's reign. According to Dr Norman Abjorensen, who resigned in disgust as CSIRO's Media Manager in December 2004 (*AS*, April 2005, pp.39–42): "A climate of fear had developed under Garrett and his henchmen (and women), and a concerted attempt had been made to identify and victimise the so-called 'old guard' who opposed or even questioned the Garrett agenda. These in most cases were the people who had given heart and soul to CSIRO and were its most precious resource. I said: 'You did not simply work there, you married it'.

STOP PRESS

Nine days after approving an email threatening staff with police action over media leaks, CSIRO Communications Director Donna Staunton resigned. Her staffer said that CSIRO's Executive had also cleared the message.

CSIRO Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, said in a statement: "It would be an injustice if Donna's contributions to CSIRO were masked by seemingly constant criticism, for example around a former role in industry".

It seems he still can't bring himself to use the "tobacco" word.

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Photo courtesy Wendy Parsons



Voices of dissent: Wendy Parsons and Norman Abjorensen.

"The clampdown on media comment made CSIRO a tame lapdog of government, and to outlaw questioning was to betray the fundamental quest of science itself. There is simply not a single viewpoint in science or any discipline. This is to impose a rigid authoritarianism that is at odds with the dynamic intellectual climate in which science and indeed all intellectual endeavours flourish."

Wendy Parsons, former Deputy Director of the National Awareness Program that Garrett disbanded, points to Garrett's promulgation of a 1994 paper by Dr Brian Clarke, his predecessor as President of South Africa's CSIR, titled *Cultural Change in a National Research Organisation in Times of Extreme Turbulence*. "This outlines how to identify and deal with staff members who do not comply with the 'new' way of doing things," she says. "This was the blueprint used to protect CSIR from the excesses of the incoming African National Congress government, which wanted to wipe out all traces of the apartheid government... It is a sinister and cruel document when used in the Australian context."

Parsons maintains that CSIRO was

not facing wipeout from an incoming government, and the political and cultural environment was in complete contrast to South Africa's. "Nevertheless, Garrett used Clarke's paper as his plan for changing CSIRO," she said, "believing that an Allen and Associates report on 'stakeholder attitudes' (commissioned by CSIRO's Board) provided justification. He put copies on the desks of senior managers in 2001, his first year at CSIRO."

"Ian Dean, a consultant engaged from South Africa by Garrett, presented this approach to CSIRO communicators at our conference in July 2001. Dean became a controversial figure after earning \$740,000 (including expenses, and allegedly paid in US dollars) over 2 years as a consultant on vaguely worded assignments in 'management training' without tenders being called. He stayed in the house of Garrett, his former CSIR colleague. Dean's company, Groman Consulting, appears to be just him, and the website has been inactive for years."

Abjorensen has not lost any of his disillusion with the reality of life in CSIRO's communications. He says: "Garrett was undermining from within a great institution, and that science was

being sacrificed for short-term commercial gains – and even these were not being realised."

An example of the mess that Garrett's management overhaul has made comes from a leaked email by a senior executive struggling to explain Garrett's new "matrix management". It said: "The gist of the design is that Chiefs (and some Theme Leaders) have dual roles across output delivery and input resource management, and they must now operate within this matrix environment. The result is that there will be staff within their Division that have responsibilities to other Chiefs or Flagships Directors."

Senior staff tell *Australasian Science* that the management "matrix" has left them as confused as ever, and Chiefs of Divisions have been weakened in leading research in their discipline without continual direction from "the centre" and involvement in endless meetings.

It is not surprising, then, that CSIRO has failed to meet its revenue targets. In May's Estimates hearing executives spent much effort trying to explain CSIRO's failure to earn levels of external income that Garrett had predicted confidently 3 years ago. In the 2000–01 Strategic Plan he had trumpeted "targets" of \$1.3 billion per annum from government and external earnings by 2006–07; in 2003 he lowered the "stretch" levels to \$1.161 billion; now he covers their further fall by calling them "aspirational". The reality for 2006–07 is a total of \$965 million, which is \$335 million less than was first forecast.

Garrett tried to defend the shortfall in external earnings on the grounds that CSIRO could not incorporate in their audited bookkeeping any "in-kind" contributions from partner organisations such as his vaunted Flagships. However, Wong pointed out that CSIRO executives should have foreseen this obvious downside.

Australasian Science

australasianscience.com.au

EDITOR/PUBLISHER: Guy Nolch

CONSCIENCE EDITOR: Peter Pockley

WRITERS: Stephen Luntz, Peter Pockley, Simon Grose

SUBEDITING: Guy Nolch, Sally Woollett

CARTOONS: Simon Kneebone

PATRONS: *Australasian Science* is supported by Nobel Laureate Professor Peter Doherty and renowned science broadcaster Robyn Williams, representing excellence in science and its communication.

EDITORIAL CONTACTS

Control Publications P/L, Box 2155, Wattleree Rd PO, VIC 3145, Australia
Phone: (03) 9500 0015 Fax: (03) 9500 0255
E-mail: science@control.com.au
Web: australasianscience.com.au

ADVERTISING: Joanna Dettl

Phone: (07) 3511 6246 Fax: (07) 3511 6427
Email: advertise@control.com.au
Rates are at australasianscience.com.au

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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.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor welcomes original articles of interest to the general public written by qualified writers on fields within their expertise. Writers' guidelines are available at australasianscience.com.au under "Contact". Prospective authors should submit an abstract to the Editor prior to submitting a manuscript.

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DISTRIBUTION: Gordon & Gotch Ltd

PRINTING: BPA Print Group, 11 Evans St, Burwood, Vic. 3125, Australia.

PRINT POST APPROVED PP 331379/0032

ISSN 1442-679X *RRP \$7.95 incl. GST

Last month's revelation that CSIRO Communications had warned staff that they faced investigation by the Australian Federal Police if they leaked information to the media (*AS*, July 2006, pp.39–40) prompted a strong denial from the organisation, which claimed the report was "completely untrue" – the email expressed its author's personal opinion and "was not sent or endorsed by management" (see *Browse*, p.11).

What is undeniable is that the email, widely distributed through an internal forum, gave the author's position within CSIRO Communications, directed staff to the consequences of breaching CSIRO's Code of Conduct, drew attention to a court case involving a public servant who leaked information to the media, and stated: "I've recently raised these concerns with the Executive and my supervisor". This implies their support, and as such serves to intimidate staff.

The AFP threat came soon after a *Four Corners* report revealed that CSIRO's climate scientists have been "gagged" from discussing policy issues arising from climate change. The ensuing media attention prompted CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, to direct an internal review of CSIRO's "Policy on Public Comment". Garrett received the review's report on 31 May and reluctantly agreed in Senate Estimates on the same day to release a summary. He had not done so when *Australasian Science* went to press.

The policy, devised by Communications Director Donna Staunton, requires staff to obtain formal permission before making comments in public. As failure to do so can bring disciplinary action, the policy has discouraged CSIRO scientists from engaging with the public.

Staunton resigned from CSIRO in June, and finished her term in mid-July. Both she and her predecessor, Di Jay, had come to the position with little experience in science or its communication. These must be necessary attributes when Garrett appoints Staunton's successor.

Garrett now has an opportunity to renew CSIRO's communications through the appointment of an experienced science communicator and an overhaul of CSIRO's Policy on Public Comment. A good start would be to consult guidelines drafted for the Australian Science Communicators (www.asc.asn.au) by veteran science reporter, Dr Rob Morrison (see *conSCIENCE*, p.41). Regrettably, CSIRO's communications over the past 4 years have flouted most of his principles.

CSIRO needs to reopen the lines of communication between its scientists and the public. "Gags" and threats of AFP intervention are not going to restore morale among CSIRO's scientists or public trust that they are being frank and forthright in scientific issues of public significance.



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COVER STORY

The Square Kilometre Array will link hundreds of receivers spread over thousands of kilometres, enabling scientists to look back to the start of time (see pp.16–19).

NOMINATIONS FOR AUSTRALASIAN SCIENCE PRIZE

Nominations are now open for the 2006 Australasian Science Prize for outstanding achievement by an Australasian scientist or small research team. The award recognises world-class science by Australasia's most inspiring minds. For nomination details see page 15.