

A poor climate for debate at CSIRO

Are the hard truths lost between big business and big politics?

Questions are being raised about the closeness of BHP Billiton and the CSIRO under chief executive Megan Clark. A former technology vice president at BHP, Clark was appointed in late 2008 and is regarded as a straight shooter.

In May 2009, CSIRO announced a deal with BHP, under negotiation two months before Clark started, which saw 15 of the company's scientists transferred to the Queensland Centre for Advanced Technologies — run by the state government — for research into iron ore, manganese and metallurgical or coking coal. BHP pitched in two pilot-scale coking ovens to the Centre, worth about \$10 million — a drop in the ocean compared to CSIRO's annual budget of \$1.2 billion.

CSIRO agrees research project interactions with BHP in this field have increased strongly since the agreement. "Australia's reserves of hard coking coal are depleting," CSIRO says. "It is critical that we find ways to best use our existing coal assets so that our customers do not turn to product from other countries. The two coke ovens will help predict and maximise the performance of new and existing products and blends, as well as develop new methods to increase the use of lower quality coals in coke making."

For the CSIRO, finding the best way to use Australia's coal assets is core business — that's the "industrial" part of its charter.

The deal attracted some criticism last year, with the Australia Institute's Clive Hamilton attacking the connections between CSIRO and big coal, particularly under CEO Geoff Garrett and continuing under Dr Clark, in an article for the website Crikey.

In January, Michael Glinsky, was recruited from being manager of BHP's resources research and development divisions, to join CSIRO's 25-member Office of the Chief Executive.

On his LinkedIn page, Glinsky chirped about being appointed to CSIRO's "highest scientific position with a guarantee of funding for several postdocs, graduate students and equipment for the R&D of my choosing".

All brilliance aside, insiders marvel how Glinsky has been given such free rein. So far it looks like a guy here, a deal there ... but as has been heavily underlined in the last

fortnight, BHP has enough influence already. We do not need BHP pulling strings within CSIRO.

There has been plenty of controversy about political pressure on CSIRO. Former head of the atmospheric research division Graeme Pearman resigned in 2004, partly in protest against pressure to stifle public engagement on climate change. Clive Spash, an economics professor, quit late last year after the CSIRO stopped him publishing a paper critical of the proposed emissions trading scheme.

Playing dirty pool, Science Minister Kim Carr later smeared Spash's reputation under parliamentary privilege, attacking the poor quality of his work.

Spash, who has left the country and now has academic posts in Norway and (soon) Austria, says his paper will appear soon in the journal *New Political Economy*. He says Carr's conduct was "unbelievable" and the quality of his work was only questioned after the dispute went public.

"Not only is it a blatant lie — because the paper was accepted for publication in what the Australian Research Council ranks as an A-class journal — but the minister is arguing that he, as a high school teacher, is able to be a better judge of quality than the scientific peer review community and the ARC, in a field in which he has no knowledge at all."

Spash's key criticism was that business could manipulate emissions trading schemes to get large payouts, as they had in Europe. The \$7.3 billion set aside as compensation for brown coal-fired electricity generators under our proposed ETS last year was just such a payout, he says, and "any voice raising questions is going to get in the way".

Setting his own stoush aside, Spash says there is concern about the imbalance in research funding at CSIRO, particularly in responses to climate change.

"Renewables like solar [and] thermal seem to have been totally underfunded, whereas carbon capture and storage or clean coal technologies seem to be getting a disproportionate share of funding."

Hard figures are tricky to get, with accounting made complicated by CSIRO's matrix which lays so-called "flagship" research programs over the organisation's core research divisions.

According to CSIRO's operational plan for 2009-10, headcounts in the energy group roughly favour fossil fuels 70:30 with 212 people working on petroleum resources (136) or clean fossil fuels (76) and 82 people working on renewables.

The government trumpets a minimal increase in its budget appropriation to CSIRO, but the backdrop is dwindling funding from external sources including industry, state and federal agencies. Dr Clark reported falling levels of turnover and staff resignations to the Senate in May, but was questioned about the merger of the sustainable ecosystems unit with the entomology division.

Media have speculated that the merger could see the loss of up to 300 jobs across the environmental science division, but Dr Clark told the Senate the intent of the merger was to increase the critical mass of researchers working in environment and ecology.

Environmental economist Dr Nick Abel, about to retire from CSIRO's sustainable ecosystems division after 15 years, defends the merger, noting that new boss Mark Lonsdale is "sympathetic to the way we operate and the way we think. We're not expecting any significant reduction in effort on environmental stuff."

Dr Abel headed CSIRO's contentious coastal surveys, looking at the impact of rising sea levels on homeowners and buyers. He copped plenty of flak from the public, and says CSIRO has been supportive.

"I've done some things that have caused CSIRO a lot of stress," he says. "They've been pretty good."

CSIRO gets it constantly from both sides. The *Quadrant* set worked themselves into a lather over an apparent error in a graph showing atmospheric methane concentrations, in the state of the climate report CSIRO issued with the Bureau of Meteorology in March. Dr Clark; under questioning from sceptical Coalition members, admitted to Senate estimates that although the methane data was complete "we did not have the little marks on the [horizontal] axis showing exactly where 1990 and 2009 were. The numbers were included, but the tick marks were not on the graph."

Terry McCrann lamented the decline of our national institutions in *The Australian*: "In short, the CSIRO is a fully signed-up member of the climate change club. It wanted to project the horror story of continually rising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. So it simply disappeared inconvenient evidence to the contrary, in the process announcing it cannot be trusted ever again to deliver objective scientific evidence."

Yeh, right. The real issue with the state of the climate report is, what took them so long? Where was CSIRO during the well-timed furore over Climategate, which helped undermine public support for our own proposed emissions' trading scheme, the science of the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the outcome of the Copenhagen summit?

Clive Spash has no doubts: "The scientists, if they were allowed to speak freely, would be able to inform the Australian public fully. The scientists are basically trustworthy. There's contested evidence and contested truths here, therefore you need open discussion and debate.

"The CSIRO is pretending there is one truth most of the time and that truth is being controlled by senior management."

Enter brand-new chairman Simon McKeon, a lawyer who chairs the Melbourne operations of Macquarie Bank — a group not known for its transparency.

It was Climate Change 101, with McKeon sounding relaxed and comfortable in an interview published in *The Age* last week: "I'm just so sad, or disappointed rather, that after a good decade or two of the world being aware of this issue the data is still interpreted so differently.

"Surely mankind can come to a landing sooner rather than later as to whether the climate is changing and then start to take a view on what the implications of that are?"

Score: Creeping managerialism (1), scientific debate (0).

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