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Submission to the Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

I am providing this submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist in my personal capacity as a prominent member of the biotechnology scientific community and industry who has had frequent interactions with the Chief Scientist – as a private member of the Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) for nearly two years and through a range of other scientific and business forums.

I would also like to comment on the basis of my own experience in positions that, like the Chief Scientist, require careful management of conflict of interest. This has included my part-time appointment to the Federal Government Industry Research and Development (IR&D) Board, which has a delegated authority as well as an advisory role to Government. I have also held a range of other board and executive positions, such as CEO for a Cooperative Research Centre, in which management of conflict of interest is part of daily life.

One of the major concerns of the inquiry is the potential for conflicts of interest that may arise when the Chief Scientist is appointed in a part-time capacity. I believe strongly that this concern is misconstrued for two reasons.

Firstly, the key role of the Chief Scientist is to bring to Government insight into the importance of science, technology and innovation (STI) to Australian society, the opportunities STI offers as well as the challenges Australia faces in translating science into economic gain. This requires a contemporary understanding of STI as well as an extensive network of contacts in the STI and business community. Unfortunately, the ability to retain a ‘finger on the pulse’ and remain well networked fades fast once a scientist retires from active employment in the sector. *For this reason, I strongly believe that the Chief Scientist should retain part-time, active employment in his/her field of STI.*

Secondly, the *potential* for conflict of interest cannot be avoided simply by making the position full-time. It is naïve to assume that full-time appointment will in itself eliminate the influence of past experience or personal prejudices and biases. The Government utilizes and relies on the services of a wide range of private sector experts – the IR&D

Board being a good case in point. If all these positions had to be full-time, Government would lose the very expertise and intelligence it seeks from such appointments! *The key to the effective operations of such advisors is to manage potential conflicts of interest, and not to seek to avoid the potential altogether.* Why should the position of Chief Scientist be any different?

I have worked with the last four Chief Scientists in my various capacities. I have found each of the incumbents to act at all times in an entirely fair and independent manner. *Robin Batterham is no exception to this rule.*

I can say without qualification that I perceive Dr Batterham as an excellent advocate for all fields of STI. I have seen no bias towards his own sector of mining, or for his employer, Rio Tinto.

I would also like to comment specifically on recent allegations of conflict of interest by Dr Batterham in regard to a PMSEIC report on "Beyond Kyoto". The Inquiry should be made aware that the Chief Scientist has no control over the recommendations by the PMSEIC Working Groups. And importantly, he does not seek to influence their outcomes. I am well aware of the operations of these committees as I have chaired a Working Group and attended the presentation of eight others, including "Beyond Kyoto". As a Working Group chair, it is repeatedly emphasized by the Chief Scientist and the departmental staff that the Working Groups are independent and their recommendations are indeed expected to reflect their own views. I have no reason to believe that the Beyond Kyoto report was any different to other Working Group papers.

Sincerely



Dr Leanna Read
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