

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

Submission no: 7

Received: 4/06/2004

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June 03, 2004



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Submission to the Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

I write this submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist in my personal capacity as a member of the scientific community with a background as Professor in a well established university and more recently as a Managing Director of a research institute specifically associated with and reporting to the Australian wine industry. Through my five years (1999 - present) as a 'Private Member' of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC), I have had the opportunity to observe the functions of (and to interact with) the Chief Scientist on numerous occasions. I therefore feel that I am in a good position to make comment in relation to this Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist.

I am a strong believer in the need for society to invest heavily in its science base in order to deliver sustainable economic growth and benefits across all sectors of society. I am equally convinced, that this burden of investment must be shared by both the private and public sector. However, the enthusiasm with which the investment is made is critically dependent on the perceived social and economic benefits that can be attributed to the investment by all stakeholders. Here it becomes critical that Government is the recipient of the best possible advice on how best to invest in science and equally that industry is made aware of the need to invest at a much higher rate than currently done. I see the role of the Chief Scientist to be critical in this regard. I am firmly of the opinion only rare individuals that have achieved recognition in their own right as scientists and at the same time are well respected by both Government and the private sector can manage to convince all parties of the necessity to maintain and further increase investment in science in its broadest sense. I believe the current Chief Scientist and his predecessor have mastered this demanding task with distinction and I admire their dedication to a dual role that is demanding and at times appears to be exceedingly challenging.

Individuals of high caliber and a dual public/business role will unavoidably find themselves in situations where the potential for conflict of interest arises. The key is that such potential conflicts have to be declared and managed professionally in a manner that can withstand the highest order of scrutiny. I am firmly of the opinion that the benefits to be gained from a Chief Scientist having a dual role and hence credibility and currency in

both public and private sectors far outweigh the potential for conflicts of interests - particularly because a partnership between Government and industry in relation to R&D investment is so critical to the future of Australia. Furthermore, having a full time employed Chief Scientist will not remove the potential for conflict of interest, however, it could indeed make it harder to spot such potential conflicts.

In my capacity as a Private Member of PMSEIC I have been fortunate to work with Dr Batterham for five years. In my interactions over those five years, I have not had any reason to believe that Dr Batterham's approach to the tasks at hand has been compromised by conflicts of interest. The interactions have been extensive and include my chairing of two PMSEIC working groups with subsequent presentations to PMSEIC. During those busy times I always appreciated the support and mentoring from Dr Batterham. In particular, I noted and appreciated the full independence 'my' working groups were given to prepare and transmit findings as we saw fit. During my many conversations with other PMSEIC members, I have not had any reason to believe that the operation of other working groups have been any different.

With respect to the development of criteria for the appointment of the Chief Scientist, I only wish to make the comment that criteria precluding appointment of individuals with a strong knowledge of the business community are likely to be to the detriment of Australia. As contacts and knowledge 'age' rapidly, a full time appointment is not necessarily a good idea. Our private sector invests too little in R&D and this unfortunate situation is likely to be more easily rectified if the Chief Scientist has a deep understanding of, and is well respected by the business sector.

Sincerely

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