

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

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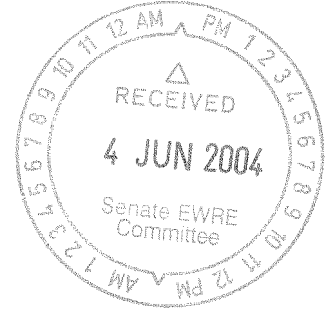
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Australian Academy of Science

SUBMISSION

to the



**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
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INQUIRY INTO THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SCIENTIST

**W.J. Peacock AC,FAA,FRS, FTSE,
President,
Australian Academy of Science.**

4 June 2004.

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SCIENTIST

Background.

The founding Chief Scientist, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, was Professor Ralph Slatyer, appointed in May 1989. The Chief Scientist was supported by a secretariat based in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. His position, along with that of his successor, another Fellow of the Academy, Professor Michael Pitman, was full-time. The new part-time arrangements for a Chief Scientist came into place when Dr John Stocker was appointed in November 1996 to work one day per week in the position. At this time, the secretariat was moved to the then Department of Industry, Science and Technology. In May 1999 Dr Robin Batterham was appointed to a three-year term on a part-time basis and was reappointed in May 2002 for a further three years. Robin Batterham was elected as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science in year 2000 on the basis of his strong contributions at the science-industry interface. The current secretariat arrangements for the Chief Scientist are based in the Department of Education, Science and Training.

It is the role of the Chief Scientist to ensure that the Australian Government has access to high-level advice on science and innovation, especially from the research community and industry. The Chief Scientist advises the Australian Government on the contributions of science, technology and innovation to national goals; one important arena for delivery of that advice is through the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council.

Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council.

The Academy of Science released in September 2003 its ***Policy statement on research and innovation in Australia***. The policy statement recommended:

that government retains the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) and upgrades the Commonwealth, States and Territories Advisory Council on Innovation.

The policy statement went on to say:

the Academy welcomes the strong positive role that PMSEIC has played in the development of the national agenda in science and innovation over the last several years, and urges the Government to maintain and strengthen that function even further.

Similarly, the Academy welcomes the active role played by the Chief Scientist in the number of reviews and consultative activities with which he has been involved over the last few years. The Academy urges the Government to expand the coordinating role of Chief Scientist, for instance in guiding the process of the identification of major research infrastructure requirements.

This policy statement may be interpreted, correctly, that the Academy considers that the role of the Chief Scientist is of such import that it requires dedicated commitment. That said, there are some people who can contribute more in a part-time capacity than others might contribute full-time.

It was in this spirit that the Academy of Science, in a media release dated 21 May 2002:

applauded the reappointment of the Federal Government's Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham, for a further three-year term. The President of the Academy of Science, Dr Jim Peacock, said Robin Batterham has worked exceptionally hard to put science and technology at the forefront of the national agenda.

The Academy of Science stands by this statement.

This Submission identifies some of the desired attributes of a chief scientist and examines how these might inform the government's terms of engagement with a Chief Scientist.

Desired attributes of a Chief Scientist.

- The Chief Scientist should be independent in providing advice to government;
- The Chief Scientist should be a respected scientist or engineer and should have extensive networks and a wide range of interests;
- The Chief Scientists should have a broad knowledge of industry;
- The Chief Scientist should have international scientific experience and linkages;
- The Chief Scientist should be aware of the needs of the scientific community; and
- The Chief Scientist should be of high standing, in order to have the confidence of government and the community.

For the Chief Scientist to be independent in providing advice to government, it is preferable that Australia's chief scientist is not an employee of the federal government, but is an adviser to government with appropriate contractual arrangements. This provides the Chief Scientist with an independent voice in a way that would not be possible if the position was in the public service. Consequently, the Chief Scientist would not be subject to interrogation by budget estimates committees, but relevant information can be provided to budget estimates committees by the government department hosting the Chief Scientist's secretariat.

This independence might be enhanced if an appropriate budget for the office of the Chief Scientist was designated, permitting secondment of support staff into the secretariat on fixed term appointments. There is the potential for ambiguity in the roles of public servants assigned to support an independent adviser to government.

A full-time Chief Scientist can be as independent in providing advice as a part-time chief scientist, especially if that person retains a substantive position of employment or has the security of a future retirement income. However, it is not self-evident that by making the position of Chief Scientist full-time, the potential for a conflict of interest will be removed. A more compelling argument for the position to be full-time is that the incumbent would be Canberra-based and would have more time and opportunities to play a coordinating role between government, industry and the research base.

There will always be the potential for a conflict of interest whether the incumbent is fulltime or part-time, from industry or from academia. What is important is that appropriate safeguards are put in place so that not only is the *potential* for conflict of interest minimised, the *perception of potential* for conflict of interest is minimised. It is the view of the Academy of Science that an

important safeguard against conflict of interest is the preparation and presentation of PMSEIC agenda items by independent working groups. The scientific presentations are clearly marked:

This paper was prepared by an independent working group for PMSEIC. Its views are those of the group, not necessarily those of the Commonwealth Government.

An additional safeguard against conflict of interest is the publication on the web (<http://www.dest.gov.au/science/pmseic/default.htm>) of all PMSEIC working party papers presented since, and including, those given at the first meeting of PMSEIC on 29 May 1998.

The Academy of Science considers that more could be done to reduce the perception of any potential for conflict of interest. The Chief Scientist might appoint a prominent circle of advisers, drawn from a broad range of backgrounds, who could provide advice on particularly complex or sensitive issues. The Standing Committee of PMSEIC does serve as one mechanism for providing external and independent input to the Chief Scientist, but its role is not well understood in the scientific community or in the community more generally.

A future Chief Scientist might be drawn from publicly funded research agencies, the higher education sector or the private sector. It would be a great shame if the current senate inquiry into the potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist resulted in the unintended consequence that worthy people in the private sector would not consider future appointment to the position.