

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

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Mr John Carter
Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
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Dear Mr Carter

Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

I am writing in relation to the Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist.

Please note that I am making this submission in my private capacity, but that my comments are submitted in the context of my experience as a member of the IR&D Board, chair of the R&D START grants bioscience selection committee, member of various NH&MRC committees, peer reviewer, researcher and most recently as Queensland Chief Scientist (a half-time position modelled closely on that of the Commonwealth Chief Scientist). My comments do not reflect the views of any of the organisations that I have been employed by or with whom I have been associated.

Part time or full time?

Innovation is vital for the future growth of Australia, but our track record in capturing the economic, social and environmental benefits of innovation has been poor. This failure is linked to our low level of industry investment in science and innovation, which in turn is grounded in the underlying cultural attitudes of our scientific, industrial and investment communities.

In my view, a key role of the Chief Scientist is to help drive the cultural changes necessary to increase business investment in innovation, and thus spearhead the development of a knowledge-based economy. To do this, the Chief Scientist must not only have credible scientific and industrial experience, but also maintain continuing links with the scientific and industrial communities. The ability to maintain such linkages is greatly enhanced by the choice of a part-time appointee with ongoing involvement in industry.

Dr Batterham, in particular, has been able to use his experience and linkages to actively and energetically promote the importance of science and innovation to both government and industry. Most importantly, he has championed the need to focus on gaining returns on our investment in science.

Conflict of Interest?

Despite these advantages, the choice of a part-time appointee as Chief Scientist raises other issues, of which the most significant is the potential for conflicts of interest. How should these be handled? Some would argue that conflicts of interest are inherently bad, and must be eliminated. Others, including me, would make the case that conflicts of interest are inevitable, fundamentally beneficial, and must be managed.

Conflict of interest is inherent in the way in which the discretionary component of the Australian Government's investment in R&D is allocated by grant agencies and guided by advisory councils. As in most scientifically advanced countries, this process relies on a pyramid of advice and decision-making with the Chief Scientist and PMSEIC at the peak, various selection committees and boards in the middle, and a huge cadre of individuals providing independent references and peer reviews at the base.

This pyramid is characterised by the fact that the individuals within it operate on a largely honorary basis, provide levels of expertise that are generally not available elsewhere, and are frequently beneficiaries of the system to which they contribute. The issue therefore is not that conflict of interest may occur (it is certain to), but that we have appropriate mechanisms to manage it at each level of the pyramid.

Way forward?

In order for this system to work we need to do three things.

First, we need to ensure that there are appropriate processes in place to manage conflict of interest in a transparent way. Such systems are indeed in place in the Office of the Chief Scientist, and at all other levels of the pyramid. Most appear to me to be both transparent and effective.

Second, we need to recognise that the people who contribute to the pyramid do so, without exception in my experience, because of their commitment to Australian science and innovation. I know of no one who does so for financial or other personal gain.

Third, we must understand that the system is inherently vulnerable to those who choose to attack individual contributors in order to achieve their own ends. If we continue to play the man rather than the ball, we will find ourselves without any scientists – be they Chiefs or Indians – willing to continue contributing to a system that allows them to be publicly denigrated and maligned.

A vibrant innovation system needs a strong science base, which in turn relies heavily on a pyramid of advice. Each of the participants in the pyramid, from the Chief Scientist down to individual referees, plays an important role and should be recognised and respected accordingly.

Yours sincerely

Peter Andrews