

Gutting the Scientific Establishment: Australia's Business Model

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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There is something so fundamentally wrong about equating the joy and genius of scientific discovery with profit and markets. Initial discoveries in quantum physics had nothing to do with the idea of pursuing a remorseless "bottom line" or some specious market concept. The results of such discoveries were, however, gargantuan. Eventually, applications arise, with various economic benefits. Patience, however, is a golden virtue in that regard.

Australia's scientific management (these comprise scientists who attempt to straddle the world of practice and business, and petty bureaucrats) have not taken kindly to the field of pure scientific endeavour.

The Turnbull government has continued what the previous government did: savage the fund lines, turning off the taps. Australia's core scientific institution risks becoming a rump, while other countries pour money into theirs with intoxicating enthusiasm.

The climate change modelling unit at the main scientific organisation, CSIRO, has been devastated, with the government feeling that sufficient work has been done in the area. Having tooted the Australian horn of achievement, Turnbull and scientific management feel that money might be better spent elsewhere.

The entire sense of Australian science as business can be gathered by a skirt through the website. The reader stumbles across the "Operating Model" which was obviously written by a technocrat versed in painful MBA jargon: "Our operating model underpins the successful execution of our strategy and delivery of our goals." [1]

The language is cold and uninspiring. There is a reminder where the body comes from, notably the provisions of the Science and Industry Research Act 1949. The message from the minister speaks about government "providing the catalyst for collaboration and transformation of our industries while capitalising on the depth of our innovative and highly skilled workforce." [2]

There is nothing in the minister's statement of 2015 (that of Ian Macfarlane of Industry and Finance) that reflects the deeper values of the scientific enterprise as science per se. Scientists are encouraged to foster business acumen, charging into brave futures with bright advertising credentials.

The idea is to reward Australian "industry" rather than add to the annals of discovery. What is sovereign is never in dispute. It is made clear that CSIRO "had a central role in the translation of science and technology into products and services that benefit our nation and enhance our productivity and our prosperity."

Policy documents that would have sat very comfortably in a Soviet government ministry have been produced, proclaiming strategic directions and aspirations. Strategy 2020: Australia's Innovation Catalyst, is one such ghastly product, glowingly administrative and heavily managerial.

CSIRO chief executive Larry Marshall's statement from 2015 uses all the language of spin in his vision. There are "inputs"; there are "crowd sourced ideas from more than 7000 of our creative people, customers, thought leaders and the public". There is that word that Australia's Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has made a Tibetan mantra: innovation.

For Marshall, the CSIRO is a business mechanism with a purpose. The body must "help reinvent existing industries and strive to create a new industry for a changing Australian economy." His message is delivered like a party official in full regalia. "Australia must be a high performing innovation economy."

This is emphasised in the CSIRO's overview of "global megatrends". Some mention is made about scarcity and resources, the issue of water, mineral and food resources. Climate change is briefly mentioned as part of the changes in earth systems "from global to microbial". (Such vagueness is typical in business speak.)

Economic worth makes a far more prominent appearance, to such an extent there is a mention of the "silk highway" (an insertion of Chinese influence?) seeing fast "growth of emerging economies, urbanisation, geopolitical change and the transition from industrialisation into technologically advanced service sectors."

Employees of CSIRO have also been caught off guard by the organisation's greater insistence that they strap on their entrepreneurial boots and seek out prospects to "partner" with business. "The CSIRO," as the organisation statement asserts, "invests in an evolving portfolio of businesses to deliver on our mission."

Australia's tertiary sector is also milking this tendency, creating a hybrid graduate interested in both scientific trends and business. The University of Technology Sydney, the University of New South Wales, and the Queensland University of Technology are among such institutions.

The assumption here is that such hybrid degrees and combinations are automatic, and while it would be incorrect to ignore that science has economic and social applications, it is also a very narrow way of viewing the world.

Marshall's money-driven overview is a reminder about how subordinate science can become. It continues to prove central to the military industrial complex. It continues to fund projects of biosecurity that involve mass extermination of undesirable species (undesirable, in that sense, being determined as a matter of agrarian economy). University departments, strung along by industry grants, have also fallen victim to this cycle of production and discovery.

Farewells have been made to genuine, speculative science. If an Einstein was to appear at the doorstep of CSIRO these days, he would be turned back with disdain. That is modern innovation for you.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

[1] <http://www.csiro.au/en/About/Strategy-structure/Operating-model>

[2] <http://www.csiro.au/strategy/>

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