

Public Perceptions of a Management Culture of Intimidation, Bullying and Harassment at CSIRO – 1

A Brief History of the Concerns

Starting in 2002, there have been growing criticisms of CSIRO's management, most of which involved the perceived development of a culture of intimidation, bullying, and harassment at the organisation. These concerns have been repeatedly voiced in the media and by senior staff at the CSIRO. Here are some examples.

Max Whitten, ex CSIRO Division Chief summarised what was happening as follows:

- “In this general climate of intimidation, it is not surprising that we see no public debate from within CSIRO”
- “CSIRO is in deep trouble”
- **“something is terribly wrong at CSIRO”**
- **“...a common thread emerges – intolerance by senior management to alternative viewpoints”**
- “Urgent need to review CSIRO’s board structure”

[“Don’t Cry for me Australia”, Australasian Science, 1 July 2002](#)
[The CSIRO is in Deep Trouble, The Age, 15 Feb 2006](#)

Max Whitten was Professor of Genetics at the University of Melbourne, and Chief of CSIRO's Division of Entomology from 1981-95. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academies of Science and Technological Sciences & Engineering and an expert on blowflies.

Norman Abjorensen, respected journalist, said:

- **“If integrity, honesty, and openness are fundamental to the way we [CSIRO] operates, then why are they so lacking? Trust is also conspicuous by its absence”**
- **CSIRO is not “built on cooperation and knowledge generation” but “an environment where winks and nods prevail”**

[“Troubled Times at CSIRO Inc”, Sydney, Morning Herald 2005](#)
[“Insider Unloads on Chaos in CSIRO”, Australasian Science, 2005](#)

Abjorensen worked at CSIRO Head Office from 2004. He is a former national editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and has held senior positions at the Age, Sunday Herald Sun, the Canberra Times, and is a former News Director of SBS.

Michael Borgas of the CSIRO staff association said:

- **“A culture of fear builds at CSIRO”**
- **“...the message in [the CSIRO] policy is understood by staff as: don’t step out of line” ...**
- **“...a culture among CSIRO staff of keeping’s one’s head down ... and doing the science ‘at night’”**

[“A Culture of Fear Builds at the CSIRO”, The Age, 21 Feb 2006](#)

- “Dr Michael Borgas ... harshly criticized the [CSIRO’s] censorious approach”
- **“...even the appearance of a compliant, unquestioning, propaganda-driven organisation is not an acceptable strategy for CSIRO”**
[“Science Agency Staff Criticise Spin Strategy”, Australasian Science, Jan/Feb 2006](#)
- “We ended up with a centralised command and control model , which is really very Soviet era-minded”
[“Culture Wars at CSIRO”, ABC Background Briefing, 15 August 2010](#)
- **“Figures from DEST show that administration now consumes 46.5% of ...expenditure on research and development, up from 28.5% in 1989.** Between June 1998 and June 2004, CSIRO more than doubled its corporate management positions and also lost 316 people from research”
[“A Culture of Fear Builds at the CSIRO”, The Age, 21 Feb 2006](#)

Rosslyn Beeby, columnist at the Canberra Times said of CSIRO:

- **“Here in Australia we’ve seen intimidation, exclusion, ... political ridicule and censorship of scientists”**
- **“...a climate of fear operates ...”**
[“Climate of Fear Silencing Scientists when they must be Heard”, Canberra Times, 4 Jan 2007](#)

Senator Christine Milne said:

(To Dr Sandland, Deputy Head, CSIRO):

“Are you aware of media reports and other discussion about there being a culture of fear and intimidation in the organisation, particularly for people who work in the area of renewable energy and climate science”?

(Answer from Dr Sandland):

“I have certainly heard those rumours”

[Hansard, Senate Estimates Hearings, 14 February 2007](#)

Julian Cribb, Science journalist said:

- **“...there’s been an alarming tendency ... for scientists working for public institutions to be ... controlled”**

[“Culture Wars at CSIRO”, ABC Background Briefing, 15 August 2010](#)

Anonymous scientists at CSIRO (“DavidGcc”) said:

- **“The most despairing observations during my 29 years of employment at CSIRO have been the decline in the integrity of CSIRO as a result of executive decisions”**

[“Culture Wars at CSIRO”, ABC Background Briefing, 15 August 2010](#)

Sam Popovski of the CSIRO staff association said:

- **“We need substantial change. Its no longer to talk about issues being addressed, its time for action, and the CSIRO board needs to understand the urgency that’s required”.**

[“CSIRO staff burned out by bureaucracy, survey reveals” Canberra Times, 16 Sep 2010](#)

The Shadow Minister of Science, Sophie Mirabella, said:

- “At a Senate Estimates hearing in Canberra today, senior officials from CSIRO admitted under questioning from Tasmanian Senator Richard Colbeck that they were unaware of action taken by at least 7 former scientists from the agency to request an investigation of allegations of systemic workplace bullying and harassment.
- **The agency’s Chief Executive, Megan Clark, was also careful to avoid answering claims that, in 2010, she had referred a private and confidential complaint from an aggrieved employee directly to the officer against whom the complaint was made.**
- **“It is unacceptable that government officials at the most senior level are, at best, unaware of serious complaints of workplace bullying in their own agencies,”** said Sophie Mirabella, Shadow Minister for Science, today.
- “If the government is serious about tackling workplace bullying, it must urgently review systems within its own agencies, because clearly they are not working,” Mrs Mirabella concluded.

[“CSIRO Fails on Workplace Bullying, Press Release, Sophie Mirabella, Shadow Minister of Science, 28 May 2012](#)

Art Raiche, ex-Chief Research Scientist at CSIRO, says:

- **“It is my strong belief that CSIRO has passed its use-by date”**
- “Sadly, over the last decade, CSIRO has transformed itself from a once-respected research institute into a highly centralised, government enterprise (oxymoron?), replete with intersecting layers of expensive management, focused on continual reorganisation. Scientific independence has been lost...”
- For this reason CSIRO no longer attracts top young scientists except as an employer of last resort... It employs a much higher percentage of second and third rate people than was the case two decades ago.
- “It is anachronistic to have a single organisation operating across so many sectors with sector funding allocations left in the hands of CSIROs incompetent management”

[“CSIRO heavy: don’t trust CSIRO scares”, Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, 27 July 2008](#)

Kevin Hooper, Australian Industrialist, said:

- **“... there needs to be some high level review of how they [CSIRO] do their business”**
- “CSIRO should stick to the thing its good at: research”

[“Culture Wars at CSIRO”, ABC Background Briefing, 15 August 2010](#)

The CSIRO staff association said:

- **“Scientists at CSIRO love their work, but say they are becoming more confused, frustrated, unhappy and burned out by battles with management bureaucracy, according to a new report.** A survey of more than 2100 staff found 62% thought CSIROs top-heavy management structure created conflict over research goals and 50 percent believed it hampered their career”
- **“”the most recent survey revealed a marked change in staff morale toward the negative end of the spectrum”**
- **“CSIRO staff felt a high level of neglect and disengagement”**

- “Those surveys also showed ... **many employees “feel trapped in their jobs and continue to work for CSIRO but without feeling committed to the organisation”**”
- “Staff feel there is a deepening rift between those who do the science and those who theorize about the best way to manage science”

[“CSIRO staff burned out by bureaucracy, survey reveals” Canberra Times, 16 Sep 2010](#)