

Monday, 27 October 2014

To: The Secretary of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

Re: Additional information for the Senate Inquiry into Australia's future activities and responsibilities in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters

As a scientist with 15 years' experience in leading, coordinating and undertaking Antarctic scientific research within the UK and Australia, I appreciate the opportunity to provide some brief, last minute, information relating to the Senate Inquiry. It is my submission that while Australia has a long and proud reputation in Antarctic science, the Australian Antarctic program is now in a parlous state and the solution requires a significant rethink as to the best means to achieve our national interests.

In particular I make the following observations:

1. The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) has in recent years become almost a dead duck in being able to undertake substantial deep field research programs on its own, whilst other nations have retained or increased their deep field research capability. Almost all substantial Australian fieldwork is now reliant on international partners.
2. Multiple AAD priorities have resulted in scientific research being forced to the end of the budget priority and activity being concentrated on the most cost-effective locations – at our three stations, requiring ever-increasing levels of capital investment and costs associated with mitigating environmental impact.
3. The Australian program operates across a tiny fraction of its claimed Antarctic Territories and never to the most extreme southern, western and eastern boundaries

I offer the following suggestions to recover a viable and cost-effective program

1. The AAD be given a clear remit of scientific research as their first and foremost objective, in parallel to the leading UK British Antarctic Survey. Other existing AAD priorities are best achieved "under the cover" of scientific research as scientific research is the currency of the Antarctic Treaty.
2. As submitted to you by Prof Lambeck of the Australian Academy of Science, a significant portion of the AAD should be ring-fenced for science and associated logistic support, as a proportion of overall AAD budget. It seems reasonable for this to be at least 15-20%.
3. That the small amount of funds within the Australian Antarctic Science funding scheme be expanded and then coordinated by the Australian Research Council with logistical advice coordinated through AAD to ensure efficient administration and excellent scientific standards. Overseas experience suggests that a dedicated ARC funding round would boost Australian expertise and Antarctic activity.
5. That the Inquiry takes legal advice as to the value of continuous occupations of permanent stations which are widely held to enhance our Territorial claims. If this is not correct, then consideration be given to winding back operations at Macquarie Island and Mawson shifted to a summer-only operation. This activity should be replaced by activities that do enhance our Territorial claims and advance our wider national interests via deployment of long-range mobile field camps with air support, allowing Australia to operate across its full Territories while accessing some of the most scientifically valuable regions on the continent.

Yours Sincerely



Professor Matt King, University of Tasmania