

INQUIRY INTO THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SCIENTIST

*ACCI SUBMISSION
TO THE
SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND
EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE*

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Background

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) is the peak council of Australian business associations. ACCI's members are employer organisations in all States and Territories and all major sectors of Australian industry.

Through our membership, ACCI represents over 350,000 businesses nation-wide, including the top 100 companies, over 55,000 enterprises employing between 20-100 people, and over 280,000 enterprises employing less than 20 people. This makes ACCI the largest and most representative business organisation in Australia.

Membership of ACCI comprises State and Territory Chambers of Commerce and national employer and industry associations. Each ACCI member is a representative body for small employers or sole traders, as well as medium and large businesses.

Discussion

On 11 May, Senator Bob Brown successfully moved a motion that the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Senate Committee should inquire and report by 24 June 2004 on:

- (a) the functioning of the Office of the Chief Scientist; and
- (b) potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist.

Senator Stott Despoja moved an amendment which was passed to:

- (c) examine the development of criteria for the appointment of the Chief Scientist through legislation.

ACCI is concerned that both public and private resources are being devoted to this inquiry which in our view is not necessary.

We make the following comments against the three elements of the terms of reference.

Functioning of the Office

Since its establishment in 1989, the Office of the Chief Scientist has been within three portfolios - Prime Minister and Cabinet, Industry, Science and Tourism, and now Education, Science and Training. Business has worked well with the office within all three portfolios over the last 15 years.

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Since the Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) was created in its current format in 1997, the President of ACCI has been a member of PMSEIC. Four Presidents of ACCI have served on PMSEIC and the PMSEIC Standing Committee. All four have expressed support for the effective operation of the Office of the Chief Scientist.

The ACCI secretariat has also worked effectively with the Office over the years. This has included providing business input into the development of the papers for presentation to PMSEIC. We also have worked with the Office in an administrative capacity as both it and ACCI provided secretariat support to the ACCI representative on PMSEIC.

ACCI believes that the staff of the Office of the Chief Scientist and the Chief Scientist function effectively and professionally.

Conflicts of Interest

All four of the ACCI presidents who have been members of PMSEIC and the PMSEIC Standing Committee have found the current Chief Scientist to have acted with integrity and to have conducted himself properly at all times in his role as Executive Officer for PMSEIC.

ACCI supports the Government decision in 1999 to make the position of Chief Scientist a part-time position. However, any reading of the current Chief Scientist's reports of activities would indicate that he works many hours longer in that capacity than one would reasonably expect of someone in a part-time capacity.

One of the key elements of ACCI's innovation policy is that there should be greater linkages between the research community and the business community. The appointment of a Chief Scientist from the private sector helps to build on those linkages, and to maximise collaboration, co-operation and ultimately commercialisation.

It is normal practice in senior roles for individuals to manage both perceived and real conflicts of interest. We understand that the Chief Scientist has operated in an appropriate way.

Given the job of the Chief Scientist is a senior position it is obvious that any holder of the office would be a person with a long and distinguished career who would have many connections with the business, academic and research communities and indeed the wider community. As a highly respected and competent individual it would be expected that they would manage conflicts of interest.

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Criteria for Appointment through Legislation

ACCI does not believe there is any need to develop criteria to be inserted into legislation for the appointment of the Chief Scientist.

There have been four Chief Scientists since 1989 – Professor Ralph Slatyer, Professor Michael Pitman, Professor John Stocker and Dr Robin Batterham. All four have been eminent Australians who have served as Chief Scientist with great distinction, and have had the support of the business community. We believe the processes used to identify the incumbents of the position have resulted in excellent choices and do not believe it is necessary to adopt a prescriptive approach to selection.