



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

CSIRO

SPEECH

Monday, 8 February 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Leigh, Andrew, MP

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Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (10:32): Last week the CSIRO's chief executive, Larry Marshall, announced that the organisation would shed 110 positions from the ocean and atmosphere staff and a similar number from its land and water division. In the early days of the Abbott-Turnbull government I visited the CSIRO along with my colleagues, Mark Dreyfus and Kim Carr, to participate in an unusual activity for their very busy and focused research staff—a political protest. The staff and their research capacity was being literally decimated—one in 10 faced the chop—and an indignant activist reflex was triggered. Some of those out on the day in white lab coats said that it was their first political protest. One forestry researcher who was facing the chop asked me the question: if Australia does not do eucalyptus research, who in the world will? Now the cuts are more targeted and they are more extreme. This latest directive will see the ocean and atmosphere section lose nearly eight out of 10 staff members.

When I spoke to CSIRO staff two years ago I noted the government was reducing the CSIRO's capacity in spite of its success. This time whole sections are effectively being dismantled because of its success. Mr Marshall has rationalised the cuts as follows:

Our climate models are among the best in the world and our measurements honed those models to prove global climate change. That question has been answered, and the new question is what do we do about it ...

Leading climate scientists have responded, arguing that these cuts will seriously undermine Australia's capacity to respond to the challenges posed by climate change. While much has been learned about the patterns and challenges of climate change, they note that vital evidence is still being gathered. The very climate scientists we stand to lose are already focusing on climate change adaptation and mitigation. Indeed, as Tom Quinn of the Future Business Council has said, 'It is impossible to adapt without having access to the latest modelling.'

This group is already doing exactly the kind of work that this new applied approach seeks to favour. When we look back at some of CSIRO's great innovations, it is clear that they have been developed through the kind of basic research that Prime Minister Turnbull sees as needing to be subjugated to applied research. Take wi-fi, for example, probably the CSIRO's most famous invention. It came out of the CSIRO's pioneering work on radioastronomy which involved complex mathematical changes known as fast Fourier transformers as well as detailed knowledge about radio waves and their behaviour in different environments. The basic research contained the solution to a problem other researchers had been working on.

CSIRO created the hendra virus vaccine, Relenza, the first effective influenza treatment. It is no wonder then that CSIRO staff and scientists around the country feel dismay at what this decision signifies. I hope that proves unwarranted, and that Mr Pyne, Mr Turnbull and Mr Marshall will listen to their scientists and give them the support they demand.