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## Q&A with Kim Carr

### Federal science minister Kim Carr outlines his thinking and his philosophy to *Australian Life Scientist*.

[Kate McDonald](#) 14/03/2008 11:54:15

#### **What was the rationale behind taking science and research from its traditional place with higher education and creating this new portfolio?**

Our key policy objective is to change the culture in this country, to build a culture of innovation. Our policy driver is to encourage the various instruments of government to lift up the political agenda the issues associated with innovation, science and research; to encourage a much better relationship between our research institutes, our public research agencies and the private sector; to ensure that we marshal the very best talent to confront the challenges facing this society in the 21st century.

#### **You hope to bring the public research sector closer to industry?**

While I have a very firm commitment to basic research, it is important to strengthen the relationship between the public and private sectors. Collaboration is a key theme running through the policy programs. We want to encourage not just new collaborations within the public sector - in particular on an interdisciplinary basis - but also between the public and private sectors. That's why our National Innovation Review is being established so that we can explore ways that that can be achieved more quickly.

#### **Do you hope to get more private industry investment in public research?**

Yes. One of the other areas we want to look at is ways in which we can encourage privately funded - not private fees-based - but privately, industry-funded PhD programs. There are many other areas but that's just one example.

#### **What do you think the priorities of the National Innovation Review should be in a broad sense?**

We need to align our national innovation priorities with our research priorities. At the moment there has not been a great deal of discussion about the connection, there certainly hasn't been much of a discussion about the appropriateness of our research priorities as they are currently constituted. There's an opportunity to evaluate these issues, but in terms of innovation we need to examine ways in which we can build a more concentrated effort, where we can end the research fragmentation, we can build higher levels of coordination between the Commonwealth and the states and we can see that we have much stronger international linkages than we currently do.

#### **There is a huge array of different Commonwealth and state funding programs - you hope to streamline that?**

There are 169 [different programs]. There are clearly two things we should do: we need a higher level of co-ordination, and we also need to establish where the gaps are and take the policy steps to close those gaps. By international standards, this country is slipping and we just can't afford to do that. I want to see a doubling in our R&D effort, public and private, and it's quite clear we need to lift our performance dramatically. We need to move in all areas, whether it's research training or research infrastructure.

---PB--- **If the Government is serious about reining in spending, where is the money for more research and**

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**development going to come from?**

In due course that will be an issue as well. We have promised an education revolution and I'm saying very much part of that is a research revolution. In terms of future budgetary commitments, that's an issue we need to work through. The whole idea of this review is to examine what the country actually needs. This is an evidence-based policy development process, it's a public process - we want to have ideas contested - and this is a review that will produce a green paper by the middle of the year and a white paper response from both the Treasurer and myself, we are co-sponsoring that, hopefully by the end of the year. That means we can have policy options considered by government that will feed into the future budgetary rounds.

**Your first move after the election was to restore the independence of the Australian Research Council. Why was that necessary?**

With the previous Government, on 10 separate occasions, there were vetoes applied to grants, but there was no public explanation given as to why. I think that had a serious effect on morale. In a whole range of areas there are researchers who have been publicly attacked for daring to offer an opinion. There was a clear effort, in my opinion, to channel public debate away from policy areas and policy ideas that were controversial, there was an attempt to denigrate researchers who had a different view on climate change or industrial relations or even on issues such as media management of the children overboard affair. There is a long list of examples of where there were assaults on what the Government regarded as its cultural enemies, and it treated researchers with disdain and took the view that our public institutions were not to be trusted. As a consequence we had the culture wars, which were aimed at the suppression of political dissent as they saw it - they defined it. I take a different view. There will be times when people don't agree with the policy position of the Government, however the policy position of the Government is the Government's to defend through the parliamentary system. I'm responsible for putting that argument to the parliament. But on the question of discovery, it's very important that the public is informed. We will enhance the public's appreciation of the value of research if we can ensure that the public is provided with the information about new discovery.

**There was an early issue just after the election about the vetting of CSIRO press releases - how does that tally with your previous statement?**

Essentially what occurred was there was some miscommunication - we were a new Government, we'd been in office for a week, communications were issued by the department which did not reflect accurately the position that I'd been arguing for all the time I've been in public life. What we've said since in regard to the charters [of rights and responsibilities] for public research agencies and in terms of independence, academic freedom and institutional autonomy is in keeping with the position I've always maintained.

**Regarding those charters of independence, you have said you believe that not only do researchers have a right but they have a duty to communicate their work.**

I do. I'm encouraging public debate. I think we will have a better informed public if we are able to communicate. In most areas of policy there is a contest for ideas and it's a myth to suggest that there are tablets of stone handed down. There are differences in interpretation and points of view and I want to see those discussions. We don't have to be frightened of new ideas. It doesn't mean that everything that is said will be right or for that matter that people don't have the right to be wrong. I would always obviously urge people to think about how they put a case because there are other points of view and under a peer review system, you would encourage people who have a difference of view. I'm not looking for a preordained truth - this is about encouraging the contestability of ideas.

**---PB--- Do you support the move to mandate publicly funded researchers to publish their work freely online, and the broader open access movement?**

In terms of publicly funded research, we are looking at ways in which we can have higher levels of access to research

through public repositories at universities. I want to look through all of the implications of that - I'm obviously interested in the debate around open source IP. These are issues that do have quite far reaching consequences so we can't just rush in, but we do want to say we are open to the idea and we are interested in discussing it.

**Despite a lot of time and money spent on it, you moved quickly to cancel the implementation of the Research Quality Framework (RQF). Why?**

Because it was flawed, it was fundamentally flawed. It was badly designed, it had an emphasis on concepts that could not be identified in real terms, the bars were set too low, it was excessively expensive and it was effectively a major distraction to the work of universities. I want to look at ways that we can ensure we have good quality and that we are able to determine where the gaps are in our research program, so it's a strategic approach where we can ensure that we get advice about longer term strategic directions of our research program. Given that the ARC currently requires, by law, evaluations, I'm moving towards measures that streamline that approach. The real issues here is in terms of the humanities, the social sciences and the performing arts where there is not agreement about the form that evaluation should be, so I want to use the next year as a process of consultation to reach agreement. We must have a rigorous, transparent and internationally credible system of evaluation.

**Are you going to continue with the previous Government's programs such as the Higher Education Endowment Fund and the Federation Fellowships?**

The Federation Fellowships are an area where we need to consider the direction. We've announced a new set of fellowships ourselves, we've moved to double the number of PhD places - the APAs (Australian postgraduate awards) - because frankly our whole research training area does need a fundamental rebalancing. We've got an ageing workforce in terms of our academic and scientific community and we need to look at ways that we can revitalise and refresh our talent base. Those are questions that do mean we have to concentrate resources at the early and mid-career levels so the program emphasis will shift. Obviously the implementation is again an issue we will talk through with the people directly interested. I want to provide more opportunity for institutions to take responsibility for priority setting within their institutions and we are examining ways of doing that. We also want to examine ways we can have more of an international focus to our research training and obviously try to lift our performance in regards to indigenous researchers. There is a range of areas in which there needs to be significant reform. The fellowships we have announced will be worth on average \$140,000 a year for four years with a \$50,000 infrastructure support program. This is a new program, worth \$175 million and it will be rolled out, as we will implement all our policy, after we have spoken to people about the best ways to achieve the policy outcomes.

**Update:**

Senator Carr gave a speech to a meeting of Universities Australia on March 12, offering a little more detail on his thoughts on compact funding, hubs and spokes. You can find it [here](#).

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, has announced a review of the higher education portfolio. Read her speech about the review [here](#) and a transcript of her interview with Kerry O'Brien on the 7.30 Report [here](#).

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