



Frank and fearless scientific debate comes with a few too many strings attached

The dispute over a paper critical of the ETS raises the question of censorship

NICOLA BERKOVIC

SITTING in a café in the inner-Canberra suburb of Lyneham, CSIRO ecological economist Clive Spash appears at a loss to explain exactly why he provoked the storm that erupted last week over the censorship of science.

British-born Spash showed a steely determination to stare down CSIRO management, and on Monday he emerged victorious; chief executive Megan Clark announced that his critique of emissions trading could be published, albeit with minor amendments.

Spash was also at a loss to explain why the CSIRO took issue with this particular paper but allowed him to publish other papers on similar topics during the past three years.

The decision to ban the 47-year-old's paper from publication, after the process of peer review, because of "political sensitivities" has raised questions about the role and internal workings of the public science agency. It also has thrown doubt on the Rudd government's willingness to back its rhetoric with action and its ability to handle criticism.

After railing against political interference in scientific research while in opposition, Science Minister Kim Carr last year announced a new CSIRO charter to protect the right of researchers to contribute to public debate, declaring that "transparent public debate, unfettered by political interference but subject to peer review, is something I have advocated for my entire public life".

In a move that opposition science spokesman Eric Abetz says is further evidence that the Rudd government is all spin and no substance, Carr displayed none of his usual passion for unfettered debate when news of Spash's paper broke. Instead, the minister went

into bat for the CSIRO, saying: "It's not censoring itself. What you're looking at is the legitimate question about how long some of these things take."

However, the way events unfolded suggests there was more to it than mere delay. The decision to stop Spash's paper from being published in British journal *New Political Economy* was made in July and involved executives at the highest levels of the agency, including head of environment Andrew Johnson and director of communications John Curran, both of whom report to Clark.

Spash says the decision to block the paper, *The Brave New World of Carbon Trading*, came as a surprise. He says when he submitted it for international peer review, he did so with the support of management. Then, after the paper was accepted for publication, he was informed that any critique of emissions trading schemes breached the new CSIRO charter, which prevents scientists from debating the merits of government policy.

The paper argues trading schemes are an inefficient way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and that direct legislation or a carbon tax would be more effective. While some experts familiar with the paper say they are not convinced by Spash's arguments, they say it furthers the debate about how to tackle climate change.

Australian National University professor John Dryzek, who is on the editorial board of *New Political Economy*, says question marks remain over whether ETS policies are effective in tackling climate change and the paper canvasses some of those issues in an analytical way. "It's a scholarly piece, otherwise it wouldn't have been accepted to the journal," he says.

The government has denied it had any direct hand in blocking

the paper, as it sought to push its Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme through the Senate. However, the incident raises the question of why CSIRO executives appear to be so fearful of ruffling feathers on Capital Hill.

Spash says the pressure from management to accept its decision was immense. After several visits from senior managers, his junior co-author decided to pull his name from the paper and Spash says he too was heaved. Within 24 hours of the CSIRO's decision to block publication in his private capacity, he received a letter that listed trivial instances in which he had breached CSIRO policy, such as an alleged failure to fill out a leave form months earlier.

CSIRO staff association president Michael Borgas says the agency's managers try to avoid "hand grenades" being lobbed by scientists. He says this is to protect the CSIRO's role as a trusted adviser to government, through which it is able to help shape public policy, and to avoid hurting those who control the agency's sizeable budget.

"It is linked in the end to funding, but it's largely about managing relationships," Borgas says.

It is perhaps understandable that management would be overzealous in its efforts to manage relationships with government.

The Rudd government has developed a reputation for being sensitive to criticism and has been known to sideline industry bodies that have spoken out against its policies. Last week, Reserve Bank of Australia board member Warwick McKibbin publicly questioned whether he had been dumped from the Prime Minister's science council as payback for attacking the size of the government's fiscal stimulus program.

However, Greens candidate for

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Higgins Clive Hamilton, who has provided support to Spash during many months of wrangling over the paper, says he is disturbed to find the CSIRO depriving the Australian public of the knowledge it has funded. While he disagrees with Spash's views, he says they would nevertheless help to inform debate.

"The CSIRO has become so cowed it now polices itself and needs no political pressure," he says. He says in Spash's area of ecological economics, it is impossible to undertake research that does not have implications for policy, and if the CSIRO is not prepared to publish it, it should simply abandon work in the area.

Spash, who has explored the interface between climate change and economics for 20 years, was recruited under the CSIRO's science leaders program aimed at attracting experts in their fields. He says although the CSIRO has been hiring people with multidisciplinary backgrounds, it has not worked out how such research fits within the agency's role.

"The CSIRO is facing a point where the science-policy interface is changing and [it has] to decide how to handle that," he says. "We're moving out of the area of

experimental science and objectivity . . . to debates about values and the types of technology we use, the types of data we put forward. Climate change is an example of where policy and science are interacting." As it grapples with such issues, the CSIRO seems bent on clamping down on scientists' ability to publish work independently. Three weeks ago, the CSIRO began quietly rolling out a new publications policy that limits what scientists can say in their personal capacity about issues within their area of expertise.

The crackdown comes after four eminent scientists gave evidence to a Senate inquiry into climate change in April.

It is understood their decision to give evidence to the inquiry that the Rudd government's emissions reduction targets were inadequate to combat dangerous climate change caused displeasure among the executive, which had decided against making a submission.

There are fears the new policy will cut off the "pressure valve" that has allowed such scientists to speak out independently, and in so doing, prevent them from putting cutting-edge research into the public domain.

Such a move would not be so

worrying if the CSIRO were erring on the side of open debate when deciding what to publish on behalf of the organisation.

The Spash case doesn't raise confidence senior managers are doing so.

Former CSIRO climate science chief Graeme Pearman says the agency perhaps needs more time to bed down its new charter. However, he is adamant that scientists must be able to inform the public of their findings, regardless of whether they are consistent with the government's views.

"If a government is so sensitive that they can't deal with that diversity, then there's something wrong," he says.

McKibbin, who has argued for limits to be set on the price of carbon permits, laments the quality of debate over the design of the government's CPRS. "The design is so important and there are so many ways to create an ETS that we do need to think more broadly," he says.

It is unclear whether the incident is an aberration or otherwise. What is clear is that when it comes to areas such as global warming and the means to combat it, the public would be well served by a more informed debate.

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CLIVE HAMILTON



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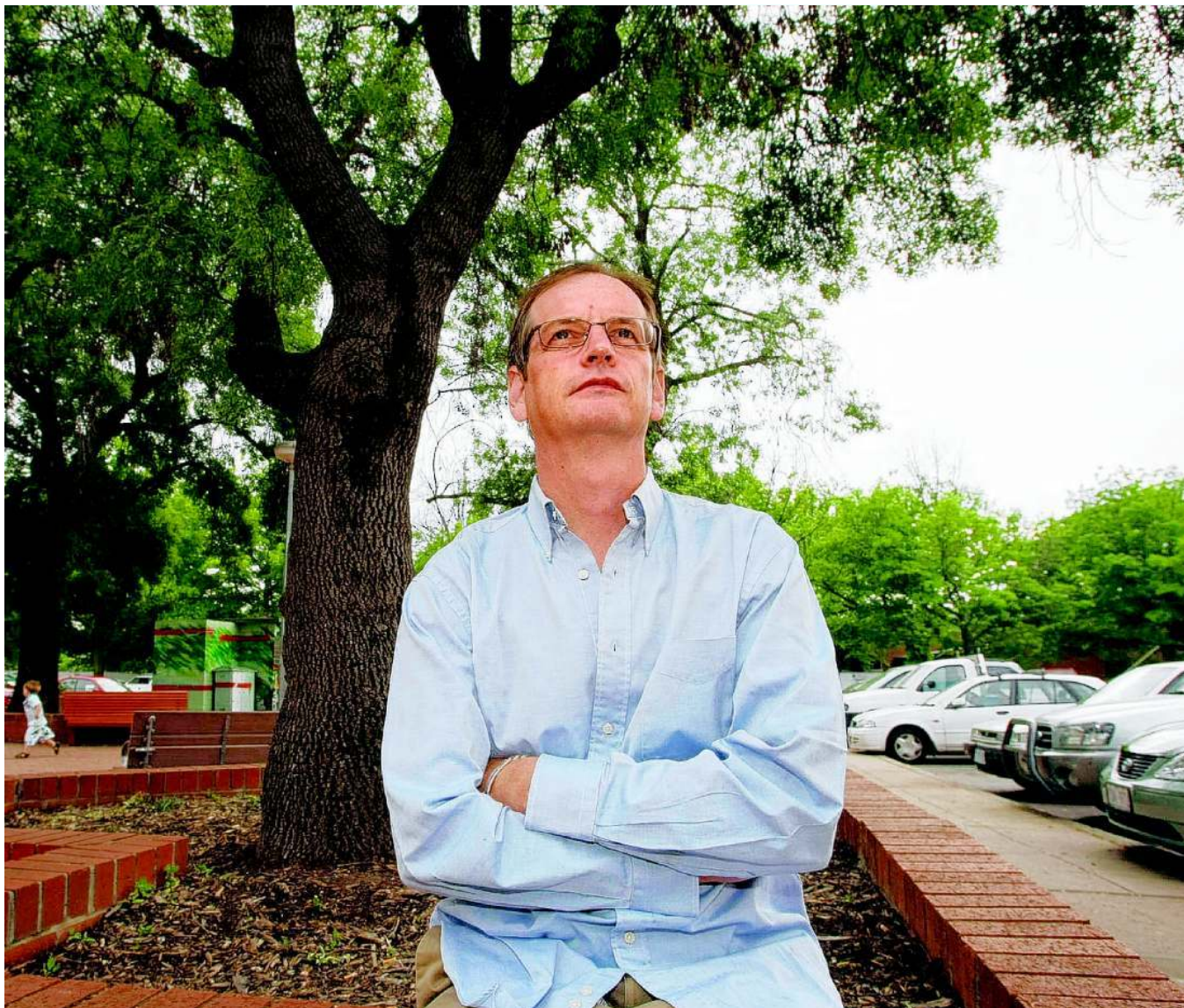
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