

Senator FORSHAW (New South Wales) (5.42 pm)—What an amazing contribution from Senator Joyce on this matter of public importance. He has just put forward in the Senate, which is being broadcast at the moment, the proposition that there is a huge conspiracy by the Rudd government to censor debate in this country. He has just acknowledged that proposition. That claim is contained in the matter of public importance today: ‘The Rudd government’s censorship of the CSIRO.’ That claim only has to be stated by Senator Joyce to be refuted. It really does not deserve an argument or a debate. If there is one person in this country and in this parliament who has not drawn breath or shut up for months and months on the issue of climate change, the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme or the emissions trading scheme, it is Senator Joyce himself. He is now claiming that the Rudd government is censoring him and everybody else. What a ridiculous proposition to advance.

If you want to see some examples of censorship by government in the recent history of this country, go back and have a look at what happened during the ‘children overboard’ inquiry when ministerial advisers, in a special unit established by the then Prime Minister John Howard, were intimately involved—

Senator Jacinta Collins—With Defence.

Senator FORSHAW—with Defence, as Senator Collins, who did such a sterling job on that committee, reminds me, in some of the misleading statements and downright lies that were told to the Australian public at that time. The then Howard government refused to allow those ministerial advisers to give

evidence before a committee. That is what I call censorship.

If you are going to make a claim about censorship, you have to have some hard evidence. I have not heard one skerrick of evidence today that the Rudd government has, according to this supposed matter of public importance, engaged in censorship. In fact, the evidence is quite to the contrary. I must note also that Senator Abetz in his opening speech, with all his usual flourish, hyperbole and exaggeration, did actually note that the CSIRO was established by the Bruce government in 1926. I do pay credit to Prime Minister Stanley Bruce. It was a significant thing that he did. The other significant thing he did, of course, was lose his seat, just as the previous Prime Minister did in the election two years ago.

I am very pleased to be able to participate in this debate today, and I wish I had more time because over the years I have had a fair amount of contact with the CSIRO. In my years working as an official of the Australian Workers Union, and eventually as general secretary of that union, I had, on a number of occasions, reason to consult the CSIRO. I did so because our union had significant coverage in the agricultural and mining sectors, and I always found them to be first-class people, scientists and researchers. They provided independent advice to us and certainly, I am sure, to the National Farmers Federation, on important issues to do with those industries.

I also had the great privilege—but only for about four months, I think—of serving on the board of the CSIRO. I was appointed in January 1994 as the board's ACTU representative. I had to resign before I took up my seat in the Senate in May 1994 to fill a casual vacancy. During that short time I had the great privilege to meet people such as Professor Adrienne Clarke, who was the chair of

the CSIRO, and that eminent internationally recognised medical expert Dr Gus Nossal, a man who has done so much for this country. I believe the independence of the CSIRO board that I saw in action at the time still remains today, and I actually believe it has been enhanced by current minister Kim Carr and the Rudd government.

I have also had the opportunity to see the work being performed over many years at the facilities the CSIRO has at Lucas Heights. A lot of people do not realise that Lucas Heights is not just a nuclear reactor. It has a significant CSIRO presence. So that is another connection. Finally, I invite people to Google the name Joseph M. Forshaw. They might find something interesting about the CSIRO there. That is not me; it is another Forshaw.

But I want to get on to this debate—

Senator Ian Macdonald—If it was a scientific paper, it wouldn't be you, Michael!

Senator FORSHAW—If you Google it, you will find something about the world-class researchers and specialists that the CSIRO has produced. My colleague Senator Hurley referred to how the current government has acted to safeguard research freedom in many ways, particularly in restoring the autonomy of the Australian Research Council by appointing an expert stakeholder group to advise it on strategy and policy. We have improved the whole process of Australian Research Council grants. We do not interfere and stand over and reject grant applications and then not publish the reasons why, as did former minister and opposition leader Brendan Nelson. In 2004 and 2005, for instance, he secretly vetoed 10 research proposals which had been judged worthy of support by independent peer reviewers. That was the record of that government. Dr Nelson did not publish the reasons why. Minister Carr has made it absolutely abundantly clear

that we will have an open policy when it comes to the awarding of research grants.

Getting on particularly to the CSIRO, the government has introduced charters for our public research agencies, including the CSIRO. These charters guarantee the agencies' right to pursue lines of inquiry, publish results and participate in public debate without political interference. These charters provide a framework for the civic engagement that we consider one of the research community's core responsibilities. They set out not only the rights but also the responsibilities of the agencies and agency researchers. And each of these charters, including that of the CSIRO, affirms the contestability of ideas, supports open communication of research findings, encourages debate on research issues of public interest, recognises the role of individual researchers in the conversation, honours the independence of public research agencies in their research activities and acknowledges the government's responsibility for formulating and implementing policy.

When it comes to the specific issue of Dr Clive Spash, I reiterate that the government has played absolutely no role in the discussions between the CSIRO and Dr Clive Spash. This is entirely a matter for CSIRO management.

Senator Milne interjecting—

Senator FORSHAW—Senator Milne is interjecting, but most of Senator Milne's contribution was actually directed at her complaints about CSIRO management. I remind the Senate that the issue of public importance before us is this allegation of censorship by the Rudd government, and I repeat what I just said: the government has played absolutely no role in the discussions between the CSIRO and Dr Clive Spash.

Senator Milne interjecting—

Senator FORSHAW—Mr Acting Deputy President Ryan, I listened to the other speak-

ers in silence. I would appreciate the same courtesy.

The notion of peer review is central to the research enterprise. Researchers test the quality and validity of their work by submitting it for critical assessment by their peers. The CSIRO has its own internal peer review processes. These processes have been established to maintain the standards of excellence that have made the CSIRO an international research icon, and they have been established to protect the CSIRO board. In conclusion, Dr Spash's paper is one of many produced by CSIRO researchers on the pros and cons of emissions trading. There is nothing unusual about it. And it is hardly surprising when you remember that the CSIRO leads the world in the science of climate change, as it does in so many other areas.