

PM with Mark Colvin

Monday to Friday from 6:10pm on ABC Local Radio and 5:00pm on Radio National.

Dumped CSIRO professor calls for Senate inquiry

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MARK COLVIN: A professor who lost his job in a free speech row with the CSIRO is calling for a Senate inquiry into the way he says the organisation is interfering with free scientific debate.

Clive Spash is now Professor at the Department of International Environment and Development Studies at Norway's University of Life Sciences.

But until last year he worked for the CSIRO.

Then he got into a fight with the organisation over a paper he wrote called *The Brave New World of Carbon Trading*.

It argued that cap and trade policies like the Government's emissions trading scheme were fundamentally flawed.

The dispute ended with the CSIRO saying Professor Spash couldn't publish his paper, even though it had been peer reviewed and cleared for publication in an international journal.

Clive Spash told me today he was angry at the way the Science Minister Kim Carr had quoted selectively to a Senate committee from what he says was a confidential peer review report.

CLIVE SPASH: Senator Carr read out statements from a confidential peer review report, a peer review report which is anonymous and meant to be double blind review, it's not meant to be released. This report must have been passed on to him by senior CSIRO management.

It also means that Senator Carr, who's made public policy statements that he supports scientific peer review, by criticising my paper for low quality after it has been through peer review, is now apparently violating the peer review process.

MARK COLVIN: So how did that come about do you think?

CLIVE SPASH: I'm not sure. Presumably the CSIRO management have passed on a confidential report to the Senator, who has then read bits of it out in front of the Estimates Committee.

MARK COLVIN: Do you dispute the report altogether?

CLIVE SPASH: No I think that the report is valid. It was a report on a very early draft of my paper and it's the whole point of peer review process. Comments are meant to be taken on board by authors so they can improve the paper, which is what I did.

MARK COLVIN: So you changed it after these comments?

CLIVE SPASH: Yes I did, yes, that's the point of the peer review process.

MARK COLVIN: And Senator Carr's comments don't reflect the changes?

CLIVE SPASH: Senator Carr implied that this was comment on the final draft of the paper; ignored the

fact that I had answered all the referee's comments. Without answering the referee's comments and writing to the editor the paper wouldn't have been accepted.

MARK COLVIN: Did you think that there was any restriction on you doing scientific reporting when you were an employee of the CSIRO?

CLIVE SPASH: I should make clear from the start that I'm an economist and there seems to be some confusion about the terms of the scientist versus social scientist. My area of work and the area of work I was employed to engage in is public policy on environmental issues.

So if I was employed by the CSIRO to do that job, I have no problem with publishing the type of work I was doing.

MARK COLVIN: So your understanding was that you were not in the position of say a public servant in a minister's department who's really gagged from speaking publicly?

CLIVE SPASH: Oh certainly not. When I was employed I was told that I would have a free remit. I was employed as a science leader to do blue skies thinking. The whole point of my position was to actually push the boundaries for the CSIRO.

MARK COLVIN: They have a policy on public comment apparently which says: "as representatives of CSIRO staff should avoid making direct comment for or against government or opposition policy". That seems to be in direct contradiction to having you as a blue sky thinker as you call it.

CLIVE SPASH: I think they've certainly got themselves into a total mess both with their public policy statements and also their charter signed with the Minister. It seems impossible for the CSIRO to conduct research engaging on public policy issues and yet maintain a statement which prevents them from doing that.

MARK COLVIN: So you would see a CSIRO employee in your position as, closer for instance, to an employee of the ABC who's actually employed to talk about public policy?

CLIVE SPASH: Yes, or you could say a university professor. That's what I was before, I was a research professor who has the freedom to speak and engage on any issue and to be judged by their peers on the validity and quality of their work.

MARK COLVIN: But a university professor isn't paid to give evidence directly to the government.

CLIVE SPASH: No but they do actually feed into public inquiries, write reports for government agencies. I was for ten years doing research in Europe which directly fed into public policy in the European Commission.

MARK COLVIN: And you never had anything like this there?

CLIVE SPASH: Never.

MARK COLVIN: So what do you think it was about your paper that they wanted to suppress?

CLIVE SPASH: The paper I was told was politically sensitive. Presumably this relates to the fact that the emissions trading scheme was going through the Senate and when I first started the paper and it was first submitted in February 2009 the issue looked like it wasn't going to be problematic.

By the time the Senate had rejected the emissions trading scheme for the first round, suddenly everything became much more politically sensitive.

I think the main point is that I'm arguing in general terms about emissions trading schemes and their problems which cannot be redesigned. Most economists are arguing that you can redesign emissions trading schemes.

MARK COLVIN: What are they?

CLIVE SPASH: The problems? Economists assume emissions trading is the most efficient approach to regulating greenhouse gasses. In actual fact this is built around a myth of market efficiency. In the economist's model there's no oligopolies or monopolies or power interests and there's no real means of addressing the relationship between very powerful companies and the government.

When you then go for a system which is based around the model of competition, and competition doesn't exist, you don't get the market efficiency that you're claiming.

Also there's problems then with the way in which compensation is negotiated, producing massive wealth transfers to the polluters; so rather than having a polluter pays principle, you have a polluter gets paid principle.

MARK COLVIN: If you're right, what should the Government be doing instead?

CLIVE SPASH: The whole issue around climate change is really about the carbon and fossil fuel economy at its heart and it requires fundamental changes in the way that we run our economy.

I would advocate certainly things like simple taxation, direct regulation, investment in alternative energy, these sorts of things.

MARK COLVIN: A carbon tax?

CLIVE SPASH: Yes a carbon tax but carbon is only part of the problem. At the end of the day we need fundamental behavioural change; we need the transition of the economy and the infrastructure...

MARK COLVIN: That makes it very clear that you're not among the climate sceptics.

CLIVE SPASH: No and I never have been.

MARK COLVIN: What do you think of the way that the debate has been moving?

CLIVE SPASH: I think that the debate has gone backwards 30 years. I've been working on pollution issues for almost 30 years myself and I would say that we got to a point at the end of the 1980s where climate change was being taken very seriously and it was just before the IPCC was set up.

And people were talking about the need for 20 or 30 per cent emissions reductions on 1980 levels. We're now talking about five to ten per cent reductions on 2000 levels.

MARK COLVIN: Professor Clive Spash, formerly of the CSIRO, now with a University in Norway. You can hear a longer version of the interview on our website from this evening.

On Professor Spash's claims about the treatment of his paper, the office of the Science Minister Kim Carr said tonight: "Clive Spash may have made some revisions but the revisions did not address all the concerns of the reviewer and still failed to meet the standards of quality required of a CSIRO paper".

And the Senate debate on the Government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme has been dragged out even further with confirmation today that the bill will not be debated until May.

The Government tried to overturn this week's vote to delay consideration of the legislation till Budget week, but didn't get the numbers.