

By Dr Gerd Winter

Senator Kim Carr
MINISTER FOR INNOVATION, INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

Who is Kim Carr?

The history of science in Australia is a tale of great potential marred by a lack of industry infrastructure capable of developing the ideas and discoveries generated by Australian scientists. It is also marked by the lack of a cohesive political strategy to boost the awareness in the public eye for what scientific research has to offer. A string of ministers, including the long-serving and popular Barry Jones, have struggled to bring science into the limelight within junior portfolios. The missing clout of science research in cabinet was felt in economically difficult times with severe funding cuts to the public research sector.

There is now widespread consensus, however, that Australia has to do more to profit from its high quality science research. In addition, science has experienced a boost in profile generated by issues such as climate change, water resources and energy. Australia has now a federal Ministry for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research implying an integration of science, technology and industry policy within a conceptual framework of innovation.

The ministry is led by the Victorian Senator Kim Carr. Known as a leading figure in the Victorian Socialist-left faction, the inclusion of Carr in the self-proclaimed fiscally conservative Rudd Cabinet may have come as a surprise to some. However, Carr is well versed with the issues of science and industry, having already been Shadow Minister with this portfolio under Latham. Since entering the Senate in 1993 he has engaged in policy issues concerning education, science and, in particular, manufacturing. "Coming from Victoria these are bread and butter issues for Labor politicians," says Carr, who comes from a working class background. "My father was a boilermaker and I was brought up to value the creativity of skilled labour."

He joined the Labor party as a 20 year-old and then worked for more than 10 years as a secondary school teacher at the former Glenroy Technical School in the northern suburbs of Melbourne; an area that since the early 80s has experienced a marked decline in the manufacturing industry, and in its wake high levels of unemployment.

In 1988 he left teaching and became policy analyst and advisor to the then Victorian Minister for Conservation, Forest and Lands, and Minister for Education, (and later Premier of Victoria), Joan Kirner. He returned briefly to teaching following Kirner's election loss to Jeff Kennet in 1992. A window of opportunity back into politics opened again when John Button retired in the Senate, after serving a decade in the Hawke government as Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce. Carr now holds a similar portfolio with the very notable difference of having additional responsibility for University research.

One who knows Kim Carr well is Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja who entered the Senate in 1995 as the Democrat's spokesperson for Science, Research and Higher Education. She and Carr have since worked on very similar portfolio issues. "I think he is genuinely passionate about innovation and about industry and he genuinely believes education and research is an investment not a cost," she says of Carr.

Particularly when it comes to industry policy, however, Stott Despoja says his reputation for more traditional Labor views could put Carr at odds with some areas of the modern-reformist Rudd Government. But referring to the announced review of the national innovation system she

also sees a great opportunity for him to "merge that modern and old school" in what she believes is a necessary reform. She expects Carr's approach will be inclusive across business, industry, science and research and she hopes, given the importance of the area for Australia's future, that this will include members of other parties, notably the opposition.

He has moved fast in laying out a series of initiatives which go beyond a mere makeover of the current R&D system with some efficiency gains. Carr wants a broad change in the culture of science in this country with 'the public good' his overriding objective. "I seek a change in the relationship between our research agencies, our universities and the private sector. I am seeking a change in the attitude of researchers towards one another. I am seeking higher levels of collaboration. And I encourage scientists to assist me to develop an environment which creates a culture of innovation."

He sees civic engagement as a core function of university scientists. "Universities are as much at home with the world of business as at home with the world of civil society," he says, but also points out that there are direct benefits for the research sector. "If the public knows the value of research work that is being undertaken then it is more likely that they have confidence and are more sympathetic to resources being spent to enhance our capacity to meet the fundamental challenges facing us."

He sees healthy debate as part of the process, which the announced charters of debate will assist by defining the relationship between government and research agencies. But he emphasises that "this is not a one way street, this is about debate not handing down tablets in stone."

The 'public good' is also the basis of the initiated review of the National Innovation System, which, he says, will go beyond the creation of new products, new markets and new processes within the enterprise system, beyond a narrow commercial definition of innovation. He heavily criticises the commercial focus of his predecessors, particularly in regard to the CRCs. "This was an anathema to what the program was all about" he says. "Innovation is not about turning our back on investment support, nor is it about turning our back on public good research... Research on something like the Cane Toad is unlikely to be funded by the private sector but it is a matter of major public importance."

As Stott Despoja puts it, "He is driven by some very clear philosophies and indeed ideologies and I don't think he'd shy away from it, he would be quite proud about having some strong traditional Labor views."

There may be challenges ahead for Carr that relate to his very active role in Senate estimate hearings. An outspoken critic of the organisational reforms towards revenue-based research, which the CSIRO undertook in early 2000, he used senate estimate hearings to persistently grill the CSIRO leadership, notably the current chief executive, Dr Geoff Garret, a management he will now have to work with as a science minister.

"Kim has a forensic eye for detail and he can be extremely passionate about issues, and when you are that passionate and you expose flaws in the system you can sometimes alienate individuals and groups, and that can be seen as going too far," says Stott-Despoja.

