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Innovation post budget: a script unchanged

Once heard it said that when a new government comes in, the seats in Parliament change but the script stays the same.

The Rudd Government went to the election as the party of the future – touting an ‘education revolution’; promising to act on climate change; and unwilling to countenance an Australia that “...did not make things anymore”.

Thus, its first Budget should have focused on setting up Australia to meet future challenges with innovative solutions. Instead, it adopted a confused message.

Universities will gain an injection of funding for infrastructure – namely, the \$11 billion Education Investment Fund (EIF) and the \$500 million Renewal Fund. These were a pleasant surprise and should help universities to pare back the sector-wide \$2 billion backlog in deferred maintenance. Allowing research institutions to access the EIF is also a good move.

On the other side of the ledger, the axing of the \$700 million Commercial Ready Program and cuts of more than \$60 million to the CSIRO are ill-timed, with the Expert Panel for the Review of the National Innovation System yet to even deliver its Green Paper.

If the Panel were to praise the effect of Commercial Ready, the Government would be in an awful pickle. The cynic in me suggests that this will not be allowed to happen.

Labor went to the last election talking about the need to reduce red tape and streamline the bewildering array of support for innovation – the position of the Australian Democrats also – but they have now created six new programs. Yet more evidence of a confused commentary.



Photo: Daniel Horne

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There are times when the Government needs to tighten the proverbial belt but research and innovation is one of the last areas that should be cut. It lays the groundwork for future economic, environmental and social wellbeing.

The National Innovation Review may result in fundamental and long-term improvement in our support for innovation. So far though, the script has not changed that much.

Other Reactions:

On innovation:

Professor Kurt Lambeck, *president of Australian Academy of Science:*
 “As promised, the budget focussed on election promises made and as a result we should not have been surprised that the words science and technology were barely mentioned. But some recognition that infrastructure extends beyond ports, roads and rail, that the development of the technologies to underpin the requirements of the future also has been much neglected would have made our wait for the innovation revolution more bearable.”

On CSIRO cuts and agricultural science:

John Chapman, *President Australian Society of Horticultural Science:*
 “As food security and rising fuel prices are becoming critical issues, only strategic investment in research and development will provide long-term solutions. Horticulture scientists around Australia are working passionately to provide affordable food and amenity horticulture on behalf of their clients, the growing and marketing supply chain, and ultimately the consumer.

This \$12 billion industry is constantly challenged by issues including access to irrigation, sustainable management of pests and diseases, climate change and access to markets. For Australia’s premier research organisation [CSIRO] to vacate research in horticulture is extremely disappointing. This decision will put further pressure on state government and private providers.

Countries that turn their back on R&D are condemning their economies to the dark ages.”

On education:

Professor Stuart Cunningham, *president of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS):*

“The Government has honoured and funded its pre-election commitments on fellowships and scholarships, doubling the number of postgraduate scholarships available to higher degree research students by 2012. Should some of this additional funding have been used to increase the value of the PhD scholarship? Analysis by CHASS and CAPA show that in 1992 the scholarship was 44% of average weekly earnings, but today it is 34%. This year the scholarship dropped below the Henderson Poverty Line.”

On medical research:

Rebecca James, *chief executive officer of Research Australia.*

“The Federal Government’s \$10 billion fund to support investment in hospitals, health care technology and medical research is an important first step in investing in the future health of Australia. The renewed commitment to a growth in funding for the National Health and Medical Research Council is welcomed. ... the sector is looking to a doubling of funding for the NHMRC from 2010 to maintain Australia’s leading edge in health and medical research.”

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