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## Business wheels out big guns in war with science

Tony Abbott has begun undermining scientists' defences, writes Sharon Beder.

By **Sharon Beder**

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There is an undeclared war going on between business and science, and the Abbott government has made it clear that it prefers to side with business.

Scientists investigate, document and publish the impacts that many business activities are having on humans and the environment, and it is the job of government to regulate to prevent and mitigate those impacts. Yet increasingly business groups, business leaders, a battalion of corporate-funded think tanks and front groups and a tiny minority of corporate-funded token scientists are doing their best to discredit those scientists so as to avoid government regulation.



Tim Flannery's Climate Change Commission is one of many expert advisory committees to be axed by the Abbott government. GENE RAMIREZ

The Abbott government has dispensed with the position of science minister (the first time since it was created in 1931), putting science into the portfolio of Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane. This government can only see science as a service to industry. According to the Australian Academy of Science, long-term funding for scientific research is declining, putting scientific facilities at risk.

The public service jobs freeze threatened almost a quarter of the CSIRO's staff, including 1400 scientists and researchers. The government has also axed several expert advisory committees, including the Climate Change Commission, that were there to provide scientific advice to government. Instead the government favours business advisers over science advisers.

Maurice Newman, chairman of the Prime Minister's new Business Advisory Council, has labelled climate change a scientific delusion and dismissed the research of thousands of scientists represented by the Australian Academy of Science, the Royal Society of London, the US National Academy of Sciences and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, saying the IPCC "resorts to dishonesty and deceit". Newman's qualifications for being Tony Abbott's "suppository of all wisdom" on climate change, and knowing better than the scientists who have devoted their careers to studying climate change, seems to be his career in stockbroking and investment banking and the many government appointments he has attained since he retired as chairman of Deutsche Bank.

According to *Guardian* sources, Newman's influence is substantial - "he is meeting Abbott at least once a week" and a speech in which he attacked the idea of climate change and renewable energy "was drafted in close consultation with the PM and his office".

Last October, Environment Minister Greg Hunt trumped scientists and the head of the United Nations' climate negotiations, who were claiming that there was a link between climate change and the increased risk of high-intensity bushfires, with his reading of Wikipedia that informed him that bushfires have often occurred during hot weather in Australia since before European settlement.

The war between business and science started with skirmishes last century with notable disputes over the health effects of tobacco and asbestos. The attack by chemical companies on scientist and author Rachel Carson, who warned of the dangers of pesticides in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, was the first of a series of notable battles.

When the rise of the environment movement in the 1960s and '70s led to new forms of comprehensive environmental legislation such as clean air and clean water acts and the establishment of environmental regulatory agencies, the battles escalated. In response, businesses began to consolidate forces in a way that was unprecedented, building coalitions and alliances and putting aside competitive rivalries. With the help of conservative think tanks and specially created front groups that campaigned against environmental and health regulations, corporations managed to achieve a virtual moratorium on new environmental legislation in many countries throughout the late 1970s and most of the 1980s.

However, towards the end of the 1980s public concern about the environment rose again, reinforced by scientific discoveries regarding phenomena such as ozone depletion and global warming. With their activist machinery already in place, corporations were able to take advantage of the new PR techniques and information technologies available for raising money, building coalitions, manipulating public opinion and lobbying politicians.

Today the business war against science is a billion-dollar industry. With so much money behind it, weak-minded politicians or those with a vested interest seem more than willing to ignore science and the public interest so as to benefit the short-term interests of business.

But the worm may have turned at last. Angry scientists are no longer content to let self-appointed environmental campaigners carry their banners for them. Climate scientists are increasingly prepared to take the necessary risks to career and reputation by jumping into public debates to slap down the ignorant assertions of climate change deniers.

The war is on in Australia - science versus business. It is a fight that science has to win in the long run - if only because the survival of civilisation relies more on true knowledge than surplus wealth.

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