Australian Government

Chief Scientist

DR ALAN FINKEL AO

Senate Estimates Opening Statement

******** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *******

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CANBERRA

I thank the Chair and the Committee for accommodating me in this time slot, acknowledging that I was scheduled to appear tomorrow but must be interstate at an all-day board meeting of a government agency.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to meet with the Committee at the outset of my term.

Any national office is a profound responsibility. My commission comes with enormous opportunity. I want to make Australia work for science, and science work for Australia.

My experience convinces me that we can be the beneficiaries of our remarkable times.

By background, I am an engineer, migrating into neuroscience. As a PhD student and postdoctoral research fellow, I developed new methods to measure electrical signals in individual brain cells.

When I finished my research fellowship in 1982, I saw an opportunity to manufacture instruments that other scientists could use to advance their research. I left Australia for Silicon Valley, California, with my wife, a small amount of cash and a determination to do something different.

In 1983 my company was a one-man operation called Axon Instruments. In 2000 it was listed on the Australian stock exchange; and four years later it was purchased by a US public company.

I shifted my attention back to Australia, determined to share what I had learned: about science, about business, and about the opportunities to be made when the two combine.

Since that time I have worked right across the science and innovation community.

I co-founded Cosmos magazine to share my passion for high-quality science journalism. I have helped to progress new technologies as a company director, and supported science education as a mentor and philanthropist.

I have also been an active contributor to the policy debate, as:

- a Member of the Research Infrastructure Review Panel led by Mr Phillip Clark
- Chancellor of Monash University; and
- President of the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering.

I have approached every role in the firm belief that we can always make more of our resources than we think we can today.

The challenge is to reach for the distant targets, in a series of measured steps: conducting research, managing risk, and making space for ingenuity and innovation.

I have found this mindset to be as helpful in the complex challenges of policy, as it is in building a business or conducting scientific research.

This will be my approach to the significant items on my agenda.

I would highlight in particular:

- Chairing the expert group which will map our national science and research infrastructure needs.

- Deputy chairing Innovation and Science Australia as, among other tasks, it develops the 15 year plan for Australian Government investment, and reviews our research and development tax incentives.

- And leading key Commonwealth Science Council projects, to inform us about our progress against the National Science and Research Priorities and to identify our most transformational research.

The importance of these responsibilities has been underscored in my mind by the recent conversation on the priorities of the CSIRO.

As the Committee will be aware, the CEO of the CSIRO announced last week a change of strategic direction that will affect programmes across the organisation, including climate research.

There is no question that Australia needs a continuous and highly effective commitment to climate science, both to meet our national needs and to fulfil our international commitments.

Our contribution is particularly important in light of our central role in understanding the climate of the Southern Hemisphere.

It is reflected in the National Science and Research Priorities, one of which specifically commits us to:

Build Australia's capacity to respond to environmental change and integrate research outcomes from biological, physical, social and economic systems.

Australian climate research is a broad activity across many institutions and many disciplines including science, engineering, humanities and social sciences. It relies on collaboration and it demands a national approach.

Our most immediate national concern must be to ensure that long-term data collections will be funded and staffed; and that the climate modelling capabilities developed by the CSIRO will continue to be made available for scientists to use and refine.

I am pleased that the CSIRO has this week committed to working with stakeholders to develop a transition plan to maintain this capacity.

More broadly, we need to approach all our research capabilities as a nation with limited resources and significant needs. This includes appropriate planning for the skilled and qualified people who are the core of our national research endeavour.

It will be my priority in the three years ahead to embed this approach in the frameworks that underpin Australian science.

It will also be my particular mission to celebrate Australian successes.

To grasp the breadth of our potential, we need to hear about our achievements. And we need to grasp that potential to answer so many of our critical questions:

- How do we put in place new research infrastructure to fuel superb science and innovation for decades to come?

- How do we develop a workforce that is literate in science, skilled in technology and excited by innovation?

- How do we ensure rewarding jobs in a more automated world?

I know that interest in these topics is widely shared across the Government and the Parliament; and I look forward to working with you in the years ahead.

My role comes with high expectations. I assure you that I approach them with energy, ambition and commitment.

Thank you