8 June 2007

The Hon John Howard MP
Prime Minister
PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Dear Prime Minister

The humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia

The humanities, arts and social sciences make a major contribution to the social and economic development of Australia. In the three years since our Council was formed, it has become clear to us that this contribution can be overlooked in comparison to that of the natural sciences. I am writing today to suggest ways in which Australia could gain greater benefit from the work of our sectors. The suggestions are low cost, but through their symbolic significance have the capacity to harness Australian creativity and innovation more effectively.

I attach a short paper that sets out our suggestions. It argues that the time has come to reconsider two of the most significant and relatively long-standing mechanisms your Government has for advising on science and innovation policy - the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, and the position of Chief Scientist. We suggest broadening their mandate to advise on all aspects of innovation, whether related to the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the arts and humanities. Many of the most significant issues Australia faces need contributions from all disciplines if solutions are to be found.

The paper suggests specific changes to roles, nomenclature, appointments and composition to reflect such a wider remit. It makes some further suggestions, which would similarly symbolize a Government commitment to taking a much broader view of research and innovation in the national interest. The Productivity Commission's recent report on Public Support for Science and Innovation broke new ground in supporting such a broader approach.

Our sector is keen to maximise its contribution to Australia's national goals. We believe there are ways that governments could gain more from the potential of the humanities, arts and social sciences, by reconsidering some of its current institutions and settings. CHASS would be willing to participate in any such re-consideration.

I have sent a copy of this letter to the Minister for Education Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP.

Yours sincerely

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President

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The humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia
Reviewing Advisory Mechanisms for research and innovation

Two of the most significant institutions which act as bridges between the Government and the research community are the Prime Minister Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC), and the Chief Scientist. Both institutions have made important contributions to the progress of Australia. PMSEIC in particular has gained in significance from the strong support and personal interest of the Prime Minister.

CHASS suggests it is now appropriate to look again at these institutions in the light of modern circumstances, to see if there are ways they could be strengthened and improved. The first Chief Scientist was appointed in 1989, and PMSEIC is approaching its tenth anniversary (although the first national science councils date from the mid-seventies). The world has changed significantly since their inception. One change has been a growing awareness of the contribution of the sector CHASS represents, the humanities, arts and social sciences.

For instance, the recent review of the Productivity Commission "Public Support for Science and Innovation" changed its view during the course of its inquiry in 2006-07. In the initial paper setting out the scope of the report, the Commission said:

> "*The focus is thus on the physical and biological sciences, including engineering, with the social sciences (and the arts and humanities) excluded except to the extent they are relevant to innovation*."

CHASS (and others) argued that the humanities, arts and social sciences were in fact highly relevant to innovation. We said in our initial submission:

> *The HASS sector contributes in a number of ways: not just as a supporting act to science; but also as an equal partner with science, technology, engineering and medicine in collaborative projects; and in the new post smoke-stack era of industry, as innovators in their own right. A study aiming to "cover all key elements in the innovation system" should explicitly recognise the HASS contribution.*

The Productivity Commission accepted the validity of this argument, and the final report read:

> *The study clearly covers the physical, biological and mathematical sciences, including engineering. The humanities and social sciences are also included in the scope of this study as they are increasingly seen as part of the sciences, such as by the European Science Foundation. … (In this, the Commission has widened its definition since the draft report.) These disciplines share the evidence-based approaches of other sciences. They may have their own direct beneficial impacts, as in applications in public health, or they may add value by increasing the productive use of the physical sciences within the innovation system*[1]*.*

[1] *Public support for Science and Innovation, Productivity Commission Research Report, 9 March 2007 p49*

One implication is the need to re-examine the role and composition of the two institutions mentioned above, PMSEIC and the Chief Scientist. These matters need detailed consideration, but CHASS would like to suggest three starting points.

The first relates to the role of the Chief Scientist. The DEST website sets out the role and responsibilities of the Chief Scientist as follows:

> *The Office of the Chief Scientist provides information and advice on policy issues, research and administrative support for the Chief Scientist and the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council.*
>
> *The Office supports the Chief Scientist in his engagement with the research and industry communities, learned societies, and other portfolios and governments, which enables his comprehensive and timely advice to Government on a wide range of scientific and technological issues of importance to Australia. (From: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/science_innovation/office_of_the_chief_scientist/*

CHASS recognises and respects the important role played by this office, but there is some confusion about the extent of its responsibilities. For instance, does the Chief Scientist have any responsibility for matters emerging from the humanities, arts and social sciences? If this is not the case, it would be challenging to provide "comprehensive and timely advice" on the full range of issues of importance to Australia.

Many of the most significant issues in Australia need contributions from all disciplines if solutions are to be found:

> *Some of the most exciting research and education today has little regard for traditional disciplinary boundaries. For example, research to help Australia's ageing population profile brings together medical science, basic biology, engineering, social science and arts and humanities.*
>
> *The world is turning to multi-disciplinary collaborations to deal with the big issues we face, critical problems such as water shortages, global climate change and threats to national security, human health and economic sustainability. No single discipline has all the answers: we need to provide the flexibility to ensure that the research and education community can pursue investigations across the whole landscape, regardless of discipline or approach.*[2]

(This extract is from a report published by CHASS and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training. It is currently with your Minister for consideration.)

CHASS believes the role of the Chief Scientist should be redefined so the brief and the title reflect the breadth of that office in providing "comprehensive and timely advice" to Government. This new consideration of the position would reflect the demands of a modern economy and modern society have moved since then.

The newly refined position could include the following components:

- a new Office of Innovation in the Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet
- the head of this Office would replace the chief Scientist (and could be called the CEO, Office of Innovation)

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[2] *Collaborating across the sectors: the relationships between the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) and science, technology engineering and medicine (STEM)*. CHASS Occasional paper 3, November 2006. p 7

- the new CEO position would be disciplinary-neutral

The CEO's position could be supported by deputy CEOs with disciplinary-specific expertise in the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) and science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) areas.

Our second broad suggestion is to refine PMSEIC to focus its activities more closely on innovation. This review of the terms of reference for the Council would include an examination of the non-Ministerial membership. It would provide an opportunity to consider a change of name to something like "the Innovation Council", to link it with the proposed Office of Innovation mentioned above.

The CHASS view is that the humanities, arts and social sciences are under-represented on a Council with the middle name "Innovation". HASS is central to innovation in modern economies, playing both independent and supportive roles, and as such should be strongly represented on a national council. A more even balance in disciplinary terms in non-Ministerial appointees would achieve this, a move away from the predominance of appointees from science, technology, engineering and medical disciplines.

CHASS also favours personal appointments rather than ex officio ones, on the grounds that this would bring the best qualified and most productive people to the fore. The proposed Council would have two primary roles: the effective harnessing of research outcomes to national needs, and the alerting of Government to over-the-horizon technologies and emerging threats that research might address.

The third matter is the current interpretation of the word "science" as employed in Government circles in Australia. This word can be used in either a narrow or broad sense. The narrow version includes only the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology etc); and the more inclusive interpretation allows "science" to include both the natural and social sciences. Australia tends to favour the former interpretation, where other countries and regions (such as the European Union) use the latter. The European Science Foundation, in fact, makes a specific statement to this effect in its literature.

The position in Australia is sometimes blurred when "science" is used as synonymous for the term "research". It can cause confusion on matters relating to both PMSEIC and the Chief Scientist, and raises questions: does the Chief Scientist have any responsibility for matters emerging from the humanities, arts and social sciences? Why is the Commonwealth Department named "Education, Science and Training" instead of "Education, RESEARCH and Training"?