

# Australian science minister demoted

Outgoing Kim Carr hailed as “one of the best”.

Cheryl Jones

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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard took Australian science leaders by surprise last week when she demoted her Science Minister, Kim Carr, to a non-cabinet position.

Carr has held the cabinet-level Innovation, Industry, Science and Research portfolio since Labor came to power in late 2007, and held, among others, the post of shadow science and research minister during the party's long period in opposition. He has now been given the Manufacturing and Defence Materiel portfolios in a move seen by some commentators as a power play by the prime minister as she struggles to hold on to leadership of the minority Labor government.

Gillard deposed former prime minister Kevin Rudd shortly before a national election last year, and speculation abounds that the revamped ministry is designed to fortify her against a possible challenge from him. Just how Carr's demotion would figure in this scenario is unclear. He is not giving media interviews about the reshuffle.

Science and research, including the government science agencies and university research, have been added to the tertiary education portfolio under Senator Chris Evans. The innovation and industry portfolios, meanwhile, have been added to the responsibilities of the climate-change minister, Greg Combet.

## Popular presence

Australia's science-policy experts acknowledge Carr's performance in the cabinet. He was successful in winning funds for his portfolio. He also reformed the R&D tax incentive programme to stimulate research and development in small- and medium-sized companies, and moved to rejuvenate Australia's ailing space programme. It was Carr who spearheaded the joint Australia–New Zealand bid to host the Square Kilometre Array, the world's biggest radio telescope.

“We were very lucky to have had Kim Carr as the minister in research and science,” says Michael Gallagher, executive director of the Group of Eight, the body representing Australia's leading universities.

He says that Carr grasped the subtleties of the national innovation system and the challenges unique to small economies such as Australia.

“He understood a few things that most ministers and most bureaucrats don't get,” Gallagher says. “The first is that there's no direct, immediate, linear relationship between research output and commercial innovation and employment. Losing Kim Carr means we're going to have to re-educate whoever is going to be around to get them to understand that the innovation system is more subtle, more indirect, more long-term and more haphazard than many assume.”

Glyn Davis, chairman of Universities Australia, the body representing Australia's 39 universities, says Carr would “easily rate as one of the best ministers ever to lead the research portfolio”.

Davis says that the university sector was happy about the reunion of higher education and research in the same portfolio, but disappointed about the separation of innovation from science. He adds that Evans has previously demonstrated a willingness to implement major reform. “I hope this continues in the new portfolio,” Davis says.



A. PORRITT/AAP/PA

Former science minister Kim Carr was well-liked by Australia's science community.