

## The Commercial Heavens: The New Australian Space Agency

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*Politicians have been clambering to the top extolling something that has yet to exist. Scientists are claiming a job boom that has yet to transpire. Much fantasy and speculation dominate the creation of Australia's Space Agency, an organisation that remains inchoate despite being launched on Monday by the appropriately named **Michaelia Cash**.*

Former CSIRO boss **Megan Clark** has [found herself](#) heading the zygotic agency.

"You ask yourself – why are we doing that? And it's really to improve the lives of all Australians and I think to inspire Australians about what Australia really can do in the space industry."

Space has been turned into patriotism, cash and incentives; and there is a sense that Australia has been lagging. No matter, suggests Andrew Dempster of the Australian Centre for Space Engineering Research – the time is ripe for celestial exploitation. "

It seems clear there is a real appetite on both sides of politics for an agency for our times, that embraces the excitement being generated by 'Space 2.0' – that is, commercial entities, low-cost access to space and avoiding some of the baggage of the older legacy agencies."

This point was more, rather than less iterated by Innovation Minister Cash, [who launched](#) the ASA in Perth on Monday with a disconcerting, grating enthusiasm that should have terrified scientists.

"Space technologies are not just about taking people to the moon, they open up opportunities for many industries, including communications, agriculture, mining, oil and gas."

The report from the [Expert Reference Group](#) behind Australia's Space Industry capability is every bit as enthusiastic as Cash, seeing space as having very terrestrial effects ("a key contributor to the growth and diversification of the Australian economy").

"No longer restricted to government agencies and budgets, space has become a fast-growing and fiercely competitive commercial sector".

This is a field of estimates and projections, of wistful glances at budgets, investments and outlays. Clark provides an elastic forecast: “We think we can add another 10 to 20 thousand jobs to 2030.” The Australian federal government put the value of the Australian space sector in 2015-2016 at \$3.94 billion. Of that, a dominant 80 percent of contributions came from the private sector.

Australia remains a curiosity in one fundamental respect: a country continent so ideally placed for observation yet indifferent historically to having its own agency, ever in the bosom of NASA and an annex of broader power goals. Subordination to other space programs has tended to be normal, most notably the role played during the Apollo 11 moon walk by such radio telescopes as “The Dish” at Parkes.

Now, money-greased collaboration is the watchword. Other agencies and entities are being sought. The market of competitors has swollen the field: the China National Space Administration, the Indian Space Research Organisation, and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, have made Australian entrepreneurs and officials envious and eager.

The head-over-heels delight that Australia is getting its own space agency has not masked that old problem with organisations of national prestige. Nothing is ever too big to be diminished by the pettiness of political dispute. Disputes and disagreements have arisen. Parochialism tails the scientist’s endeavour, and bureaucracy risks insinuating itself into the experiment and initiative.

Some cities and states feel more suited to host the bulk of the ASA’s incipient activities; sites are being fought over with playground brutishness. The premier of New South Wales, **Gladys Berejiklian**, [has dreams](#) of ASA being placed in precinct known as “the Aeropolis”, which will feed both her narrow understanding of science and tailored electoral ambitions.

“NSW has the dish (at Parkes) and we should be the home of space innovation.”

Clark [has pitched](#) for the national capital, Canberra, a point that has been seen as eminently sensible.

“We need to engage internationally and also to co-ordinate nationally and part of that activity (is) best to be centred on Canberra.”

Well noted, though the Australian capital has shown a certain tendency to outsource its public service jobs to other regions, a point that might risk a resource deficiency.

The last time a local Australian effort was made to supply administrative form to the exploitation of space came in the 1980s. The Australian Space Board remained a project in miniature, an office hiding within the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce. After ten years, it vanished with little trace, killed off by bureaucratic stasis and boredom.

Other centres – NASA, which runs 11 research centres, and the European Research Agency, which has nine, have eye-popping resources that the ASA can only dream of.

"This is not a model," [claims Alice Gorman](#), Director on the board of the Space Industry Association of Australia, "that is sustainable."

Despite the question of sustenance and sustainability, the picture now may well be different, though hardly in the broader name of science per se. The [Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#) has defence on its mind in Australia establishing "a sovereign space industry" to make the country "an active space power". The ASA also promises to be a mercantilist organisation for the skies more than the radical, insatiable discoverer of the galactic frontier. This is no time for scientific curiosity for its sake. Pocket books and bank balances rather than petri dishes are the order of the day.

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