

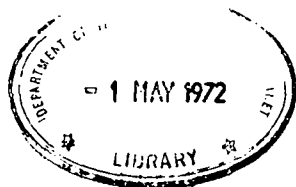
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY

Statement to the House of Representatives by the
Prime Minister (the Rt. Hon. William McMahon, C.H., M.P.,)

Thursday 27th April 1972

I rise to inform the House of new arrangements that the Government will make in relation to science and technology in Australia. These arrangements will involve the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Science and Technology and provision for an appropriate secretariat. The function of this Advisory Committee is to furnish co-ordinated advice on actions and policies that would assist in the alignment of our science and technology, to our national objectives.

Honourable Members will be aware of striking advances in science and technology over the past half-century. A few familiar examples come to mind - radar, antibiotics, the jet engine, immunology, satellite communications and latterly, space exploration - there are many others.



After World War II, it was recognised internationally that major investment in science, in education and in science-based activities would be a prominent feature of the future. Scientific research in all fields has therefore received increasing support from governments and as a consequence, science and technology in their totality have contributed enormously to the economic and social advancement and the well-being of many countries.

Australia has both contributed to and benefited from these advances. The Commonwealth Government has been involved in the development of science and technology in Australia virtually from the time of Federation, and has played a key role through the policies which it has developed over the years to meet the changing pattern of national needs and opportunities.

These policies comprehend the creation of a resource of skilled scientists and technologists, and the pursuit of rigorous programs of scientific research and technological development, both within the Government and outside - principally in the universities and in

industry. Some of these activities have been undertaken in partnership with the States.

The Commonwealth has encouraged and expanded the scientific and technological efforts of its own agencies such as the C.S.I.R.O., the Australian Atomic Energy Commission, and the Department of Supply. Moreover, the Commonwealth has developed schemes to provide financial support for science and technology outside of its own fields of immediate responsibility. For example, research of high scientific merit is supported financially through the Australian Research Grants Committee; industrial research and innovation are assisted through the Industrial Research and Development Grants Board, and scientific work in the fields of medicine and health services is supported through the National Health and Medical Research Council. One result of this support has been the emergence in fields such as radio astronomy and medicine, of institutions which have achieved international recognition and have become centres of excellence. The Government will continue to foster the development of such centres and in this context I remind the House of the Government's decision to establish an

Australian Institute of Marine Science which we trust in the fullness of time will achieve similar international recognition.

The Government has thus played, through its various policies and actions, a major role in bringing Australian science and technology to their present advanced state, and has, I believe, abundant reason to be proud of the record of Australian scientists in this regard, The Government will continue to play a major role in these fields.

The rapid, and at times spectacular, advance made by science and technology in recent years has brought with it a number of problems. For example, some research has become very expensive in terms of manpower, money and equipment. Indeed some fields require facilities which are beyond the resources of almost any single one of the developed nations - beyond the resources, that is, if the country concerned is to maintain balance among the competing claims on the public purse. As a consequence, countries have been compelled to make explicit choice from among its various scientific and technological projects and to

determine priorities for the allocation of resources. There is an increasing tendency therefore for countries to concentrate part of their resources on particular areas in which they have demonstrable need, expertise, or unique environmental opportunities. In addition, there is a growing tendency to avoid the national development of large and very expensive projects and to look towards the possibility of co-operation on an international basis.

Another problem of increasing concern to many countries, arises from the adverse effects which have been recognised as flowing from some applications of science and technology. I need not elaborate in detail on such matters as despoliation of national resources.

What I do want to emphasise is that the Government takes the view that, before deciding to support new areas of science and technology, it is mandatory not only to assess the potential benefits, but also to forecast possible undesirable results. Only the best advice that can be obtained for this purpose is good enough.

Australia has reached the stage where it becomes more important than ever to judge our priorities carefully because we cannot cover the whole field. We are therefore obliged to make decisions as to which of the demands should be satisfied. It may also be necessary to create opportunities for new scientific and technical developments so that specific national objectives can be achieved. We have thus two aims - to resolve the demands and promote areas outside of these demands. Neither can be neglected and a balance must be achieved.

The growth and complexity of science and technology, together with the emergence of problems such as those outlined have led other countries to establish formal machinery for providing to them expert advice on a co-ordinated basis. While the Government has been aware of these moves it has only reached its present position after careful consideration of the desirability for Australia to adopt similar procedures.

Up to the present time in developing policies for science and technology it has been our practice to seek advice through formal or

informal channels from those sources most able to assist. However, with the experience of other countries as a guide and the increasing range and complexity of the problems which we face it is now timely to change our approach.

After examination by the Minister for Education and Science of experience and developments overseas, and following discussions with leading industrialists, with the Australian Academy of Science and with senior Government scientists, the Government has decided to establish an Advisory Committee on Science and Technology.

I should perhaps point out to Honourable Members that the establishment of similar advisory committees in other countries and the problems tackled by them have led to the use of the term "science policy", the meaning of which is frequently misunderstood. Science policy in the sense in which it is generally accepted by governments implies a deliberate and coherent framework for the provision of advice on the size, structure, creativity and utilisation of scientific and technological research, as a basis for policy decisions on these matters.

The purpose of this framework, in the sense that I have described it, should be clearly understood, It is one of the means by which governments can be assisted in their considerations of the various factors which need to be taken into account in reaching decisions concerned with the attainment of national goals.

The primary function of the Committee to which I have referred and which will report to me through the Minister for Education and Science will be to make recommendations to the Government, on Australian efforts in civil science and technology. It will assess on a continuing basis Australian requirements, resources and potential in civil science and technology and will provide advice on these matters.

The Government intends that the Committee should make wide ranging and comprehensive assessments of the scientific and technological situation. It will advise on such facets as long term planning, new areas which are of importance to Australia, the priorities that should be assigned to specific

projects or areas of research, the means for improving efficiency in the use of resources and the effective development and utilisation of scientific and technological manpower.

The Committee will be empowered to undertake studies on its own initiative, in addition to providing advice on specific matters that are referred to it by the Government.

The Committee's interests will lie mainly in the fields of civil science and technology. It is not intended that it be concerned with questions of defence science except to the extent that these may be related to matters that fall in its own fields of primary concern. Nor is it intended that the Committee's activities extend into fields of medical research which are the responsibility of the National Health and Medical Research Council.

The Committee will have a membership of 11 distinguished persons with experience in manufacturing industry, primary industry, mining industry, commerce and finance and science. All members, including the Chairman, will serve

part-time and will be appointed for three year terms. Members of the Committee will be announced at an early date. Senior Commonwealth officers, including Permanent Heads, will not serve directly on the Committee, but will assist it as assessors and will be available to advise on specific matters within their areas of individual responsibility. It will be seen therefore as completely independent.

The Committee will consult with other relevant advisory bodies with a view to ensuring liaison on areas of mutual interest and to avoiding duplication of effort. It will submit an annual report which will be tabled in the Parliament.

The Committee will have difficult and long ranging tasks to perform and it is serviced by a competent and high level secretariat which, by the qualifications and experience of its members, will be able to provide the support which the Committee will need.

As I have already mentioned the Commonwealth over many years, has played a key role in the development and application of

science and technology in Australia. However, the Government recognises the important roles also played by State Governments, by industry, and by Universities. It therefore looks forward to their co-operation in the work of this Advisory Committee, in the belief that the effective and balanced development of the national effort in science and technology will be in the best interests of the nation as a whole.