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PRIME MINISTER

19 April 1977

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COUNCIL

I seek leave to make a statement concerning the Government's arrangements for receiving independent advice on science and technology.

Science and technology have played an important part in Australia's development, and if properly encouraged, they may be expected to be even more important for Australia's future. They are basic to our capacity to meet the challenges presented by issues such as energy and resource availability, industrial productivity and competitiveness, urbanisation, and the management of the environment.

To ensure that our valuable but limited scientific and technological resources are applied most effectively to Australia's problems, an integrated effort is needed. Advisory machinery of the highest quality is essential if the Government is to make the right decisions. The Government must be able to draw on the best available advice if it is to formulate clear objectives, establish the most effective and appropriate institutional means for achieving them, and assign priorities on a rational and considered basis.

Mr Speaker, science policy advisory machinery was first established by a Liberal Country Party Government in Australia. In April 1972, the then Prime Minister, the Right Honourable the Member for Lowe, announced the formation of the Advisory Committee on Science and Technology. This reflected the importance the Coalition Parties attached to having expert and co-ordinated advice on policies for science and technology. As Honourable

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Members may recall, I was the responsible Minister when this original Advisory Committee was established in 1972.

The Committee was disbanded in February 1973. It was not replaced for some years - not until mid-1975 when an Interim Australian Science and Technology Council was set up pending the passage of legislation.

Soon after the 1975 election, a small and highly qualified Advisory Group was formed to advise me on the role of a permanent science and technology council. Having considered the Advisory Group's report, I announced that the Interim Australian Science and Technology Council would continue, but with some changed membership and functions.

As the Advisory Group recommended, the reconstituted Interim Council was asked to report to the Government on long term arrangements for an independent science and technology advisory body.

The Interim Council consulted widely and considered a large number of submissions which substantially represented scientific and technological opinion in Australia. The Council's Report, presented in November 1976, indicated that there was widespread support for the creation of a permanent and independent science and technology council.

The Government has accepted the Interim Council's recommendation that the Australian Science and Technology Council be established as a permanent and independent body. As it is of great importance that ASTEC not only be independent, but that it be seen to be independent, the Government intends to establish ASTEC as a statutory body.

The establishment of an independent science and technology policy advisory council on a permanent basis is a significant advance. The history of science bodies in Australia has been chequered, and making ASTEC a statutory body will give the council the status, permanence and stability which it requires.

The functions of ASTEC are to advise the Government on science and technology, including

- the advancement of scientific knowledge and the development and application of science and technology in relation to the national well being;

- the adequacy, effectiveness and overall balance of the national effort in science and technology in Government, industry, education and other sectors of the community;
- the assessment of gaps and overlaps in science and technology in Australia;
- the identification and support of new ideas of science and technology likely to be of national importance;
- the practical development and application of research discoveries and the fostering of technological innovation in industry; and
- the means of improving efficiency in the use of resources related to science and technology.

The Council will have a strategic role in assisting the Government, to encourage Australian science and technology to meet the nation's needs and objectives. It will have no executive responsibilities but will be able to advise on operational arrangements.

ASTECS knowledge and analysis of science and technology will be valuable to many arms of Government. And the Government expects the Council to inform itself and be informed of relevant Government policies and to take into consideration economic and budgetary implications in discharging its functions.

ASTECS will draw on existing Departments and Agencies for the expertise, knowledge and assistance necessary to enable these functions to be discharged effectively. But this will in no way compromise the independence of ASTEC.

Pending the passage of appropriate legislation, ASTEC has been established by executive action and is now continuing its important work. As the Council Report recommended, ASTEC will report to me, and its secretariat, which will be small in number, will be attached to my Department.

The Government has agreed that ASTEC should prepare a report on the present state of science and technology in Australia as recommended by the Interim Council. ASTEC will prepare this report in parallel with conducting investigations and providing advice on matters either referred to it by the Government, or which arise from its own initiatives.

Since the Government will be making decisions on matters upon which ASTEC will be reporting, the timing of the release of ASTEC's reports will be for the Minister to decide. The Government intends that ASTEC's reports shall be made public unless there are overwhelming reasons - in the national interest - for not doing so.

ASTEC will have a part-time Chairman and Deputy Chairman, and up to thirteen other part-time members. The Council's membership will have experience and knowledge across the spectrum of science and technology and its impact on the community. Members will be selected for their individual qualities and on the basis of their ability to contribute to the work of the Council, not as representatives of particular interest groups.

I am pleased to announce that Professor Geoffrey Badger has accepted the position of Chairman of ASTEC. Professor Badger has had a distinguished career as a scientist. After several years as a Professor of Organic Chemistry, at the University of Adelaide, he served for a short time as a member of the Executive of CSIRO. He has just completed a ten year term as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide and is now a Research Professor in that University. He is the President of the Australian Academy of Science and the Chairman of its Science and Industry Forum.

Professor Badger has played a significant part in developing and presenting the case for an independent advisory council, on science and technology. In 1967, he chaired a working party, established by the Science and Industry Forum of the Academy of Science, to examine the need for science policy machinery in Australia. I recall that as Minister for Education and Science I took part in the discussion of his report at a subsequent meeting of the Forum. Professor Badger again stressed the need for an independent science advisory council in a Presidential Paper published by the Academy in 1975.

Another eminent scientist, Professor Sir Rutherford Robertson, Fellow of the Royal Society of London and Past President of the Australian Academy of Science, has accepted the position of Deputy Chairman of the Council. Sir Rutherford is

Director of the Research School of Biological Sciences at the Australian National University.

The other members of the council are:

- . Professor B.D.O. Anderson, F.A.A,
Professor of Electrical Engineering,
University of Newcastle;
- . Mr S.G.W. Burston, O.B.E.,
Chairman,
Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers Council;
- . Dr L.W. Davies, F.A.A., F.T.S.,
Chief Scientist,
A.W.A. Research Laboratory;
- . Mr A.W. Hamer,
Managing Director,
I.C.I. Australia Limited;
- . Professor B.E. Hobbs,
Professor of Geology,
Department of Earth Sciences,
Monash University;
- . Mr B.T. Loton,
Executive General Manager,
Steel Division,
Broken Hill Proprietary Co Limited;
- . Sir Louis Matheson, K.B.E., C.M.G., F.T.S.;
- . Professor Sir Gustav Nossal, C.B.E., F.A.A.,
Director,
The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research;
- . Mr A.H. Parbo,
Managing Director,
Western Mining Corporation;
- . Mr L.G. Peres,
Reader in Political Science,
University of Melbourne;
- . Mr K.C. Stone,
Secretary,
Victorian Trades Hall Council;

- . Professor R. Street, F.A.A.,
Director,
Research School of Physical Sciences,
Australian National University;
- . Mr J.G. Wilson, C.B.E.,
Managing Director,
Australian Paper Manufacturers Limited.

I would like to thank the organisations to which the members of ASTEC are affiliated for releasing their services to take up the task of this important advisory body.

I should also like to place on record the Government's appreciation of the work which the Interim Council, chaired by Sir Louis Matheson, has undertaken in preparing its report. Sir Louis and the members of the Interim Council have contributed considerable time and effort. Their advice has greatly assisted the Government to make decisions on long term arrangements for obtaining independent policy advice on science and technology in Australia.

For the information of Honourable Members, I present the report of the Interim Australian Science and Technology Council entitled:

"Future Arrangements for an Australian Science and Technology Council".