



PRIME MINISTER

PRESS STATEMENT

13 APRIL 1978

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COUNCIL BILL 1978

SECOND READING SPEECH

In a statement on 19 April last year, I informed the House of the Government's decision to establish the Australian Science and Technology Council (or "ASTECC") as a permanent statutory body.

The purpose of this Bill is to put that decision into effect, thereby ensuring that the Government will have available to it, on a continuing basis, independent advice of the highest calibre on matters of science and technology.

The original forerunner of the present ASTEC was an advisory committee on science and technology, the formation of which was announced by the Rt. Hon. the Member for Lowe (Sir William McMahon) in April 1972. I was the responsible Minister at that time, and the formation of the Committee reflected the great importance which the then Government attached to having independent, expert advice on these matters.

After the change of Government, the advisory committee was disbanded in February 1973. Two years later, an interim ASTEC was formed. After the 1975 election, the interim ASTEC was re-established, with some modifications to its membership and functions.

In November 1976, the interim ASTEC recommended to the Government that a permanent Australian Science and Technology Council be established as an independent statutory body. This recommendation was accepted. Pending the passage of legislation, the permanent Council was established by executive action in April 1977.

Since that time, ASTEC has provided the Government with valuable advice on a range of matters, notably its report on Energy Research and Development which I tabled in this House on 4 April 1978.

The history of science policy advisory bodies in Australia has been chequered. It is important that ASTEC be constituted as a statutory body, in order to provide the Council with the status, permanence and stability it needs to do its job effectively.

It is also very important to ensure that ASTEC be as independent as possible of any Department of Government, and statutory status is necessary to achieve this. The Council will report to the Prime Minister, an administrative arrangement reflecting both the status and independence of ASTEC.

The Bill before the House has three major purposes, intended to guarantee ASTEC's effectiveness as a working body. First, the functions of the Council are defined. Second, the Council is invested with sufficiently wide powers to enable it to execute its functions. Third, provisions are made for the independence of the Council, to enable it to undertake its functions effectively.

The functions of the Council are defined in clause 5 of the Bill. The Council's role will be to investigate and furnish information and advice to the Government on science and technology, particularly

- . "The advancement of scientific knowledge;
- . the development and application of science and technology to the furtherance of the national well-being;
- . the adequacy, effectiveness and overall balance of scientific and technological activities in Australia;
- . the identification and support of new ideas in science and technology likely to be of national importance;
- . the practical development and application of scientific discoveries;
- . the fostering of scientific and technological innovation in industry; and
- . the means of improving efficiency in the use of resources by the application of science and technology."

These functions will allow the Council a very wide purview indeed. It can range from pure science, to the problems of improving efficiency in industry by applying the results of research and development. It can consider the activities and technological problems of higher education institutions and private enterprise.

The Government believes that this wide overview will allow ASTEC to play an important part in ensuring that there is a worthwhile interchange of ideas, information and new discoveries between Government, industry and academic science and scientists.

The Council's advice to the Government on priorities and balance of effort will inevitably influence the allocation of resources by the Government, and facilitate long-term, well-conceived forward planning by both Government and industry.

In keeping with the quality of advice which the Council is to provide, only people of the highest quality and standing will be appointed as members. A proportion of the membership will have backgrounds in various sectors of the industry, and others will have academic backgrounds. People having a contribution to make by virtue of special knowledge and experience can also be appointed. Members will be selected for their personal qualities rather than as representatives of organisations or interests.

To discharge its important functions, the Council is to be provided with appropriate powers, listed in clauses 6 and 9, and 20 to 24 of the Bill. The Council will be able to conduct inquiries and collect information on any aspect of its functions, either from its own initiative or at the direction of its minister.

It is intended that the Council's reports to the Government will be made public unless there are overwhelming reasons in the national interest for not doing so. Clause 6 contains detailed provisions requiring the prompt tabling in Parliament of ASTEC reports except in the closely defined circumstances there referred to.

The Council will be able to consult widely, with Commonwealth and State bodies, and with scientific, commercial, industrial and other organisations. Commonwealth bodies shall provide the Council with such assistance in the performance of its functions as is reasonably practicable. The Council will also have powers to engage consultants to conduct studies for it, and to arrange with Commonwealth authorities for officers of those authorities to be available to assist the Council. The Council will also be able to form committees of council members and others, who will conduct investigations on behalf of the Council, and will report their findings and recommendations to the Council.

These powers should enable the Council to meet its responsibilities adequately, from the conduct of basic investigations and information-gathering, using such expert advice and assistance as are necessary, to reporting its advice and recommendations directly to the Government.

The third important purpose of this legislation is the provision of necessary independence for the Council in its actions, so that its advice can be provided to government freely and without unwarranted influence. Clause 8 of the Bill provides that, although the Council will be subject to direction by the Minister, these directions will not extend to the content of any information, advice or report which ASTEC provides to the Minister. This will ensure that ASTEC's advice is truly independent, and free of even the possibility of political influence on advice which must be founded on sound scientific judgement.

Another important area where independence is ensured is in the staffing of ASTEC. It is intended that ASTEC will be served by a small staff of skilled officers. Such staff are to be provided under the Public Service Act, but clause 19 of the Bill includes provisions designed to ensure that the staff of ASTEC are under the direction of the Council, free of any unwarranted influence from other Commonwealth agencies. In particular, clause 19 provides specifically that staff members shall perform their functions and duties in accordance with the directions of the Council.

Another provision designed to secure the independence of the Council is clause 25 of the Bill, which exempts the Council and those working for it, from legal action in relation to any act done in good faith and in accordance with ASTEC's powers and functions. People supplying information to the Council in good faith will be similarly protected. This legal indemnity will allow the Council, and its witnesses, to provide information and advice fearlessly and candidly.

The Bill also provides proper protection for information provided to the Council in confidence.

The above represent the more important purposes of the Bill. There are, in addition, the usual provisions of a Bill of this nature, concerning the appointment, terms of office and remuneration of Council members, and acting members, and related matters. The Council will be obliged to meet as necessary to perform its functions. Council members will be required to disclose any interest they may have in any matter under consideration by the Council. Such an interest will debar the Council member involved from taking part in any decision on the matter in question and, if the Council sees fit, from being present at any discussions on that matter.

Mr. Speaker, the Government believes that there is an overwhelming case for establishing an effective science advisory body in Australia which is an independent and permanent statutory authority. Nothing less will properly safeguard the status, permanence and stability of ASTEC. This Bill provides the necessary safeguards, and I commend the Bill to the House.

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