



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF THE NATIONAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY CENTRE
CANBERRA - 23 NOVEMBER 1988**

Your Excellency, Mr Yanagi,
Sir Neil Currie,
Ms Wendy McCarthy,
Mr Eishiro Saito,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

1988 has been a memorable and exciting year for Australians.

Our Bicentenary has provided a magnificent opportunity not only for celebration but also for more enduring achievements which, long after 1988 has entered the history books, will be appreciated by future generations of Australians.

The National Science and Technology Centre is just such a project: innovative, important and enduring.

There is of course only a very small number of national institutions deemed worthy of location here in the Parliamentary triangle - the focal point both of Canberra's formal life and of its tourist activity.

The decision to place the National Science and Technology Centre among these premier institutions in this area reflects the high priority the Government attaches to it.

Another proof of the importance we attach to this Centre is the decision taken by Cabinet this week, which I am pleased to announce tonight, to establish the Centre as a statutory corporation. In this form, the Centre will receive the recognition it deserves as a significant national institution, and will also have the maximum autonomy to pursue corporate sponsorship and other commercial activities.

So the Government does see this Centre as very important - and before I express my thanks to the many people who deserve recognition for their contribution, I want briefly to explain why this Centre is an important addition to Canberra and to Australia.

It is no overstatement to say that as welcome as this building is in 1988, it is perhaps a pity that it was not opened, say, twenty years ago.

If it had been, there would already have been two decades during which Australian children were brought up with the insights into science, and the enjoyment of science, that this Centre now provides.

That could only have been to the benefit of the Australian economy and to the Australian community.

Because if we are to have an economy restructured so as to allow us sustainable prosperity in the future, we need to get the fundamentals right first.

And one of these fundamentals is scientific research.

It has been argued by the Australian scientific community that the hands and minds that should shape Australian science into the next century are not being attracted to careers in science.

If that is so, it would be a tragedy for all of us.

What is needed is a concerted national effort to encourage the further development of science and technology in Australia.

The taxpayer is already contributing, through Government programs, a fair share to this effort - through tax deduction schemes, through direct funding of basic and applied research through the CSIRO and elsewhere, and through the education system.

According to the OECD, the Australian public sector's contribution to research compares favourably, as a proportion of GDP, with similar countries.

The reforms to our education system now being put in place, including the massive expansion in university places, will continue this trend.

The work of the Australian Science and Technology Council will continue to provide an important and valued source of independent advice to the Government.

The Government has also shown it is prepared to coordinate research in new and emerging areas of inquiry, such as our recently announced studies into the Greenhouse effect.

Just two weeks ago Australia was elected to vice Chairmanship of an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change set up by the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organisation. This gives Australia a leading position in the panel activities which are seen as a prime focus for world activity on the Greenhouse effect.

But because of the fundamental importance of scientific research, the Government recently decided to investigate what further support should be given. I established a senior officials group to suggest short and long term measures that can be taken to strengthen our research and development effort. This group will present a preliminary report to Cabinet's Structural Adjustment Committee next week.

I can assure you this process is not a cosmetic exercise to stifle voices of concern. I and my colleagues will be treating the report seriously and reacting positively.

Ultimately, however, Government can't do the job on its own. Industry has to play a greater part than it is now if we are to expand those key sectors essential to our long term competitiveness.

It is to build an active partnership with industry that we are reforming CSIRO and university laboratories to make better use of their enormous reserves of talent.

We want to see Australian industry take a greater role in direct research spending and in supporting Australian researchers - so that those who have made a world-class breakthrough with world-wide commercial application are not forced, as they have been too often in the past, to look overseas to develop their findings.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For all these reasons, the sponsors of this new Centre are to be especially congratulated.

The Centre has a number of major sponsors from Australian industry - but I am sure I speak for the Centre when I say it would be keen to hear from other companies as potential sponsors.

I pay tribute to my ministerial colleague, Barry Jones, who has been committed to this project from the start, and I congratulate Dr Michael Gore and his colleagues who brought to the Centre the skills and enthusiasm of Questacon.

But perhaps more than anyone else, the Government and business community of Japan deserve our most sincere thanks.

Their generous financial contribution provided about half the total construction costs of this Centre, which makes it a very substantial Bicentennial gift indeed.

So it is appropriate too that the grounds of the Centre will be adorned by some of the 1200 cherry trees which were also given to Australia by Japan to mark our Bicentenary.

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This is perhaps a precursor of great things to come. For if we are to succeed in establishing a stronger commitment to our research base then we will also need to look closely, as we are, at concepts such as the Multifunction Polis which has been proposed by Japan.

This may become a unique cooperative venture between Australia and Japan and we can ill afford to let gestures of this kind slip from our grasp.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Centre will provide a tremendous boost to Australian science, and a major new attraction for school groups and other tourists who come to Canberra.

This Centre will justly stand as an enduring symbol of the friendship between Australia and Japan.

I wish the Centre well in its future activities.

This Centre is all about "hands-on" scientific experience. It is now my pleasure, in a "hands-on" fashion, to declare open the National Science and Technology Centre.
