

STATEMENT TO THE PARLIAMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
8 MAY 1989

As never before, scientific and technological developments are altering the lives of every person, changing the face of nations, cultures and the international economy, and even throwing into question the very environment in which we live.

Medical discoveries are offering relief for the sick and injured, helping childless couples to have children, opening broader horizons for the elderly. Researchers are providing new drugs and new surgical techniques and are even probing the nature of life itself.

New manufacturing techniques are revolutionising the way we work, the way we travel, what we eat, how we live.

Computers store and manipulate information in quantities and with a speed that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago.

Rapid communications are delivering instant news throughout an apparently shrunken world, criss-crossed with optical fibre networks and surrounded by satellites.

Concepts of warfare today are largely unrecognisable to those who fought in the Second World War.

Even the most basic cycle of our climate, the purity of the air we breathe, the very borders between sea and land, seem affected by technology. Problems such as the Greenhouse Effect and the depletion of the ozone layer are real issues today that even in the last decade would have seemed incredible outside the pages of science fiction.

One possible response to this vast process of change is despair - the feeling that attempting to control the seemingly remote forces of unleashed innovation is futile.

Honourable Members who are in contact with their constituents will know that many people, especially many younger Australians, do indeed border on despair when they contemplate the dangers of nuclear war and the despoliation of the environment.

A more realistic response is to attempt to understand the nature of these changes and to harness the best endeavours of all people to ensure that the forces of science and technology yield a better future for mankind.

The march of technological change - where it seems possible that it might only lead to a polluted, clamorous, dangerous and uncertain world - must be made to serve our needs and to create a world in which our children and grandchildren can live at ease.

Indeed, if Australians of the next century are to inhabit a prosperous nation and a clean and safe world, we today must grasp the challenge of gaining control of the processes of scientific and technological innovation and ensure that we receive benefit, not disadvantage, from change.

This is a challenge that confronts all Australians.

Australians of course are used to enjoying a quality of life equal or superior to that anywhere in the world.

But just as we accept that our predecessors had to work hard to build this society, so we must recognise that retaining such advantages, so as to pass them on to our children, will require hard work and constant effort.

Since this Government came to office in 1983, we have been single minded in our determination to ensure that such an effort is made.

A crucial foundation for the pursuit of our wider goals is our adoption of the most wide ranging and comprehensive program of structural adjustment in Australia's history.

We have taken the decisions - tough ones, many of them - to create a more internationally competitive economy and to remove the impediments which prevent industries and individuals from making their fullest contribution to national prosperity.

In this endeavour, science and technology continue to have an essential role to play.

They can open the way for Australia's manufacturing and service industries to be more competitive, and for the men and women who make up the Australian workforce to be more productive.

Our agricultural and mining industries, our medical researchers, our astronomers, our communications specialists are already showing the way, not just with new techniques and new products that can be sold abroad, but with new knowledge, on which no price tag can be placed.

This Government is determined that Australia will not fall behind. We are committed to maintaining and enhancing the proven excellence of our researchers, allowing them to further the horizons of basic research and to contribute through their creativity and innovation to Australia's goals.

Mr Acting Speaker,

Since coming to office my Government has pursued a consistent science and technology strategy.

This strategy recognises that crucial elements of research must be supported by public funds. It adopts as two important objectives the pursuit of excellence and the closer co-operation between researchers and users of that research. It recognises that science and technology depend on the creativity of individuals. And finally, it seeks to integrate science and technology into the broader community.

In pursuit of that strategy, research into science and technology in Australia is supported by public funds totalling about \$1.9 billion annually, through direct funding, through institutions of higher education and through tax concessions.

We have introduced new research and development promotion and incentive schemes, and reorganised our research organisations.

There has been a massive expansion of higher education places and a dramatically lifted school retention rate.

The best Australian research can now receive increased support, as researchers must now win a proportion of their funding by competing with others against a variety of standards, some involving peer review and others commercial criteria.

Since 1982-83, Government support for research through grants, higher education and Government agencies has risen by 12 per cent in real terms. Support for industry research and development has trebled.

Public funding of research and development in Australia is at about the middle order of OECD nations. But private sector support has been near the bottom of the ladder. When this Government came to office, 80 per cent of the nation's research activities were publicly funded, with private industry providing the remaining 20 per cent. By 1986-87, within a substantial increase in total R and D expenditure, industry had increased its share in the nation's research effort to 35 per cent.

This is a welcome trend. But with this Statement today, the Government is saying that it recognises that more needs to be done.

More needs to be done both to enhance our efforts in the quest for knowledge, as well as to ensure that a sufficient research effort is directed to areas of crucial application for Australia.

The details of the Government's initiatives will be announced directly by the Minister for Science, Customs and Small Business, Barry Jones.

Let me take this opportunity first to pay tribute to this Minister's determined and far-sighted advocacy of these issues. He is a Minister who makes an invaluable contribution to the Government's consideration of science issues and one in whom the science community can place its trust and confidence.

The first element of the Government's statement that I wish to announce today is that I will be appointing Mr Jones as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Science and Technology.

In this role Mr Jones, who will retain his existing portfolio duties, will exercise on my behalf the day to day responsibility for the development and co-ordination of science policy across the Government.

I also announce the establishment of a new consultative body which will bring together at the highest level all those who have a role to play in setting the nation's priorities in science and technology.

This new body will be known as the Prime Minister's Science Council. I will chair it and Mr Jones will be its Deputy Chairman. Its membership will consist of Government Ministers, representatives of the science community and leaders of Australian industry.

The first meeting of the Council is to be held in October. At the top of its agenda will be a consideration of the status of science in Australia - covering both the state of research in Australia and the nature and effectiveness of linkages between research and industry. The October meeting will also consider the Greenhouse Effect, to the research on which the Government has recently provided \$7.8 million.

I want my Council to bring a new focus and prominence to discussions on Australia's national priorities in scientific research and a new capacity to make sure that our aims in basic and applied science are properly set and implemented.

To assist in this, I am appointing Professor Ralph Slatyer as Chief Scientist. He will assist me and Mr Jones on science and technology policy, chair the Science and Technology Co-ordinating Committee and serve on and be the Executive Officer of my new Council.

Professor Slatyer is a scientist of national and international distinction, both in research and in the development of science and technology policy. He has served as Chairman of the World Heritage Committee, President of the International Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment and most recently as chairman of the Australian Science and Technology Council.

The Australian Science and Technology Council which has been providing analysis of developments in Australian science and technology throughout the term of my Government will continue to provide this valuable service.

Indeed, I expect ASTEC to make a substantial contribution to the success of the new arrangements I have just announced and to enjoy an enhanced role as a result of them.

Mr Acting Speaker,

This statement is based on extensive consultation with the science and technology community, and on detailed reviews both of specific problems and of the broader needs and concerns of scientists.

It brings together, as the Government promised it would, all the strands of the Government's support of science and technology research throughout a number of portfolios.

This statement does not represent a conclusion to the debate about science and technology in Australia, nor a reaction to it.

It represents a contribution, and I believe a very significant one, to a continuing process of policy development.

It provides for the expenditure of an additional \$390 million over the next five years in order to boost Australia's science and technology performance. Taken with the anticipated revenue foregone due to the extension of tax concessions, this represents a \$1 billion package of support for science and technology in Australia.

This statement represents our recognition that the pace of change in this country cannot be relaxed. We cannot rest on our laurels. The world will not let us do so.

Mr Acting Speaker,

No Australian wants to leave it up to the rest of the world to make the decisions that are so important to shaping our future.

With this Statement, we are showing our determination that Australia will be a full participant in the exciting and vital processes of scientific discovery, innovation and adaptation.
