PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA **6 OCTOBER 1989**

I am pleased to announce that the first meeting of the Prime Minister's Science Council is being held today.

The membership of the Council is included in your press kits.

Today's Discussions

Two topics of considerable importance both to the Government and to the nation are being discussed at today's meeting. They are global climatic change and the issues it raises for Australia, and resources for science and technology and their utilisation.

Also included in your press kits is a paper describing recent developments in government policies for science and technology and significant actions taken since the May statement 'Science and Technology for Australia'.

Global Climatic Change - Issues for Australia

This morning the Council is discussing the scientific evidence for the greenhouse effect and considering the effects of possible changes.

Papers to be presented to the Council describe the processes at work in the atmosphere and the ways in which human activity is changing them. Some important points are made in the papers and will be covered in discussion. Although there are considerable uncertainties, the balance of scientific opinion is that climatic warming is very likely in the next few decades. There may be increased climatic variability, which would have important implications for agricultural production. The combination of changes in Australia and elsewhere will present us with a mixture of hazards and opportunities.

Since change seems likely, even though we cannot yet predict what form it will take, it is prudent to prepare for its consequences. There is a need to take account of possible rises in sea level in planning the future use of our coasts and littoral regions. As a nation, we make such extensive use of these regions that even small rises in sea level would have important social and economic effects.

Even though we cannot yet predict with certainty the effects of the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, we do know that climatic change is likely to be disruptive and costly, socially, economically and environmentally. We should, therefore, do all we reasonably can to minimise that change.

This means reducing greenhouse gas emissions, a task which will not be easy for any nation.

The Government has already done much to prepare its response to the issues to be discussed this morning. Our present position on many of these matters is set out in my statement on the environment 'Our Country, Our Future', which I delivered on 20 July this year.

Australia is taking a leading role in international activities. We are participating in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). We have signed the Hague Declaration on Protection of the Atmosphere. We have introduced measures which more than meet the requirements of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.

We expect significant developments as a result of activities planned for the next few years, including the report of the IPCC at the Second World Climate Conference in 1990 and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, which we hope will consider an international convention on climate change.

The Government is providing additional funds for greenhouse research in Australia. In addition to activities being conducted as part of ongoing research programs, we have provided $5.54 million over two years to complement existing work. Much of this will be spent in CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology.

The Government has also established a National Greenhouse Advisory Committee to advise on priority areas of research and set objectives for a dedicated research groups scheme which will commence next year. With regard to the important matter of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases I have established a task force to advise the government on the options available to it. Following receipt and evaluation of that advice the Government intends to convene a meeting of relevant interests to discuss options for limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

Resources for Science and Technology and their Utilisation

There are two messages which emerge strongly from the papers to be discussed this afternoon. We need to make the science and technology infrastructure, comprising research workers, their laboratories and equipment, as strong as possible and we need to link the research activities in our higher education institutions and government laboratories more closely to national needs, and to relevant industry sectors.

The Government can look with some satisfaction at what it has already achieved, while recognising that reform and rebuilding will take time and will require further substantial effort.

In the May statement 'Science and Technology for Australia' Minister Jones and I stated the government's commitment to providing an environment which will encourage successful research. It recognised that such research depends on highly motivated and thoughtfully directed effort.

In the May statement, we announced additional support for science and technology, amounting to $390 million over five years. The measures announced in the May statement are already producing results, as the paper I referred to earlier makes clear.

I should like to mention one aspect of progress towards the goals the Government has set for improving Australia's science and technology capacity. This concerns the provision of career structures for research staff in higher education.

The Australian Research Council will introduce an integrated package of reforms and innovation to its existing fellowships schemes. It will provide a new system of fellowships that will significantly increase opportunities for career progression of outstanding young researchers.

The existing postdoctoral research awards and Queen Elizabeth II fellowships will be supplemented by two new fellowship categories, Research Fellow and Senior Research Fellow.

The fellowship system, which currently comprises 128 postdoctoral and 28 Queen Elizabeth II fellows, is expected to produce approximately 350 fellowships at its peak in 1995.

All fellowships in each category will need to be won in open competition. The Postdoctoral Fellowships and the Fellowships can be held only once in each category, while Senior Fellows will be able to compete for further Fellowships at the expiration of their terms.

The Minister, Mr Dawkins, has released a detailed statement, which is included in your press kits.

The Council will also discuss the commercialisation of Australian research. The authors of the invited papers have noted that our performance in this area has been inadequate. The Government will continue its efforts to improve this situation, but an effective solution will require continued and sustained action by all parts of the community.

I believe that we are moving in the right direction. The restructuring of the Australian economy, which has been a cornerstone of my Government's policies, offers tremendous opportunities to those companies able and willing to take up the challenge of developing and applying new technology to their products and processes.

The overall message which emerges from these papers is that science and technology will be even more important in Australia's future than in the past. International competitiveness in all industry sectors will be increasingly dependent on technological innovation and on highly developed skills in management and at all levels in the workforce, of which the science and technology community is a key element.

Background to the formation of the Council

The formation of the Council was announced in May 1989 in the joint statement 'Science and Technology for Australia', issued by the Minister Assisting for Science and Technology, Mr Jones, and myself.

That statement was prepared following reviews of several areas of science and technology policy, including research in higher education and the research responsibilities of the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, as well as general reviews of Australian science and technology by ASTEC and by a group of officials.

The reviews identified a number of issues of general concern, including the adequacy of mechanisms to coordinate and consult on science and technology policy.

The Council will be a forum for exchanging views and discussing topics of national interest. It will also be a body which can recommend action by the Government.

The Government is strongly represented in the membership of the Council by Ministers with primary responsibility for scientific and technological matters. The Council also contains strong representation from the business community and the science and technology community.

The Council will also have links with the Coordination Committee on Science and Technology. This committee, which is chaired by the Chief Scientist, Professor Slatyer, was another part of the measures Minister Jones and I announced in May.

Meetings of the Council will be held at least twice a year. The next meeting will be held in about six months and there will be another meeting at about this time next year.

In addition to the core membership of the Council, other people with a particular interest in, or ability to contribute to, the issues under consideration will be invited to attend particular meetings.

These people will be drawn from all areas of the community, but will come particularly from those engaged in research and the management of research, and in the application of science and technology to economic and social objectives.

Some of these people will be invited to prepare and present papers to the Council. In this way, the Council will be able to draw upon a wide range of resources and benefit from the best expertise available in Australia.

The papers will be published after the meetings as a permanent record of proceedings and as useful source of reference material on the issues discussed.

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MEMBERSHIP OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S SCIENCE COUNCIL

The Prime Minister (Chair)

The Hon Barry Jones, MP
Minister Assisting for Science and Technology
(Deputy Chair)

The Hon Neal Blewett, MP
Minister for Community Services and Health

Senator the Hon John Button,
Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce

The Hon John Dawkins, MP
Minister for Employment, Education and Training

The Hon John Kerin, MP
Minister for Primary Industries and Energy

Dr Keith Boardman, FAA, FRS, Chief Executive of CSIRO

Professor Ray Martin, AO, FAA
Chairman of the Australian Science and Technology Council

A representative of the Australian Council of Trade Unions

Professor Brian Anderson, FAA, FRS
Head of the Department of Systems Engineering in the Research School of Physical Sciences at the Australian National University

Sir Gustav Nossal, AC FAA, FRS
Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research

Professor Cheryl Praeger, Professor of Pure Mathematics at the University of Western Australia

Sir Peter Abeles, Managing Director of TNT

Mr Roger Allen, Managing Director of Computer Power

Mr Trevor Eastwood, Managing Director of Wesfarmers

Mr John Ralph, AO
Managing Director and Chief Executive of CRA

Dr John Stocker, Managing Director of AMRAD

Professor Ralph Slatyer, AO, FAA, FRS
Chief Scientist (Executive Officer)