



# PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
AUSTRALIA PRIZE  
CANBERRA - 14 MAY 1990**

Prize winners,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Not since the new Parliament House was opened two years ago have we hosted such a significant occasion in this building. Your presence here tonight for the inaugural award of the Australia Prize is itself a statement about our nation's emerging priorities, a recognition of the standing science now rightly has in our society.

Australia has never lacked talented and committed scientists. In fact our brief history boasts a record of real achievement in many fields. I doubt, however, I would get much argument from tonight's audience with the proposition that, until recently, science has had to struggle for fair recognition for its role and its importance. Perhaps you can draw some comfort from the fact that the recent elections saw, for the first time, science discussed as an issue in its own right. At the time, I argued that for Australia's future it was essential that we should no longer be content to be just the lucky country; that we must also become the clever country. That sentiment struck a very receptive chord in the community. The reason it did was not because it was some catchy slogan that offered hope in difficult times. Rather it reflected a genuine belief among Australians that if we are to maintain our place in the first rank of the developed nations we must embrace, and embrace enthusiastically, a culture in which science and technology are vital elements. We are, after all, in the region of the world which is growing fastest and which counts among its member countries some of those at the forefront of scientific effort.

For government the encouragement of science has to be an end in itself. In the words of the American science writer Timothy Ferris: "Science is young. Whether it will survive long enough to become old depends upon our sanity and courage and vigour ...". So the challenge now, in an age when physics pushes into fields once the domain solely of philosophers and theologians, is to ensure that it does 'grow old'.

Scientists have proved in this country that given adequate resources they will produce work of great worth. The relevance science now has to the wider community can perhaps be best demonstrated at the anecdotal level. Had I, a decade ago, stood here and told you that a book on theoretical physics - Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" - would be a best-seller I would have been regarded as slightly eccentric. Had I gone on to claim that books on chaos theory were also doing a brisk trade that judgement would have been confirmed. What this phenomenon tells us is that science is exciting interest in the broader community. Scientists are also reaching out, educating we laymen and women that science for its own sake is of fundamental relevance to us, to our understanding of the world and to the shape our future might take.

Another factor in the increased interest in and respect for science can be directly traced to the rapid rise of the environment as an issue. When people have questions about environmental issues they do not turn to business or to political leaders for answers - they turn to scientists. So, too, do governments. The decision my Government made last year not to proceed with the Wesley Vale pulp mill, in the end, rested on the work of the CSIRO. After all the arguments about jobs, development, balance of export earnings and import replacements had been heard it was the high-quality, cogent and accessible work of the CSIRO that convinced the Cabinet that it would not be responsible to proceed with the project.

Science now has a secure place at the top of my Government's priorities. One of the critical decisions we have taken to ensure this was to establish the Prime Minister's Science Council and the Office of the Chief Scientist in my own Department. Now, when science speaks in this country I hear directly what it has to say. [Ralph Slatyer makes sure of this!]

Foremost amongst our concerns as a Government has been improving ways of bringing the power of science and technology to bear on achieving higher rates of economic growth, on improving the health of the nation, on national defence, and on solving the pressing problems of the environment.

In addition, we must ensure Australia has a highly skilled work-force able to support new technologies and new industrial challenges amenable to science and technology. To this end, we have provided additional equipment and research funds for higher education institutions and government research organisations. We have also provided extra post-graduate awards to increase the number of highly qualified young people entering the Australian workforce - young people who will maintain the proud tradition of Australian scientific research.

Australia has also resolved to work to reduce its reliance on imported technology and borrowed research. We must become a leader in the production and export of ideas. My Government has already dramatically boosted our science and technology potential - with a \$1,000 million package of initiatives last year. But to stay abreast and move ahead of the world, we need to pool the talents of our university, Commonwealth, State and private sector researchers and link them more effectively to the rest of the economy. As a step towards this goal the Government recently announced that it has decided to establish a network of 50 world class Cooperative Research Centres. My Minister for Science and Technology, Simon Crean, will be responsible for the introduction of these new research centres, which will create additional jobs for about 1,000 talented Australian scientists.

Each research centre, when fully established over the next five years, will be staffed with a team of highly skilled scientists, using the latest high tech equipment, exchanging information around the world - making, we are confident, scientific breakthroughs in medicine, technology, pollution control, communications. And so, instead of young Australian scientists having to go to Europe, America and Japan to find the leading edge of scientific research, we'll have their scientists coming to us.

While the measures I have just described are focussed on strengthening science and technology in Australia, there is also a pressing need to continue to encourage the community's awareness of the importance of science and technology. A central task here is to ensure that our young people fully appreciate the opportunities that exist for challenging and rewarding careers in science and technology. They must also be well prepared to live in an increasingly technological society, not just as passive observers, but as active participants.

I am particularly pleased that we have in the audience tonight a number of young people, representatives of the young Australians who have already distinguished themselves in their studies in science and technology.

The attitudes and ambitions of these young people, and others like them will determine the type of society we have in this country in the years ahead.

To meet this need for greater public awareness of science and technology, my Government included a Science and Technology Awareness Program amongst the measures it introduced last year. The program's goal is to increase awareness of the central role of science and technology in achieving economic growth and improved national well-being. At the pinnacle of this program is the Australia Prize. Other measures are designed to inform the general community of the role of science and technology in national life. Academic achievement by young Australians is being encouraged through support for participation in the

Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry Olympiads. This year will also see the introduction of the Australian Students' Prize. Five hundred of these will be awarded each year to our best young achievers at the end of Year 12. They will encourage the ever-increasing number of students finishing high school to strive for excellence.

Although the Government can do much to increase public awareness of science and technology, it cannot hope to make the necessary impact on opinions and attitudes unless it is supported by other sections of the community. Importantly, industry is playing its part. The BHP Science Awards for teachers of science and technology, the CRA Science Summer Schools and the Shell Program for Young Achievers all raise interest and reward enthusiasm and achievement.

Let me turn now to the matter which brings us here this evening: the Australia Prize.

This is an annual award to recognise an outstanding achievement in a selected area of science promoting human welfare.

In inaugurating this award, the Government wishes to recognise and reward scientific achievement, wherever it occurs. We wish also to enhance and promote Australia's image as a nation with a proud record of scientific achievement and appreciation of the value of such achievement in ourselves and in others.

Despite being a country with a small population, and the disadvantage of being remote from the major centres of learning and culture, Australia has an excellent record of research and of contribution to the world of learning.

I shall not dwell for long on the achievements that led the Australia Prize Committee to select the distinguished winners of this inaugural Australia Prize. We have all seen the excellent video which portrays so graphically the nature and importance of the work for which they are now being recognised.

The field of research selected by the Committee this year - the biological sciences related to agriculture and the environment - is, of course, one of vital interest to Australia: One that bridges our lucky country foundations and our clever country aspirations. During the whole of the period since European settlement, our economy has owed much to agriculture. Although we have prospered from the abundance of our agricultural production, there has been a high cost in terms of land degradation and an increasing dependence on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. As we have just seen, the advances we are honouring this evening will reduce that dependence on chemicals. Not only is work in this field of vital importance to Australia, it is also an area of research in which Australia has displayed particular strength. For this reason, it is appropriate, and also particularly gratifying,

that one of the winners of this inaugural Australia Prize should be an Australian.

Let me record my Government's gratitude for the efforts of the Australia Prize Committee. This panel of distinguished Australians has brought wide knowledge and experience to bear on a difficult and demanding task. They have chosen wisely and well; I commend them for their efforts; and I congratulate the distinguished prize-winners on winning the inaugural Australia Prize.

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