



PRIME MINISTER

52/94

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING COUNCIL

Together with several of my Ministerial colleagues, I met a number of leading scientists, engineers and business people at today's meeting of my Science and Engineering Council.

The Council discussed some areas of technical and economic development critical to the future prosperity of Australia, many of which were addressed in *Working Nation*.

Working Nation is about looking to the future, making decisions today which will give us an innovative and competitive future using and developing our skills and our science and technology base.

An important feature of our future will be the so-called 'information super highways', which will transform all our lives over the coming years. We discussed these today at my Science and Engineering Council.

My Government has a keen interest in seeing Australia reap maximum benefits from the development of the information super highway.

We established the Broadband Services Expert Group last year to advise it on the technical, economic and commercial preconditions for the widespread delivery of broadband services in Australia.

The Group reported to Council today on its progress, and expects to release an interim report around the end of July 1994, and a final report by the end of 1994.

My Government also commissioned a report from the Australian Science and Technology Council on research data networks, an information highway already up and running. This report was discussed today by the Science and Engineering Council before being presented to Government in August.

The Australian Academic Research Network allows our scientists and engineers to interact with one another and with their counterparts around the world. It provides access to data banks, sophisticated opportunities for information exchange with other users, and the ability to shrink global distances that we expect from the super highway.

The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee has developed this network, drawing on significant government assistance, and we now have a network that is second only to the US.

Discussion at the meeting of my Science and Engineering Council today also focussed on strategic directions for the Government's policies for science and technology, and on identifying the key strategic issues needing to be addressed.

In creating an innovative future, I believe that we will need a cultural change in our perceptions of science, technology and innovation, building an appreciation in our society of their importance in maintaining our quality of life.

We will also need to recognise the vital role of demand for science and technology in stimulating industry to innovate and to improve its innovative capacity to compete globally.

At today's meeting, members discussed a new study that the Australian Science and Technology Council is proposing to undertake, of matching science and technology to future social and economic changes in Australia over the next fifteen years.

I consider this is an important study which should provide insights for policy development, as well as stimulate awareness of science and technology more generally.

I was also impressed by a presentation to Council today from leading business people and scientists, about the opportunities that Asian food markets provide for Australia's agri-food industry.

It confirmed the directions we are taking in responding to the Hilmer Report, and the initiatives announced in *Working Nation*.

Australian agri-food companies, with their high quality, low cost products and high skills bases, are already increasing our presence in Asian food markets. In the past 2 years, exports of highly processed food have increased by \$900 million or 39%.

It is this type of success that my Government is laying the foundations for through the initiatives of *Working Nation*.

Also, through expert studies such as those I heard about today at the Science and Engineering Council, we will be able to take a long term view, putting in place the policies and programs that will secure an innovative and competitive future for all Australians.

CANBERRA

24 June 1994