



PRIME MINISTER

72/94

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP ECONOMIC PLANNING ADVISORY COUNCIL - NEW ARRANGEMENTS

Today I am announcing changes to EPAC. Its tenth year of operation provides an appropriate time to make changes to enhance its future role.

EPAC has contributed substantially to promoting a broader consensus and understanding of Australia's medium and long-term economic and social prospects.

There has been a convergence of views among major groups in Australia that was unthinkable a decade earlier.

EPAC discussion and consultation was the early linchpin for that process. Similarly, EPAC's reports have helped inform and shape debate on a wide range of issues including: foreign and public sector debt, savings and investment, population ageing, growth potential, productivity, public sector benchmarking, enterprise bargaining and micro-economic reform.

I now wish to build on these achievements by creating a new advisory group, by developing and focusing the public information work of EPAC, and by establishing a capacity for related special projects in order to extend EPAC activities.

In order to improve my access to new ideas and new ways forward in business and economic matters, I will be appointing a new "Economic Round-Table" to replace EPAC Council. The members of this small group will include the Treasurer and creative business achievers and independent-minded individuals who are thinkers and doers. The aim is to avoid simple interest group representation and to have flexible membership arrangements in order to keep the ideas flowing. I will chair the Group and relevant Ministers will be invited to attend. The Group will give attention to the possible role for the Government on key strategic issues and to links to broader social concerns. Initial composition of the Group will be announced soon when members have agreed to their appointments.

I thank all present and past members of the EPAC Council for their contribution to developing our medium and longer-term thinking and policy. I will be meeting with many of these members in the numerous other fora which have emerged for interchange of views, and I look forward to those continuing associations.

Turning to the Office of EPAC, it is my intention that its widely respected work in producing public reports on medium and longer-term issues should continue. For many today, the name of EPAC is associated more with these studies than with the meetings of Council. The small group of past and present staff of the Office of EPAC deserve credit for this achievement.

The acronym EPAC will continue with the re-establishment of the Office of EPAC as the Economic Planning Advisory Commission. The Commission will continue to publish accessible and authoritative studies as in the past, but I wish the opportunity to be taken to develop a more thematic focus, with EPAC producing fewer but high quality reports. For 1994-95 the Commission will look at three themes of fundamental importance for Australia's medium and longer-term future: Globalisation, Investment and Growth, and Work Patterns.

In addition, I am asking Professor Glenn Withers, the head of EPAC, to establish a capacity for related special projects which will allow EPAC to broaden the range of its activities to include provision of policy advice on medium-term issues in selected areas. EPAC will retain its well-established role in co-ordinating for the Commonwealth submissions on the Budget by business, trade union and community groups and reporting publicly on their content. It will also strengthen public discussion on medium and long-term issues through seminars and conferences.

In particular I am asking EPAC to convene a major conference on Long-Term National Strategies to be held in Sydney on November 24-25. This Government has long taken a farsighted view of the country's direction and has acted upon that. At the same time, it is appropriate that we take stock periodically beyond the immediate political arena. The Government has a commitment to hearing broad debate before policy decisions are made. This Conference will do this and will itself help define the longer-term work program for EPAC. More details of this Conference will be announced soon.

Finally, I intend that the Commission be able to undertake task force work on suitable projects as requested by Government. These could cover a wide variety of topics with a medium-term focus. They would mainly be directed at reporting over 3-6 months periods and tapping the best talent from outside the public service, including as task force heads, and obtaining transfer or secondment of top expertise from within the public service. The projects may often have a sharper policy focus than for regular EPAC studies, but will still benefit from EPAC's remove from policy implementation responsibilities. I will announce the initial projects of this kind shortly.

The Commission will be responsible to the Prime Minister, as is the present Office of EPAC.

The changes I have announced today will increase still further the contributions to be made by EPAC in identifying the issues underpinning our future, for filtering the arguments and evidence and for discussing the issues in a balanced and authoritative way. I also look forward to meeting with the new "Economic Round-Table" as a new source of insights for the Government.

CANBERRA
16 August 1994.