

For 2 days early this month representatives of what is being called Australia's "science and technology community" (it also includes engineering) met in Canberra to join forces in a bid to influence future federal Budgets. Most of the speakers and many of those in the audience were high-fliers in the "community" who carry a lot of clout.

They were attending the National Forum on Science and Technology in the Budget, convened under the joint auspices of 4 organisations which also combined to form a group (NSTAG) to analyse science and technology issues affected by Budget decisions. NSTAG reviewed federal support in a report "Science and Technology in Australia" prepared for the forum.

In the forum's opening session, Prof Ron Johnston discussed this report* and presented an overview of the issues to be discussed. In his address, which appears below, he said the forum represents "a coming of age of Australian science and technology".

A new accord with government

by Ron Johnston

The publication of *Science and Technology in Australia* by the National Science and Technology Analysis Group, and the staging of a National Forum on Science and Technology in the Budget signals the beginning of a new era in relations between scientists/engineers and government.

The report and the forum are a product of collaboration between the Institution of Engineers, Australia, the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) and the Academies of Science and Technological Sciences. This in itself heralds a recognition of a need to put aside differences and to develop a single face, and a coherent strategy, in dealing with governments.

For FASTS it is the first public outcome of a somewhat shaky mass marriage. The "federation" was stimulated by discontent among scientists both at the low Budget allocations to science in 1984/85, even with a publicly prominent Minister for Science, and the inadequacy of their traditional avenues of political influence through the Academies.

The report itself is, in my opinion, a document of considerable quality and daring. On quality, it compares well with reports of ASTEC and government departments with far more resources. Its breadth of scope, its emphasis on a simple formulation of issues and its detailed description of programs and their funding, all in 52 pages, ensures that everyone will have something with which they disagree.

But it would be a great mistake if all

our energies were channelled into marking and correcting this report. What is important is that it reveals the development of a new sophistication among Australian scientists in their approach to relations with government.



Prof Ron Johnston is foundation professor of science and technology studies at the University of Wollongong and a director of the Centre for Technology and Social Change, an independent research, consultancy and training organisation attached to the University. He trained as a scientist and has experience in both industry and government in developing and applying science and technology. He is currently leading research projects on national policy-making for science and technology; the direction, transfer, assessment and control of technology; economic and social implications of technological change; and the role of technology in industrial performance. He has conducted contract research for ASTEC, the Federal Departments of Science, Education and Industry, Technology & Commerce and 4 state governments and is a consultant to the OECD and Unesco.

The simple methods of the past have been admirably captured in a quote from an academician: "In the old days, influential people in the scientific community talked to influential people in politics and the cash just came."

With the loss of influence by science, the cries for greater funding grew even louder, but so did the resistance among politicians.

But now, the inadequacies of this approach are clearly accepted. As the report says: "We must do far more than just repeat the hackneyed statements on past inadequate support and on claims for the obvious need for increased funding; we must ourselves become more involved in the problems of government and in its handling of competing demands."

This new approach is reflected in the aims of this Forum:

- to initiate dialogue and co-operation between government and scientists and technologists
- to appraise the Government of the implications of funding decisions
- to educate the S&T community in the problems of policy-making in science and technology.

What we are witnessing, and involved in, is a coming of age of Australian science and technology, where influence with government will no longer be sought primarily through the "pork barrel". Rather a serious and long-term commitment of time and skill is to be made to increase the general understanding of the dynamics of science and technology, and to the presentation of information at a time and in a form which will assist the difficult resource allocation decisions which have to be made by governments.

* Limited numbers of the report are available to IEAust members from Lee Rydstrand, IEAust HQ, (062) 73-3633.