

Science set for star role in Australian election campaign

[SYDNEY] Australia's opposition Labor party has taken the rare step for a political party of promoting support for research and development (R&D) as a key plank in its election campaign. National polls are expected sometime next month.

Labor's leader Kim Beazley has promised to restore a 150 per cent tax concession for industrial R&D if elected. The concession was cut to 125 per cent in 1996 by the present ruling coalition government of the Liberal and National parties.

Labor's proposal would be worth about A\$600 million (US\$330 million) over three years. The concession would be targeted at companies with fewer than 500 employees. Larger companies would qualify if they spent more than 2.5 per cent of turnover on R&D. Other firms would be eligible for a tax concession at the current rate.

Pay crisis deepens as Russian rouble plummets

[MOSCOW] Russia's financial crisis, the devaluing of its currency, and the sacking of the cabinet has left in tatters government promises to repay debts to scientists.

"The Ministry of Finance tells us that banks lack money and that it is impossible to pay salaries to scientists," says Vladimir Khlebodarov, chairman of the Russian Academy of Sciences' labour union. Khlebodarov says the union is planning to organize new, "more effective" actions later this month.

Meanwhile, the post of minister for scientific research remains vacant following the removal by President Boris Yeltsin of the cabinet headed by the prime minister, Sergei Kirienko.

British graduates turn their backs on teaching

[LONDON] The number of graduates applying to teach science in British schools has dropped sharply, according to figures released by the Graduate Teacher Training Registry. The National Association of Head Teachers describes the situation as "extremely serious".

Physics has suffered the biggest fall, with just 150 graduates accepting university teacher training places in physics, 39 per cent down on the 1997 figure. Graduates training to teach chemistry are down 21 per cent, with biology down 16 per cent and mathematics down 31 per cent.

The figures are a significant blow to a government campaign to attract more — and better qualified — graduates to teaching. A

discussion paper will be published later this year proposing the introduction of performance-related pay.

Deforestation blamed for Himalayan landslides

[NEW DELHI] Deforestation and unplanned housing may have caused last week's landslides in the western Himalayas that killed more than 300 trekkers and buried whole villages, according to scientists and environmentalists in India.

The Geological Survey of India has started mapping landslide-prone zones to help state authorities better target housing development. Scientists are also calling for a central facility to forecast landslides.

J. S. Samra, the director of the Central Soil and Water Conservation Research Institute in Roorkee, says India urgently needs a separate institution for research into mountain hazards.

Shaggy cloned dog story for Texas vets

[WASHINGTON] Researchers at Texas A&M University have been promised an anonymous donation of \$2.3 million to clone Missy, the donor's dog.

The research team — led by Mark Westhusin, associate professor of veterinary physiology and pharmacology at the university's College of Veterinary Medicine in College Station, Texas — has received an initial payment of \$500,000. They have already taken tissue biopsies of Missy, who was flown to Texas in May.

The project, announced last week by the university and the Bio Arts and Research Corporation of San Francisco, details its goals on its website (www.missyplcity.com). These include improving the "basic understanding of canine reproductive biology". The team also plans to lay the groundwork to clone "exceptional individual dogs of high societal value" after it has cloned Missy.

Germany 'should boost interdisciplinary research'

[MUNICH] Interdisciplinary research between universities, non-university institutes and industry in Germany should be strengthened in areas such as materials research, genetics and molecular medicine. This is the main recommendation of a report from a high level technology advisory group, the Technologierat.

The group, set up by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1995, comprises 17 experts from the academic community, industry and politics. Recommendations from its two previous reports — on information technology and biotechnology — have helped boost these

areas in Germany. The Technologierat also recommends that social sciences and humanities should increasingly contribute towards science and technology assessments.

The new report identifies science and technology as key to Germany's future economic development. It concludes that industrial exploitation of research results is unnecessarily delayed by the rigid and 'outmoded' separation of scientific disciplines and of basic and applied research.

In-utero gene therapy appears on NIH agenda

[WASHINGTON] The Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) at the National Institutes of Health will discuss next month its first proposals for in-utero gene therapy.

The discussion has been prompted by two submissions by French Anderson, the gene therapy pioneer at the University of Southern California, who is preparing protocols to treat two diseases in utero: alpha-thalassaemia, and severe combined immunodeficiency caused by adenosine deaminase deficiency.

The RAC no longer has authority to approve protocols — this has been shifted to the Food and Drug Administration — but it still functions as a public forum for discussion of novel gene therapy protocols.

MIT to raze Rad Lab's home to the ground



[BOSTON] The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) last month received permission from the Cambridge Historical Commission to demolish its famous Building 20, where radar was perfected during the Second World War.

The dilapidated building was erected as a temporary structure in 1943 to house the Radiation Laboratory. In its time, the 'Rad Lab' was the biggest scientific collaboration in US history and a bigger effort than the Manhattan Project in terms of staff and funding. Building 20 was also the incubator of many other advances, including the first atomic clock. The site will provide a home for MIT's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, designed by architect Frank O. Gehry, who recently designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.