Australian technology

Button gains from Jones

Melbourne

LAST month's Australian federal elections have ended with a reduced majority for Mr R.J. (Bob) Hawke's Labor government and a portfolio reshuffle of considerable moment for Australia's fast-fading technology-based industries. With ballot-counting still incomplete, it is plain that a 2 per cent swing against the government has replaced the forecast Labor landslide.

With 34 Senate seats (against 33 for the conservative opposition parties), the government has lost its last chance to control the upper house, where the Australian Democrats now hold the balance of power with seven probable seats, the most recent won by Dr Norman Sanders, former US citizen, Korean War pilot, research geomorphologist, Tasmanian parliamentarian and crusading conservationist. The Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP, see *Nature* 29 November, p.395), in the person of Ms Jo Vallentine, looks set to gain one seat, but shaven-headed lawyer/rock star Mr Peter Garrett will probably lose to the Democrats' deputy leader, Senator Mason.

Pre-election talk of a technological superministry has been borne out to some degree by the annexation of several of the technological development functions of Mr Barry Jones's Department of Science and Technology (DST) by the politically more powerful Department of Industry and Commerce. Under the leadership of the government Senate leader Senator John Button, the new ministry will be known as the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce (DITC), while Mr Jones's reduced bailiwick becomes the Department of Science.

Precisely how many sections of the old DST will be handed over is not yet clear, but they are thought to include the Management and Investment Companies Scheme (MICS, see *Nature* **307**, 584; 1984), the National Biotechnology Scheme and elements of the DST Policy Division. As well as attempting to revitalize basic scientific research and continuing to boost the public's perception of it, Mr Jones will assist Senator Button in the House of Representatives.

The acquisition of the Australian Industrial Research and Development Incentive Scheme (AIRDIS) will allow Senator Button's expanded DITC to operate the new 150 per cent research and development tax write-off provision, which had been inserted into Labor's modest campaign platform before the election. Three major industrial companies have already indicated that they are considering research and development activities in Australia to take advantage of the next tax scheme.

Senator Button will never be the high-tech visionary Mr Jones is (but then, who could be?). He is, however, much more of a political infighter, and while his stance in refusing increased protection to the depressed heavy-engineering industry engendered hostility among the unions, his sponsorship of the steel and automobile industry rationalization plans has earned him considerable respect in industry circles. The government's replacement of protectionist trade minister Mr Bowen by the former finance minister Mr Dawkins must also be interpreted as indicating the importance it places on efficient industry restructuring.

Jeffrey Sellar

Medical research

Too little cash

THE British Medical Research Council (MRC) is still not sure how much it will have to spend in 1985–86, but one thing is already clear — there will not be enough. The removal of £3 million from the last-minute addition to the science budget (see *Nature* **312**, 582; 1984) has made the future look even more bleak. The council plans to restore £1 million to the budgets of its research units (cut last autumn by just over £2 million), but otherwise fears there will be a further deterioration in its capacity to support applications for long-term (five years or more) research grants, perhaps by 25 per cent. The result of that could be that only two out of five first-class applications would succeed. MRC will also be more selective in its support for research units, aiming at the survival of the best at the expense of the less good.

Sir James Gowans, secretary of MRC, delivering this sombre message on the eve of the recent holiday, also called into question government policy on the science budget and in particular the British government's assumption that the Department of Education and Science must be solely responsible for finding the cash with which to support the research councils. The result, this year, had been that the department had had to look for extra science money by cutting other educational services. Gowans thinks the government should shoulder collective responsibility for science.

Without quite knowing where the funds will come from, MRC will nevertheless go ahead with four new projects on which is has set its heart, and which are:

- A unit for the application of molecular biology to medicine (at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford).
- A new programme in neurobiology.
- Expansion of medical imaging techniques (Hammersmith Hospital, London).
- A centre for collaborative research with industry (Mill Hill, London).

Maxine Clarke

European research

Commission looks ahead

Brussels

ALTHOUGH the funds allocated to the European Communities' research and development programmes on 19 December fall well below the Commission's original proposals, there is now reason to hope for a substantial increase two years from now, when research ministers will select programmes with particular promise.

Last month's meeting agreed on a budget of 1,225 million European Currency Units (ECU, £2,040 million) for the four or five-year research programmes, some of which have been in limbo for more than a year. More than half the budget will go on thermonuclear fusion (690 million ECU). Radiation protection and waste management gets 120 million ECU, biotechnology 55 million ECU, the stimulation programme (by which the communities support national initiatives) 60 million ecu, the "Brite" programme for industrial research 125 million ECU and non-nuclear energy 175 million ECU.

The hope of extra funds is linked with the ministers' decision that two-thirds of last month's allocation should be spent within two years, whereupon there is to be a thorough review of the scientific value and Community interest in the different programmes. If everything prospers, the result may be that total spending over the next five years will not fall far short of the Commission's original proposals.

The Esprit programme in information technology, with a budget separately agreed, is to move into a new phase this year. The research meeting on 19 December agreed that new proposals would have to be more detailed than in the past, with more precise timetables.

The outgoing commissioner for research, Etienne Davignon, was mildly optimistic when he announced the outcome of the research ministers' meeting. National governments had made substantial compromises in reaching agreement on the new budget, he said. And research is no longer a second-string in Europe, where "fundamental research is the best in the world".

Davignon's concern, as always, is with commercial competition in technology; he urged that European companies should pay more attention to the need for self-sufficiency. He had no doubt that the Common Market could be made to function more efficiency, but not necessarily in time to keep up with the United States and Japan. And Davignon was also glum because the proposed increase of the Commission's budget, to be secured by an increased rate of value added tax of 1.4 per cent, had not yet been agreed by national parliaments but had "already been spent" in Brussels.

Anna Lubinska