

Australian aftermath

Political changes have affected Australian science. In the first of two articles. **Peter Pockley** paints a picture of the period up to Labour's downfall.

WHILE it may be rash to write historical perspectives close to the events under examination, a claim that Australian science politics have never had a more turbulent twelve months would be hard to beat. The dismissal of Mr Gough Whitlam's Labour government by the Governor General, Sir John Kerr, on 11 November and its replacement, first by vice-regal fiat and ultimately by election of 13 December, by the conservative coalition led by Mr Malcolm Fraser has brought about an atmosphere of tight security and public silence on most areas of government policies and practices. Yet, science politics have boiled merrily along in the public gaze.

All government departments with a substantial science component have suffered change, not because of their scientific responsibilities but largely as a by-product of Mr Fraser's determination to dismantle many of Labour's bureaucratic monuments. However, while the new Prime Minister is working hard to do this, or simply to neglect Labour's social initiatives, like medical and legal aid, he will be hard put to affect one over-riding legacy of the three Whitlam years. This is the evident politicisation of many sectors of Australian society which had previously never noticed, let alone used, their political feet. Under the previous 23 years of Liberal-Country Party rule, the most successful influences on government were the established forces of commerce who operated largely in a private, sometimes covert, fashion. Under Labour, the opportunities for overt political action were expanded, partly by design, partly by default.

The environmentalists and scientists, for example, were encouraged into political action by the deliberate design of direct channels to Cabinet through the establishment of ministers and departments devoted to their interests. It should be noted, though, that these two particular groups and ministries were vastly different. The Environment Department, begun from scratch, had an activist and intellectual in Dr Moss Cass as its first Minister. The staffing of the department had a strong scientific basis from the Secretary, Dr Don McMichael, down. The environmental movement was among the strongest supporters of Labour in their 1972 and 1974 election victories.

In contrast, the Science Department

was formed by splitting the former Department of Education and Science, whose head, Sir Hugh Ennor, went to the Science part. Despite the new organisational design, Australian scientists were slow to forge a stronger platform for their own interests. Some blame was directed at the department which, apart from Sir Hugh Ennor, a former biochemistry professor at the Australian National University, was not strong in scientific experience. The new Minister for Science, Mr Bill Morrison, was less encouraging to the scientists and bureaucrats under his control than he might have been, both through his critical approach to their work and a certain lack of energy in publicly promoting their interests. In an interview for *Nature* in 1973, Mr Morrison remarked that "there are absolutely no votes in science": if true then his time as Science Minister was politically useless to him, but he only needed 30 of the votes which went to his Liberal opponent to have saved his seat at the recent election, and there just might have been 30 disinherited scientists in his electorate.

Two confrontations

When the government defaulted seriously on science matters, though, the general political climate had prepared scientists for exerting effective public pressure. After a constructive start to 1975 with the announcement in January of the formation of the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC), the government had to ride out two major confrontations with the scientific community in which the scientists displayed considerable nous and had significant effect. The first boilover was the raid on CSIRO's statutory responsibilities by the then Minerals and Energy Minister, Mr Rex Connor (who was returned at the recent poll), following the extraordinary scene of Mr Clyde Cameron's fit of pique in refusing for a time to serve in the Science portfolio. In the face of heavy odds, CSIRO held its ground in the fight.

The second occasion concerned a first-class foul-up of the financing of research grants. There are two principal government schemes for supporting individual and small group research; these are run by the Australian Research Grants Committee (ARGC) and the National Health and Medical

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The old, the new and the ever-present: Gough Whitlam (top), Malcolm Fraser (centre) and Sir John Kerr (bottom). (Photos: AIS)

Research Council (NH&MRC). The funds available to these schemes were ruthlessly slashed in the August budget; ARGC's funds for 1976 were cut by 66% to about \$3 million, and NH&MRC's by 43% to about \$4 million. The exact amounts were hard to ascertain from the budget papers which referred to the financial year 1975/76 (July to June) while the research grants schemes, like universities, conformed to the calendar year. The reality of the potential disaster to research in universities and non-government institutions only sank slowly into the collective consciousness of Australian scientists.

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were long in burning. In the face of an inflation-conscious government, resolute at last to hold the line on overall expenditure, the scientists mobilised themselves with nationwide protest meetings and lobbying through the press and private channels; one remarkable occasion in Melbourne drew 800 odd researchers—the atmosphere was described as “euphorically united” against the philistine forces of government. By late September, they had forced both Ministers responsible (Science and Consumer Affairs—Mr Cameron — and Health — Dr Doug Everingham, who was later defeated at the poll) to admit to bungling through a failure to appreciate the difference between financial and calendar years during the final budget negotiations. Face-saving formulae were found to restore the 1976 grants to roughly the 1975 levels in paper money terms; for 1976, ARGC finally allocated \$7.2 million and NH&MRC \$7.15 million. Even these levels, though, constituted about 12–15% less in real terms than the previous year due to the effects of inflation.

Prelude to the fall

By the time the research grants controversy had died down, the Labour Government was beginning to look decidedly shaky. Following the mid-year Cabinet reshuffle, there was firmer and more competent leadership among the senior ministers, but their economic decisions, although basically sound, were biting hard on many important groups. The budget was severe on the

19 universities and 85 advanced colleges by deferring triennial financing for one year. A “pause year” was introduced for 1976, before resumption of the progression of triennia in 1977. The recommendations of the Universities Commission and the Commission on Advanced Education, for expenditure of \$1,780 million and \$1,681 million for the 1976–78 triennium, were set aside, and higher education was thrown into great uncertainty. The effects, though, were mainly felt by the senior administrators of universities and colleges and even their public protests did not cut much ice among their staffs.

The consequences of the economic situation and of Labour's administration of it did not strike home to the great bulk of academics until their own personal interests in research were threatened. In comparison with the cutbacks in growth of expenditure on salaries and capital, the initial research cuts were very small beer (for universities the cutback is of the order of \$200 million for 1976, an exact figure being hard to calculate on a comparative, annual basis because of triennial financing). Yet those initial research cuts, totalling about \$7 million, did more to lose the confidence of the academic community in the government than any other factor, and the government could ill afford to lose the support of any articulate group. Ironically, when the constitutional issue reached crisis point, many of the previously disenchanted academics flocked back to active support of the Labour cause.

It is doubtful if the scientists of Australia ever saw themselves as the precipitants of crisis in government, but their associations with key political events of 1975 were close and, at times, uncomfortably so. By being forced into political defence of their own territory, many scientists appeared to become more informed and articulate on basic political matters than previously.

Mr Fraser chose to use his majority in the Senate to defer Labour's Budget after Mr Whitlam had sacked Mr Connor from the Ministry for allegedly misleading Parliament on an aspect of the long-running “overseas loans affair”. Mr Fraser also took one or two other useful precautions before embarking on this unprecedented course—like squaring off the proprietors of the three national chains of newspapers, whose unquestioning support he enjoyed throughout the campaign.

With the fall of Mr Connor, his adviser Professor Harry Messel disappeared from immediate view in Canberra. The other member of Mr Connor's tightly knit team in the raid on CSIRO, Sir Lenox Hewitt, then Secretary of Mr Connor's Department,

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Top: Sir Hugh Ennor, Secretary, Department of Science. Below: Rex Connor, former Minerals and Energy minister. (Photos: AIS)

had already departed the Canberra scene, having been strongly encouraged to move sideways into the security of the chairmanship of Qantas, Australia's overseas airline. Nonetheless, the awkward division of responsibility for CSIRO between the Minister for Science and Consumer Affairs and the Minister for Minerals and Energy was translated into a division of CSIRO's funds (\$143 million from all sources for 1975/76) along similar lines in the August budget. Since, however, the budget did not get passed by the Senate until the election had been forced on Labour by the Governor General, the personality of CSIRO was never effectively split by these arrangements.

(to be concluded)