

Australian science

Budget dismays even ministers

Canberra

If they needed reminding of it, Australia's scientists had their political impotence brought sharply home to them when the federal budget was announced at the end of August. In a fiscal strategy aimed at promoting business confidence by reducing the budget deficit to \$A6,745 million (£4,500 million) from last year's \$A7,961 million, and smoothing the Labor Party's path to re-election by means of a small tax cut immediately before the federal polls (now tipped for November or December), the feebleness of the science lobby was made painfully obvious.

The science and technology minister, Mr Barrie Jones, is reported to have contemplated resignation from the ministry over the budget cuts to his portfolio, and later to have earned the prime minister's displeasure by hinting publicly that taxation would increase after the election. Beyond exhorting scientists to make the public more aware of the value of their work, Mr Jones did not elaborate on the tactical details of the successful science lobbying.

Including government appropriations for salaries, administration and major capital expenditure of \$A596 million — a monetary increase of 1.6 per cent over the 1983–84 figure — funds totalling \$A660 million will be available through the Department of Science and Technology, if industry subventions and earned revenue are taken into account. Complaining of the new budget's effect on morale, Dr Paul Wild, chairman of Australia's largest research group, the 7,000-strong Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), reported that CSIRO's direct budget appropriation of \$A322 million intends no provision for inflation in non-salary operating funds and that most areas of CSIRO research will face cuts of up to 4.3 per cent.

An estimated 180 CSIRO jobs will be cut, mostly those of young scientists in short-term non-tenured positions. Already, the staff of at least one CSIRO division have agreed to take leave without pay to bring down salary costs and minimize retrenchments. To keep things in perspective, though, the government has set aside \$A30 million for Australia's defence of the America's Cup yacht race in 1987.

The science portfolio has suffered considerably compared with the others, which is especially disappointing given the importance accorded it in the national technological strategy. The government's total outlays, excluding health, represent an average monetary increase of 10.7 per cent across the whole economy. With a projected inflation rate of 6 per cent, the 1.6 per cent monetary increase for government-sponsored science and technology

results in a net contraction of about 4.5 per cent in real terms.

At \$A1,237 million, tertiary education commission grants for universities have kept pace with inflation and grants to colleges of technical and further education have increased by 23 per cent to \$A307 million. The Australian Research Grants Scheme, however, has had its funds augmented by only \$A3.5 million to \$A26 million to meet grant applications for 1985 totalling \$A65 million.

Budget provision for medical research grants has been increased by \$A6 million to \$A44 million. Defence science has an extra \$A11 million, taking its budget to \$A158 million. Support for the Bureau of Mineral Resources has increased from \$A23 million to \$A31 million.

US election

Shoestring lobbies

Washington

In an election campaign that has seen optometrists and freight-forwarders organize Political Action Committees (PACs) to channel money to candidates favourable to their causes, scientists seem almost strangely absent. The records of the Federal Election Commission reveal only a handful of PACs concerned with scientific issues, and these, by any standard, are woefully impoverished.

Organizers of science-oriented PACs blame their poor showing on an "ivory tower" attitude among scientists who refuse to see scientific interests as the basis for political organization, and on the "bad name" that PACs have received. The result of post-Watergate election reforms, PACs are the only legal means by which organizations not affiliated with a candidate can make campaign expenditures. Although PACs are allowed to contribute no more than \$5,000 to any one candidate, there is no limit on the amount that can be spent on "independent" advertising opposing a candidate; PACs have come to be associated with such "negative advertising" campaigns.

The Science and Technology PAC, or SCITEC-PAC, which claims to represent the interests of research scientists most directly, has so far spent only \$643 during this congressional election; it has made no campaign contributions at all this year. The organization's treasurer, David Garin, says that the group plans to donate a total of \$1,000 to about a dozen candidates in the next three weeks. Garin said the average contribution to the PAC was \$40 per person. (Corporations and labour unions are not permitted to contribute to PACs.)

At least two somewhat more successful PACs concentrate on space issues. The Campaign for Space, which has the stated

An addition of \$A150 million over five years to the research funds available for automobile design through the Australian Industrial Research and Development Incentives Board arises from the design facility of the Button car plan, formulated by Industry and Commerce Minister, Senator John Button.

Mr Jones is nevertheless bravely burying his disappointment by a recitation of the bright spots in the budget. Antarctic research and the Bureau of Meteorology are to enjoy considerable increases, and modest support will be given to marine sciences, the National Biotechnology Scheme, fifth generation computing and a new CSIRO Division of Information Technology. Nonetheless, the minister's exasperation could not be disguised. He remarked that in an election year, short-term political considerations will always displace the longer perspective necessary in science.

Jeffrey Sellar

aim of promoting a balanced manned and unmanned civilian space programme, including both construction of a space station and an increased programme of planetary exploration, has taken in about \$40,000 for this election; the group plans to contribute \$10,000 to congressional and senatorial races. The group has also endorsed the re-election of President Reagan, citing his support for the space station and Democratic challenger Walter Mondale's opposition to the shuttle when he was in the Senate.

The other space group, called SPACEPAC, has taken in \$60,000 for the election, spending almost all of it so far on fund-raising costs. Its only campaign contribution has been one of \$300 to Representative Don Fuqua, chairman of the House of Representatives Science and Technology Committee.

Thomas Frieling, executive director of the Campaign for Space, readily acknowledges that the small contributions of his and other science-related PACs cannot make much difference to the election results. But, he notes, even the "big league" PACs are limited to contributing \$5,000 to election campaigns that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in the House and millions in the Senate. Garin, of the SCITEC-PAC, suggested that the real significance of his contributions was that they represent an endorsement by a non-partisan group that has the interests of science at heart.

The one scientific professional society that has organized a PAC, the National Society of Professional Engineers, dwarfs these efforts; it has so far raised \$200,000 for this election. And nobody else comes close to the American Medical Association's \$3.6 million war-chest.

Stephen Budiansky