

Australian budget

Science bucking the trend?

Sydney

THIS year's Australian budget is being hailed as a victory for science and for the Minister for Science, Mr Barry Jones. Adapting to harsh new economic realities, across-the-board cuts were the order of the day, including A\$500 million pared from welfare, and the reintroduction of limited fees for tertiary education. But science slipped past the razor almost unscathed.

The grim state of Australia's economy is reflected in the plunge in the value of the dollar, and a massive trade deficit due to low prices for Australia's traditional exports of farm produce and minerals and a dismal performance by manufacturing industry. The Treasurer, Mr Paul Keating, warned that if trade problems were not solved soon the country would be forced to take "banana republic" style measures.

Despite the smooth ride for science, the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), taking two-thirds of the budget, must absorb about a 1.5 per cent cut in real terms in funds for salaries and operating costs. This is due to inflation running at 8 per cent and A\$5 million earmarked for a retirement scheme to allow young researchers to move into areas thought to be of special significance for Australia's future. Six areas have been chosen: computers, information technology, manufacturing technology, raw materials processing, space technology, and (human) nutrition.

The best news is for the Australian Research Grants Scheme (ARGS) which was blessed with a 10 per cent increase in funds in real terms. The government has a commitment to strengthen the role of ARGS which could eventually see it take on a role like that of the National Science Foundation in the United States.

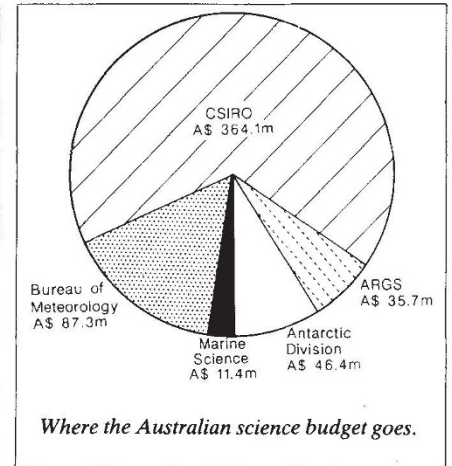
Funds for the Bureau of Meteorology are just keeping pace with inflation. But the bureau does have A\$5.6 million this year to pay for equipment upgrading and construction costs, compared with A\$3.6 million last year. High priority is being given to equipment to warn of severe weather such as tropical cyclones and the floods which struck Sydney in August.

The Antarctic Division's funds are up by A\$4.3 million but ship charter costs will rise by A\$4.5 million in 1986/87 because of the fall in the value of the dollar. An additional bonus of A\$4.5 million this year, following on from A\$5.0 million last year, will help continue the building of new bases, which will last into the next century.

Marine science turns out a loser. Professor Jörg Inberger, President of the Australian Marine Science Association described the budget as a catastrophe.

Grants under the Marine Science and Technology Scheme have been cut from A\$4.0 million in 1985-86 to A\$3.8 million. He is particularly disappointed when increases of 25 to 30 per cent are needed just to keep existing programmes going due to inflation, the falling dollar, and the need for increasingly sophisticated and expensive research tools. In part the funds saved will go to fulfil promises that ARGS funds would be increased. The Australian Institute of Marine Science received just sufficient to keep up with inflation.

Professor Inberger also finds no joy in his role as chairman of the ARGS subcommittee for Engineering and Applied Science. His committee submitted a request for A\$12 million to fund research that they believed essential. They received A\$5.5 million. Moreover the government has earmarked A\$1.2 million of the A\$5.5



million for large items of equipment because it believes that funding fewer, but larger, projects will make more productive use of the money. But this strategy means there will be no increase in the number of projects funded or scientists supported.

Charles Morgan

Science policy

US lobby group still struggling

Washington

THE National Coalition for Science and Technology (CST), the only unabashed US lobbying group claiming to represent science on Capitol Hill, is facing an uncertain future. The five-year-old organization has already once been rescued from the brink of bankruptcy, but unless another source of revenue is found soon, it may have to close its doors for good.

The coalition's executive director, Philip Speser, is forthright about its aims: to make sure that the interests of the scientific community are heard loud and clear in the corridors of power. The work, he says, consists largely of "knocking on doors". Because CST is a registered lobbying group and not a charity (unlike most other scientific organizations that attempt discreetly to pull strings in Washington), CST can openly express its views on key members of Congress.

The response of the scientific community has, however, been less than enthusiastic. Speser thinks this stems from scientists' deeply-ingrained distaste for direct involvement in the political process. Scientists prefer to make their case through "non-lobbying lobbyists" — the professional societies that wait politely to be asked their opinions at congressional hearings.

Individual membership of the coalition (at a modest \$35 per year) is down to less than 300, from a peak of around 500 a year ago. About 30 corporations and institutions have signed up, but they are not enough to secure the coalition's future.

The coalition is run by Foresight Science and Technology Inc., a government



CST director Philip Speser: still knocking on doors.

relations and consulting company of which Speser is president; it also handles several other non-profit organizations, making its profits from, among other things, books on how to secure government contracts for small businesses.

Recent activities include the publication regular newsletters, and congressional breakfasts where scientists can meet political decision-makers. The coalition has tried to maximize its effect by concentrating on specific issues that have not been taken up by more influential groups. But it is far from well-known, and staff on several science committees in Congress say they have never heard of it.

Speser says he has the behind-the-scenes support of senior science mandarins in the government who are encouraging him to keep the coalition afloat, and that the coalition was a significant, if not revolutionary, influence on the 1987 science budget.

Tim Beardsley