

Australian technology

Jones and Hawke make hay

Canberra

THE restructuring of Australian industry in the face of rapid technological change has become a central policy theme of the year-old Labor Government, due in large measure to the advocacy of the Minister for Science and Technology, Mr Barry Jones. The Prime Minister, Mr R.J. (Bob) Hawke, has set up a committee of federal ministers to coordinate policies relating to the many deep structural changes necessary. As well as Mr Jones, the committee includes the Ministers for Trade, Education and Youth Affairs, Industrial Relations and Defence Support, under the chairmanship of Senator John Button, Minister for Industry and Commerce.

On 13 April, Mr Jones released a draft national technology strategy to stimulate Australia-wide discussion of structural problems. His paper, a summary of deliberations of the National Technology Conference last September, contains several proposals crucial to the transformation of Australian productivity. It is particularly concerned with the minuscule investment in research and development by private industrial companies. According to the figures made available, research and development in Australia in 1981-82 hit a low of 1 per cent of gross national product (GNP), with the business sector's contribution sinking to 0.2 per cent. In 1968-69, private research and development was 0.5 per cent of GNP in a national total of 1.3 per cent.

The paper now sets a target of 1.5 per cent of GNP overall for 1990, with the business share amounting to 0.5 per cent and rising to 1.0 per cent by 1995 to equal the government's projected contribution.

Much of the blame for Australia's dismal export performance in technology was attributed to the country's attitude to education as an investment. The Jones strategy now urges that the proportion of Australian children completing secondary school be increased from 30 per cent in 1982 to 40 per cent in 1985 and 50 per cent by 1995. Alarming, the number of tertiary students between 17 and 22 years old actually fell, as a proportion of the population of the same age, from 11.5 per cent in 1975 to 10.5 per cent in 1982. The strategy paper's recommended figures for 1985 and 1995 are 12 per cent and 20 per cent respectively.

Many of the recommendations in this paper are politically sensitive, including the proposal for a review of union attitudes to adult apprenticeships, the effect on training of minimum wages for juniors and the previously sacrosanct doctrine of "comparative wage justice" in which "equal work" attracts equal pay regardless of the industry or its capacity to pay. One per cent of the workforce should be re-trained each year, a portable super-

annuation scheme instituted to promote mobility between industry, universities and government, and industrial protection gradually reduced.

In a society arthritic with structural rigidity, with 50 per cent of the workforce unionized and a cadre of industrial managers not yet weaned from protectionism, the issues canvassed are strong meat. The prosecution of the policy implied will depend on Mr Hawke's skill at maintaining consensus.

An admirer of South-East Asian industrial development and a recent convert to economic planning in the style of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), he claims that previous governments have not been interested in formulating coherent science and technology policies. **Jeffrey Sellar**

European pharmaceuticals

Free trade makes trouble

A BRITISH Medical Association (BMA) campaign aimed at preventing patients from being dispensed unlicensed drugs has suffered a temporary setback. The newly-formed Association of Pharmaceutical Importers claims that BMA's advice to physicians last week to stamp prescriptions "UK-licensed products only" contravenes the Treaty of Rome.

BMA's general medical services committee had become concerned by the growing number of reports of adverse reactions to imported drugs that are dispensed in the same ways as UK brands but which have not been licensed specifically for the UK market. Imported products bearing the same name as home lines may include differently coloured tab-

Radioactive atolls

Bikini Islanders sue United States

Washington

THE inhabitants of Bikini Island, which was used for 23 above-ground nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958, are suing the US Government in an attempt to force a clean-up of their homeland. The 167 residents of the island left at the request of the US military and have since been shifted several times to different nearby islands, living largely on food and supplies provided by the US Government.

A study commissioned by Congress reported last fall that a clean-up could be carried out at a cost of \$90-120 million.



The most feasible approach, according to the study team headed by Harvard professor emeritus Henry Kohn, would be the removal of a million cubic metres of contaminated topsoil. Without such drastic measures, the island would not be habitable for 100 years if local foods were to be consumed.

The urgency of the suit filed this week, according to the islanders' attorney

Jonathan Weisgall, is that the Compact of Free Association approved by the Marshall Islanders (of which Bikini is a part) and now pending before Congress would terminate all claims arising out of the nuclear testing, and would provide no funds for cleaning up Bikini. The Bikini Islanders would, however, receive \$75 million in compensation over the next 15 years on top of the \$23 million trust fund already set-aside by Congress. This fund is used to pay medical and other expenses and a monthly stipend to the 1,100 islanders and their descendants.

Eniwetok, an island near Bikini also used for nuclear testing in the 1950s, was cleaned up by the United States in the 1970s at a cost of \$105 million.

The Bikini atoll had been resettled after the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) reported in 1967 that radiation had diminished to a safe level. In 1975, however, an initial ground radiological survey raised doubts about AEC's earlier conclusion; and a full survey in 1978, which included measurements of body-burdens of radiation in the 139 Bikini Islanders who had returned, found that they were receiving exposures of 0.27 to 1.18 rem per year, largely from eating locally-grown food that had taken up radioactive caesium-137 from the soil. The federal standard for the general public is 0.5 rem per year; the occupational limit is 5 rem per year. Those who had resettled were removed once again, and the island has since remained uninhabited.

As well as taking legal action, the islanders are appealing to Congress for action on a clean-up; the House Interior Committee has recommended an initial \$10 million authorization to begin the work.

Stephen Budiansky