

**Address by**  
**Mr. Noel Noel Treacy, T.D.,**  
**Minister for Science and Technology**  
**to the Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation**  
**on Tuesday 13th January 1998**

It gives me great pleasure to be with you all today. I trust you had a fruitful meeting this morning and, before you proceed to lunch, I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words to you about the value which I place on the important and urgent tasks facing this National Council.

Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank you all for the time which you have committed to the vital mission of providing expert advice to the Government, on the strategic direction of Science and Technology policy. This commitment shows that you all share the vision of Science, Technology and Innovation as the cornerstone on which to build our international economic competitiveness.

I know that when my predecessor Minister Michael Smith met you in July last, he spoke to you about the outputs which he hoped to see from this Council, in terms of advice on strategic issues, such as annual S&T expenditure priorities, increasing the levels of interaction and co-operation between the industry and third level sectors and identifying the key technologies, sectors and disciplines which will drive our future competitiveness and national prosperity. I want to take this opportunity today to let you know that I am completely at one with him on the importance which I will attach to the advice which I receive from this Council.

Indeed, I believe that your role in providing practical strategic advice on Science and Technology policy is all the more important given the opportunities and challenges brought about by our booming economy and by what I see to be a major shift in attitude to the importance and centrality of science and technology.

When the White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation was published at the end of 1996, it was acknowledged, that while science and technology has become increasingly central to our lives, policy in this important matter had been very much ignored and neglected since

the foundation of the State. Now, a little over one year later, we have made vast strides into improving this situation.

For example, my appointment as Minister, almost three months ago, at the two Departments responsible for both Enterprise and Education development, reflects our Government's recognition of the importance of treating S&T as an inclusive agenda. Education and industry represent the primary inputs and outputs of the S&T system. In common with my predecessor Minister Smith, my focus at the policy level, will be to bring about a shared view of the needs and opportunities of both these constituencies and I am committed to driving the industry and education agendas on S&T.

We have also seen the establishment of new State structures charged with the task of ensuring that our public investment in Science and Technology is properly prioritised, planned and co-ordinated.

We have seen the establishment of this National Science Advisory Council which has produced a very valuable first statement on expenditure priorities in 1998.

We have also seen an acknowledgement by this Government of the centrality of S&T, by the launching of the S&T Education Investment Fund - the largest such investment in our education system since the foundation of the State. This new dedicated fund clearly illustrates the growing importance of education, and of Science, Technology and Innovation in securing our economic growth and future competitiveness.

In our Programme for Government, *An Action Plan for the Millennium*, we outlined our plan for modernising our society for the new millennium. The Programme committed us to undertaking a major drive and improve access to employment by raising the skill's profile of our people. In our Programme we also committed ourselves to a development of the Science, Technology and Innovation infrastructure.

As you know, my colleague, the Minister for Education and Science, Mr. Micheál Martin, T.D., and I were happy to include in the legislation establishing the S&T Education (Investment) Fund, a provision which provides that ICSTI can be consulted on the practicalities of administering this new fund.

I am pleased to say that the new fund and the revised M1 scheme which I launched last November, addresses many of the issues highlighted in your statement. I would like to thank ICSTI for the speedy production of this statement and I look forward to receiving other such timely and practical statements of advice from you in the future.

I am aware that you will be keen to know my thinking on another of your key recommendations for expenditure in 1998, namely the establishing of an Innovation Investment Fund. I am convinced of the value of directing public resources for S&T to those areas which are of strategic importance to Ireland's competitiveness. I am also fully in agreement with the principle that introducing an element of competition for public sector S&T resources, will greatly assist in allowing the 'cream rise to the top'. I am at present, giving further consideration to the establishment of a fund similar to the one proposed in your Statement and I hope to be in a position to announce my decision shortly.

I know your Council was to discuss your work programme for 1998 at your meeting this morning. I am sure I will be hearing about this during lunch. I will also be very interested in the up to date position on the work of each of your three task forces, which are all concentrating on the

preparation of strategic advice on particular subsets of Science and Technology policy.

It is a fact of public administration in any country that no matter how much money Government makes available there is never enough to satisfy all needs and decisions are required about priorities and prioritisation. In an area such as science and technology which has heavy investment requirements and long lead times but an expectation for results in the short term, this is even more acute. The areas being addressed by your three Task Forces - public enterprise, key technologies and innovation infrastructure are all extremely relevant in this regard.

We have to strive on all fronts to get the best match between the emerging opportunities reflected in developing technologies on the horizon and our national capacity to exploit these. It is absolutely fundamental that we make progress on this issue so that we can with full confidence and the backing of Irish industry and the research community take long term investment decisions. The answers may not be clear cut in all cases but a range of priority areas will become apparent. And if we look at the foresight exercises in other countries we will appreciate the importance of involving as many players as possible in the process -

researchers, policy makers and industry so that the final results are ones which command a broad degree of consensus. Indeed the process of developing the consensus will have an integral value in its own right.

The Programmes in Advanced Technologies or PATs' are of course part of our effort at identifying emerging technological areas that will be key to our future competitiveness and the PATs Advisory Committee which I will shortly establish will also be developing views on how to best deploy our limited PATs funding. It is important that there should be good liaison between this new Advisory Committee and your Council.

At the end of the day whatever priority areas are identified must be suitably reflected in how public expenditure is deployed and here again another of your Council's Task Forces is engaged in vital work. I look forward to hearing more about this in the course of our lunch and of course to receiving additional policy statements from ICSTI in 1998.

I was pleased to hear that you have invited RTE here today for an exchange of views in relation to S&T Awareness. I believe that awareness - or should I say lack of awareness - has been the Achilles tendon of Science and Technology in the past. Vital research has been

conducted in our third level establishments for many years contributing to an improvement in world class knowledge and to vital breakthroughs in many critical areas and yet little of this has been reported.

There are many reasons for this and it is not productive to point fingers in any one direction. The bottom line is that all of us have a role to play - Politicians, Public Servants, Advisory Councils, Researchers, industry - and the media. Since the White Paper on Science and Technology it is possible to see that we are now beginning to get the message across and there are welcome new developments to be seen in the amount of attention being given to the subject by policy makers, by the way in which Irish industry is now investing in product and process development - and by the way these developments are being reported.

The recent National Science Week operated by Forfás on behalf of our Office of Science and Technology was a good example of how we are beginning to co-operate to create critical mass, in getting the message through and in attracting publicity and I would like to both thank and congratulate all concerned in this co-operative effort. But the process of changing attitudes and perceptions in this area is an ongoing one and we



must continue by all available means to reach out to the full broad audience.

And just as the media must help us, we must help the media in producing the news, the public interest stories and the opportunities. Just as we have to prioritise in science and technology media editors have to prioritise amongst all the items competing for their limited space. The road forward must lie in dialogue, interaction and a mutual understanding of our respective needs and requirements.

Finally, I would like to thank you all for your commitment to date in producing timely and practical advice and to say that I look forward to receiving more of the same over the coming months. You may rest assured it will be met by equal commitment on my part.

Thank you.

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