The present Astronomy Advisory Committee (AAC) was set up by the then Minister for Science and the Environment, Senator J. J. Webster, in July 1979 following a Government review of astronomical facilities carried out by an interdepartmental committee (IDC) in 1978-1979. The IDC was assisted by an expert sub-committee, whose report Review of Observatories (1978) has since been published. The AAC consists of a chairman and ten members drawn from the astronomical community in Australia. It is serviced by the Department of Science and the Environment.

The original forerunner of the AAC was a committee set up by the then permanent Head of the Department of Science, Sir Hugh Ennor, in 1974. Its purpose was at that time to advise him particularly on matters concerned with the Anglo-Australian Telescope (AAT). The AAT Board is constituted under two separate acts passed by the Governments of Australia and the United Kingdom, which are called the ‘contracting parties’. Each of the contracting parties acts through its designated agency, in Australia the Department of Science and the Environment (DSE) and in the United Kingdom the Science Research Council (SRC). For the Australian party the designated agency is exercised through its permanent head, the Secretary of the Department. In October 1976 the Minister, Senator Webster, decided that the Committee should be constituted formally as the Astronomy Advisory Committee of six members to advise him ‘on matters concerning astronomy in Australia which may be referred to the Committee from time to time or which the Committee believes should be brought to attention’.

The functions assigned to the present AAC are:
1. To advise the Minister on matters referred to the Committee by the Minister.
2. To draw to the Minister’s attention such other matters as the Committee considers to be of importance in relation to the Government’s overall support for astronomy.
3. Notwithstanding the generality of the above, the Committee shall:
   (i) examine and report to the Minister on proposals for Commonwealth support for new astronomical research facilities;
   (ii) nominate two of the five members of each of the panels (not including the Time Assignment Committee of the Anglo-Australian Telescope) which will allocate observing time on national astronomy facilities;
   (iii) examine and report to the Minister on annual reports prepared by the time allocation panels referred to in (iii); and
   (iv) make available to ASTEC the agenda and minutes of its meetings.

As its first task the newly constituted Committee was asked by the Minister for its advice on matters raised in the ASTEC Report The Next Generation of Australian Telescopes (1979) and on a submission from the ANU on its proposed 2.3 m optical telescope. In regard to the ASTEC report the Committee was asked for its advice specifically on the following matters:

(i) the implications, especially the financial implications, of ASTEC’s first recommendation, that Australia’s research effort in astronomy be maintained at present levels;
(ii) the provision of funds by the Commonwealth Government for the Australian Synthesis Telescope, and the mode of operation of that telescope, as described in ASTEC’s second, third and fourth recommendation;
(iii) the involvement of Australian astronomers in astronomy at other wavelengths, now and in the future.’

The Minister stated that he would like to receive the Committee’s advice on these matters by the end of 1979.

After its first meeting in August 1979 the Committee was able to inform the Minister of its strong endorsement of the ANU proposal. It also took the opportunity of raising the vexed matter of the provision of travel funds to enable astronomers allocated time on a telescope to meet the costs of such travel and accommodation.

In October 1979 the Secretary of the Department of Science and the Environment, Dr J. L. Farrands, asked the Committee if it would also accept the responsibility to advise the Department on matters concerned with the AAT. In particular he made reference to a review of the AAT’s future resources and the recruitment of astronomers to positions that were to fall vacant in the coming months. At its second meeting the Committee agreed to take on these additional responsibilities. It proceeded to consider a report from a review panel appointed by the AAT Board to recommend on future resources for the AAT. The Committee strongly supported the view that increased funding was necessary to enable the AAT to improve its instrumentation in order to maintain its position in the front line of astronomical research on the world scene. It will be pleasing to users of the AAT to learn that both the UK and Australian governments have agreed to support an increased level of spending on AAT instrumentation of the order of 25 per cent.

Regarding the Minister’s request for advice on ‘the involvement of Australian astronomers in astronomy at other wavelengths now and in the future’ the Committee at its third
The fourth meeting of the Committee was held in March 1980 after the Space Astronomy Workshop. As a result of recommendations issuing from the Workshop it was agreed that separate study groups should be established to examine and report on possible developments in the following areas: Starlab, IR Astronomy, X- and γ-ray Astronomy, and Radioastronomy. The groups will be asked to operate on fairly tight timetables which require the submission of their recommendations together with costing figures by the end of October 1980. The Committee also gave support to the upgrading of the Australian Balloon Launching Station (operated by DSE) and its removal to Alice Springs, and for a return flight of the Kuiper Airborne Observatory (KAO).

Because of the additional questions requiring urgent answers that had been referred to it, it was not possible for the Committee to complete its report to the Minister by the end of 1979. In particular the outcome of the Space Astronomy Workshop had to be included in its considerations. Moreover, it was announced in December that Senator Webster had resigned from his position to become High Commissioner in New Zealand. The new Minister for Science and the Environment is the Hon. David Thomson.

The report to the Minister is now nearing its final stages. The Australian Synthesis Telescope (AST), as recommended by ASTEC, maintains its priority as the next major national facility for astronomy. However, there is great concern about whether the Government will be willing to provide funds of the order of $12 million in the current economic climate. There have been proposals for sharing the facility with the UK, perhaps under the auspices of the AAO, but reports indicate that the UK Science Research Council may be fully committed in its capital expenditure on astronomy for the next 5 years.

It is evident that the Australian Government is aware of the excellence of astronomical research in Australia. The Committee hopes to persuade ASTEC, which reports to the Prime Minister, and the Government that Australia's reputation in astronomy can be maintained only by the provision of new capital facilities at a level commensurate with that spent in Australia over the last few decades, and by the continued provision of funds to authorities such as the TEC and ARGC to maintain and improve the recurrent expenditure on staff, maintenance, and instrumentation.
