

5 November 1999

The Hon John Howard MP  
Prime Minister of Australia  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Since we were both at the Sydney University Law School in the 1950s a lot has changed. I am sure that you would agree with me that many of the changes have been stimulated, and even directly caused, by the impact of science and technology on our country and on the world.

In daily life in the law we see the immediate features of such changes about us. Word processors. Computer retrieval of statutes and cases. Voice recognition of oral communication just around the corner. In the High Court of Australia, we have pioneered the use of technology to bring the law closer to the people. Many hearings are now conducted across our continental nation by instantaneous video link. The decisions of the Court are available, free of charge, within minutes of their pronouncement in Canberra on the Internet, to which access is possible throughout Australia and throughout the world.

In addition to these aids to legal and judicial practice, science and technology are directly affecting the very content of the law. It is happening in ways that would have astonished us fifty years ago. How to protect individual privacy in cyberspace? Whether to patent genetic discoveries in the Human Genome Project? How to regulate an HIV vaccine trial to ensure safety and protection for the participants? In a world of instantaneous communication we now know humanity's shared legal problems. We realise how many quandaries we Australians share with other nations.

This is why there is a vital need to improve the awareness of science and technology at all levels of Australian society. From the freshest primary school students to the highest judges and leaders of the land. Science and technology will permeate the lives of Australians in the coming century. We must be part of the revolution which they bring and we must be sure that human beings remain in charge of their destiny. They can only be so if they know where their destiny is leading, why and how.

I therefore support the moves that are designed to enhance awareness in our community of the importance of science to economic growth. But more than this, I support such awareness for its political and legal significance and because science and technology are the great engines of change for the lives of all Australians. We must not be left behind.

MICHAEL KIRBY