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FAILURE TO LAUNCH: AUSTRALIAN SPACE POLICIES, 1959 – 2023

Abstract

Australia has a long history of involvement in space. It hosted the largest rocket range in the world, at Woomera, and helped to launch the European rocket, Europa. It also plays a small but significant role in American spaceflight and, with United States help, launched its own satellite in 1967. Historically, however, space has also been accorded relatively low priority by the Australian government, and the nation did not have a coordinating agency until the 2018 creation of the Australian Space Agency. That Australian space efforts were marked by government reluctance is often mentioned in histories of the nation's space activities. Yet, there have hitherto been few detailed analyses of why this was the case.

For over sixty years there was a drumbeat of proposals for Australian space policies or programmes, and usually negative government responses to each. The first came from the Australian Academy of Science in 1959 for a modest space research programme, followed by significant internal government discussion around Australia's involvement in the European Launch Development Organisation, resulting in a reluctant Australia agreeing to participate in the organisation in 1963, only to leave once launch at Woomera was off the table. The height of the Apollo era saw both Australia's rocket testing agency and enthusiastic but misguided businessmen suggest programmes; these came to naught. At the same time, the Australian government investigated but ultimately largely declined American offers to join its post-Apollo programme in the early 1970s. Only in the 1980s did the government commission an inquiry into Australian space efforts, which was followed by the creation of a small Australian Space Office; the Office's own policy proposals found less enthusiasm and it was wound up in the late 1990s. Only in the first decade of the twenty-first century did the tide slowly begin to shift towards a sustainable approach to space, with one result being the creation of the Australian Space Agency in 2018.

This paper will examine proposals for greater Australian engagement in space to explore the complex reasons behind the Australian government's approach. In particular, it sets these decisions in the historical context, and assesses not just the government decision, but the economic, strategic, political and scientific, viability of the proposals themselves. Doing so offers an important insight into the nature of the spaceflight discussion in Australia.