The planners

**A wartime meeting**

We are all happy, are we', said Nugget Coombs as the meeting broke up late one evening, 'that it will be a full research university?'

The meeting, or rather talking session, was one of many that took place in Melbourne and Sydney during the war years, attended by some or all of the usual crowd: Pansy Wright, Alf Conlon, Coombs when he was in the country, and other intellectuals who were, in one way or another, deeply engaged in the war effort, but at the same time thinking ahead to what Australia would look like after the war had been won. Discussion at these sessions was relaxed, often lubricated by red wine, and it ranged over large issues of the present and the future: military strategies in New Guinea, new weapons of war (Wright, a physiologist, invented a new type of gun mounting), the potential of the social sciences to influence change, the need for an Australian medical research institute, and then, as the ideas flowed on, the prospect of setting up a national research university.

Alfred Conlon was at the centre of this small but influential circle. Aged in his mid-thirties, he was tall and bulky, with a penetrating gaze, a soft, persuasive voice, and a mostly unlit pipe perpetually in his hand. The philosopher Julius Stone called him 'a theoretician of the social process'. His formal status is harder to define. From 1943 until the end of the war he was head of the Army's Directorate of Research, an organisation which we might now call a 'think-tank'. This entitled him to wear an officer's uniform, which he did to such poor effect that he looked, as Wright put it, like a military tramp. Charming and charismatic, he evoked both profound affection and, especially among conventional officers of the armed services, intense dislike. Operating, as he preferred to do, outside the formal confines of power, and without formal qualifications for the positions he held, he enjoyed direct access to the Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, Sir Thomas Blamey, and through him to the Prime Minister, John Curtin. In addition to Wright and Stone, his close friends and colleagues included the poet James McAuley, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner and the lawyer John Kerr. Although Conlon and Coombs spent long evenings together, Coombs was not under his spell.

Roy Douglas Wright was Professor of Physiology at the University of Melbourne and an honorary colonel attached to Conlon's Directorate. He had picked up the nickname 'Pansy' after playing on stage the part of a malodorous university attendant during his student days, and it stayed with him through to the 1980s when, as Sir
Douglas Wright, he was the University of Melbourne’s Chancellor. The sobriquet did not suit him at all well, as he was anything but soft and delicate. A journalist later remarked that he had as much use for charm as a bear has for perfume. With a drawling gravelly voice that seemed to fit his stocky, unkempt appearance, he had forthright opinions which he expressed in earthy language that was sometimes deliberately uncouth. In the 1940s, one of the opinions he held most strongly was that Australia should improve facilities for scientific—especially medical—research in order to stop its top researchers from making their careers abroad. At one time he had himself considered going overseas, but had decided instead to stay in order to lobby those in government for change.

But Coombs is the one whose words, as Wright remembered them, deserve to begin this book, as he more than anyone else was responsible for bringing the Australian National University into being. Born in Perth in 1906 Herbert Cole Coombs had, like so many other distinguished Western Australians, attended Perth Modern School. Owing to his short and stocky build (and his aversion to the name his parents had given him), he had been called ‘Nugget’, a name which remained with him through a long and extraordinary life of public service. After completing Bachelor and Master degrees at the University of Western Australia, he won a scholarship to the London School of Economics, where he took out a doctorate in 1934 for a thesis relating to central banking. Returning to Australia, he joined the central economic staff of the Commonwealth Bank, and shortly after the outbreak of war the Menzies government recruited him to the Treasury. When Labor took office he became a valued adviser of the new Treasurer, J.B. Chifley.

Coombs was a pragmatic idealist whose vision had been shaped by the events of the 1930s. The Depression had convinced him of the need for government intervention to prevent social disruption and individual human suffering; and in 1936 the publication of J.M. Keynes’ *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* had convinced him, along with many others of his generation, that planning could bring about social change for the better. Coombs was the pre-eminent planner in an age of planning; and when Chifley appointed him to head the Department of Post-War Reconstruction early in 1943, he found himself in the best possible position to influence the shape Australia was to take after the war.

So when he and his colleagues concluded, after discussion on that evening in late 1944 or early 1945, that Australia should have a national research university, there was a strong chance he would be able to make it happen. This was the moment of conception, when the idea of a national research university was set to become a reality.

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**The idea of a national research university**

I**deas about a national university for Australia (leaving out the word ‘research’) can be traced back to the 1870s. At that time there were three small universities in the Australian colonies—Sydney, founded in 1850, Melbourne in 1853 and Adelaide
in 1874—each based on the traditional English, Scottish and Irish concept of a university whose primary purpose was to teach.

A leading educationist of the day, Edward Morris, who is now chiefly remembered for his book *Austral English*, warned of the dangers of having small colonial institutions competing with one another, and pressed for a common standard. The three universities, he argued, should really amalgamate into one; but as that seemed out of the question at a time of intercolonial rivalries, he proposed that they federate just for the purpose of examining and assessing their students.

Morris was joined in 1900 by the journalist Alexander Sutherland, who went a step further by advocating a ‘University of Australia’, somewhat akin to the Royal University of Ireland and the University of New Zealand, to be responsible for setting national degree standards, regulations and examinations. Writing in the spirit of the movement that was shortly to result in federation of the colonies, Sutherland suggested that ‘strong and hearty co-operation’ between the existing institutions promised benefits that would not occur so long as they remained apart.

Sutherland imagined his University of Australia finding a home in the federal capital, which at that time was yet to be given a location and a name. As ideas for the capital took shape in the early years of Federation, a national university became an accepted feature of the proposed city. In 1910, after the site of what was to become Canberra had been chosen, the Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, agreed to set aside land for a university; and when the government launched an international competition for a design for the city, the competing architects were required to allocate appropriate areas for various public buildings and institutions, including a university. The winning design by Walter Burley Griffin placed the university in ‘a situation of gentle undulation’ at the foot of Black Mountain, surrounded, as he saw it, by the most attractive region of the city.

Ideas about the purposes of the proposed university and the form it should take were so far vague. For some it was sufficient to say that the national capital should be ‘the centre of our intellectual life’, which implied that a university should be a part of it. O’Malley, as member of a Labor government, hoped that Australia would have at least one university which served the masses in the same way that he saw the existing universities serving ‘the classes’. His fellow American, Griffin, drew a diagram whose ornate logic linked ‘the scientific, professional, technical and practical branches for both teaching and research’.

Except for the choice of site, Griffin contributed little to the University as we now know it. But his use of the term ‘teaching and research’ does give an early hint that notions about the purposes of universities were set to change, chiefly in response to developments across the Pacific. Since the Civil War, research had gradually become a part of the American university system. Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, founded in 1876, signalled the beginnings of a new kind of institution which emphasised research and postgraduate training. By the turn of the century, these research institutions formed a distinctive group within the American system, and an inspiration to university planners in other parts of the English-speaking world.
In the late 1920s Canberra began to take on the role of a national capital. The federal parliament was due to move there from its temporary home in Melbourne in 1927, and with it a host of public servants, many of whom would need educational opportunities for themselves and their children. The prospect of sudden growth gave impetus to more serious debate about a university for the capital, as well as focusing attention on the purposes the university might serve. Sir John Butters, the chairman of the committee responsible for developing the capital, imagined the university serving the needs of the sons and daughters of local residents, enhancing the life of the community, and promoting the city’s prestige. He was joined by Sir Mungo MacCallum, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney and chairman of a committee which looked into the university question. MacCallum favoured two universities, one (the Canberra University) for teaching and the other (the Commonwealth University) for conducting national examinations.

Others gave priority to research, envisaging a university quite different from the state institutions. An article entitled ‘Australia’s Oxford’ which appeared in a Melbourne newspaper suggested that Canberra did not need a ‘bread-and-butter’ type of institution, but rather a super-university. Its author was probably Professor T.H.
Laby, Dean of Science at the University of Melbourne and a distinguished physicist, who held the far from universal view that a university would be judged on the basis of its research. Laby told a government commission in 1927 that Canberra should have a great national research and residential university, which should be for Australia what Oxford and Cambridge were for Britain, and Harvard, Yale and Princeton were for the United States. Two years later he presented the first detailed case for a national university devoted to teaching and research, arguing that if Canberra was to have a university, it had to be justified in terms of its contribution to the nation. Certainly, it would be necessary to admit students resident in Canberra to a pass degree; but the students who would be attracted to Canberra from elsewhere should all be studying for Honours degrees or pursuing postgraduate research.

In the meantime Cabinet, recently installed in Canberra’s new Parliament House, approved in principle MacCallum’s proposal for a university to serve the needs of the capital, and set up another committee to take the idea a step further. This brought together two men who were to prove forceful advocates of the university concept. Sir Robert Garran and David Rivett. Garran, as a young lawyer, had played a prominent part in the constitutional debates preceding Federation; then, on the inauguration of the Commonwealth, he became the federal government’s first public servant as Secretary of the Attorney-General’s Department and later as Solicitor-General. In 1927, aged 60, he was one of the first public servants to move his household from Melbourne to Canberra. Lean and erect, and standing six feet four inches tall, Garran worked hard to enrich cultural and intellectual life in the bush capital.

David Rivett was a chemist, a year or so older than Garran and nearly a foot shorter, who had acquired a taste for experimental research at Oxford and at the Nobel Institute in Stockholm before returning to the University of Melbourne, where he rose through the academic ranks to become Professor of Chemistry. In 1927 he was appointed to head the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which had been set up recently by the federal government to conduct scientific research for the benefit of science and industry. Rivett accepted the need for a teaching university, but pressed for something more ambitious. Although he had never visited the United States, he knew enough about Johns Hopkins to promote it as the model for a postgraduate university which would be ‘a shrine for investigators’. He also drew a link between the proposed university and his own CSIR, suggesting that the scientists in charge of the CSIR divisions might become honorary professors in the university.

Garran and Rivett, along with the third member of the committee, J.G. McLaren, who was in charge of the government department responsible for the development of Canberra, came out in favour of a university which would initially offer undergraduate courses in arts and economics to the locals, as well as conducting postgraduate research and original investigation. The government was sceptical about the prospect of a teaching university but keen about a postgraduate institution, especially if it had close links with the CSIR. On Rivett’s prompting, the proposal was referred to a CSIR committee, with the distinguished chemist (and teacher of Rivett) Sir David Masson in the chair and Rivett and Garran among its members. Against Rivett’s better
judgement, Masson swung this committee back in favour of a teaching university: but the Wall Street crash intervened, suggesting to the CSIR that there would not be much point in spending the necessary £30 to bring the committee together for a final decision.

So the idea suffered Canberra’s fate during the 1930s: stagnation. Nevertheless, that flurry of activity before the Depression ensured that it was sufficiently well planted to survive a long dry season. There was also a broad understanding that the university, when it eventually came, would be something out of the ordinary, something in keeping with the grandeur the national capital would one day certainly achieve.

In the meantime, something had to be done to satisfy the educational requirements of public servants arriving in Canberra and to reassure potential recruits that they would not be coming to an educational desert. Although Canberra’s population in the late 1920s was well short of five figures, the majority were public servants and their families, better educated than most of the Australian community and more aware of the advantages education could offer them. There was also the specific problem of providing for public servants who were already part way through courses at the University of Melbourne. At the beginning of 1929 a small group of residents formed themselves into the University Association of Canberra to press for a university and, more immediately, to arrange some sort of classes for Canberra students. The Association was determined and influential: Garran took the chair, and other members included his deputy in the Solicitor-General’s Department, George Knowles, and an energetic young librarian, Harold White. Without forsaking its grander ambitions, the Association decided to press for the immediate establishment of a university college. As this was a much cheaper option than a full-scale university, implying no further commitment, the government readily agreed; and an ordinance was proclaimed to create the Canberra University College.

The College, which we will visit in a later chapter, entered into a loose association with the University of Melbourne and took its first students at the beginning of 1930. It survived precariously through the next decade, with small student numbers and no permanent accommodation: however, it did provide another forum for promoting the university idea. In fact, the instrument which created it ordained that this was part of its job. There was overlap between the membership of the University Association and the College Council, with Garran occupying the chair of both organisations, and the Association having the right to nominate another two members of the Council. But overlap was not surprising in the early years of Canberra, when there were many more hats than heads to wear them.

The university’s local proponents tended to base their ideas on the familiar state universities, varying the form to serve the immediate needs of Canberra and its public servants. Laurence Fitzhardinge, who joined the University Association in 1934 when he took up a job in the National Library, offered an alternative vision of a university which was national in its aims and scope, and whose form was not at all influenced by local considerations. Fresh from Oxford, where he had completed a BLitt in Classics, he described a centre for research and postgraduate study where students and teachers would work together in the search for truth. These views were
sufficiently diverse to encourage a lively debate: but however much they differed among themselves, the members of the University Association and the College Council were in broad agreement that Canberra deserved, in Garran’s words, ‘a University with a difference; something distinctly different, in character and function, from any institution that at present exists in Australia’.

Outside the capital, detractors were ready to argue that Canberra deserved nothing, that the country needed better universities, not more of them. Long before the Australian National University materialised, the prospective university was charged with guilt through association: for example, by Queensland’s Director of Education, who described Canberra as an ‘excruciation on the map of Australia’. All in all, the university’s advocates found the going hard. In 1934 the College Council, supported by over a dozen local organisations including Rotary, the Trades and Labour Council and the Canberra Musical Society, took the case to the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons. But Lyons, with an eye to the wider electorate, discounted the argument that a university would encourage national unity and ruled that Canberra had no more claim to such facilities than Goulburn, Bendigo or any other town with a larger population than the capital. With the front door closed, the University Association tried other means of access. Immediately after the death of George V early in 1936, the association approached Lyons with a proposal for an Institution of International Affairs, to be named in the King’s honour, which might one day form part of the national university. But Lyons concluded that the proposal would duplicate existing state organisations, and the King was left with only a stodgy statue outside Parliament House to perpetuate his memory.

After this setback, members of the University Association began to lose heart. They decided to concentrate their energies on developing the Canberra University College, though with some misgivings, as there were doubts whether the College, which appeared to be getting nowhere, would help their larger ambitions. At the same time, they continued to plan for the proposed university, keeping the question before influential people and arranging relevant talks in the Hotel Civic: for example, Harold White presenting his impressions of American universities, and the economist Douglas Copland on the university and public administration.

Following the outbreak of war, the Association put forward an extraordinary scheme for attracting ‘refugee professors’ from the Continent, who might then be secured ‘on modest terms’. Half a dozen scholars with international reputations could form the nucleus of a first-rate research university. Not surprisingly the government’s response to the idea was cool, and Australia missed the chance to start a university ‘while brains were cheap’.

After more than a decade of arguing and lobbying, a national university still seemed a long way off. Garran, now in his seventies, tended to doze during meetings of the University Association or the College Council, and to wake up unsure of which group he was chairing. But by this time, the deliberations of both groups had ceased to matter, except for one decisive initiative.
Education manoeuvres

Education was an activity which the Commonwealth Constitution left to the states. Nevertheless, between the wars successive federal governments became involved in educational matters in various ways, including vocational training for veterans, an experimental system of preschool centres, and a program to encourage physical fitness for the benefit of the nation’s health. Commonwealth entry into the theatre of higher education was initially through a side door labelled ‘scientific and industrial research’, and included the formation of the CSIR and a system of grants available to the universities through the CSIR for pursuing research and training research workers.

Despite this trend towards increasing involvement in education (which defenders of states’ rights viewed with suspicion), by 1939 the Commonwealth’s role relative to the states was still small. War, and then the threat of invasion, weakened the states’ resistance and opened the way to more decisive Commonwealth intervention.

The conservative government led by Robert Menzies, in power during the first two years of the war, introduced a coordinated approach to training for the war effort, especially in the munitions industry. Menzies’ perspective was limited by the immediate needs of wartime. It was left to John Curtin’s Labor government to plan for the post-war educational needs of Australians. Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941, two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He brought with him a Cabinet dedicated to the war effort, but also determined to plan for a ‘new social order’ in which every Australian would have the right to peace, security and employment. He had the support of an outstanding group of public servants, many of them trained as economists, who shared the government’s optimism, as well as an absolute confidence in the benefits of social and economic planning. Their shared objective (as one of Curtin’s ministers, quoting Keynes, declared) was to ‘snatch from the exigency of war positive social improvements’.

Research was essential to realising this vision. Shortly after Labor took office, Cabinet approved a scheme of Reconstruction Research Grants which were aimed at promoting work in the social sciences just as the CSIR grants encouraged research in the physical and biological sciences. These were intended to expedite research on matters relevant to reconstruction, to supplement related work being conducted within government departments and to produce conclusions which would help the government formulate national policies. The results were disappointing. Although some of the work supported by the grants was valuable, much of it was mediocre; and the universities seemed more inclined to use the Commonwealth money for their own purposes than to participate in a cooperative research effort.

Some of the government’s advisers concluded that what was needed was systematic and wide-ranging Commonwealth involvement in education and research. Towards the end of 1942, the states agreed to hand over to the Commonwealth certain powers which would allow a coordinated approach to post-war reconstruction. With its hands now untied, Curtin’s government grasped the initiative and set up a Department of Post-War
Reconstruction, with the Treasurer Chifley as Minister and Coombs as Director-General. Coombs promptly put to his Minister a proposal for a Reconstruction Education Commission, which would be given the task of surveying post-war education needs. The education question, he noted, was vital to reconstruction. But Chifley was unenthusiastic: education was a state matter and, in any case, it had traditionally caused problems for the Labor Party because of its links with religion.

Coombs, never one to abandon a cause he had embraced, returned to the issue a few months later, suggesting that the Commonwealth was under great pressure to take the lead. Perhaps he had in mind the Prime Minister's Committee on National Morale, chaired by Alf Conlon. In September 1943 Conlon presented the committee's report on education, which argued that the people had to be educated for peacetime and that economic and social reconstruction would be impossible without an emphasis on education. Just a few days later, Coombs approached Chifley for the second time.

In the feverish busyness of wartime planning, there seems to have been a whiff of rivalry over who could come up with and implement the best ideas first. There was initial suspicion among other departments about the bright boys in Post-War Reconstruction, and the potential there for building empires. As it happened, the initiative for setting up an inquiry into education came not from Coombs and his departmental colleagues, but from his contemporary and fellow economist Ronald Walker, who was deputy head of the Department of War Organisation of Industry. Walker managed, with a little help from David (now Sir David) Rivett, to persuade his Minister, John Dedman, to raise the matter on a committee of Cabinet. Dedman then appointed Walker to chair an interdepartmental committee, comprising representatives of the main departments interested in educational matters. Conlon complained to Wright that the 'enthusiastic amateurs' in War Organisation of Industry, were 'trying to bugger our education manoeuvre'. But Coombs was made a member of the committee, and therefore remained at the centre of educational planning.

Walker's committee brought together some of the leading advocates of increased Commonwealth activity in the field of education. As well as Walker, Coombs and Rivett, there was R.C. Mills, who was Professor of Economics at the University of Sydney and chairman of the Universities Commission, which the Labor government had set up to provide financial support for students and coordinate student admissions. Coombs had known and respected Mills since his time at the Commonwealth Bank in Sydney. He was a close friend of Chifley and, according to Coombs, the only person to whom the Treasurer's door was always open.

The interdepartmental committee met several times in late 1943 and through 1944, and reviewed a wide range of Commonwealth educational activities. Initially, the idea of a national university was not on the agenda, and it appears not to have been mentioned until the sixth meeting, when Charles Daley, who had been invited to attend meetings as a representative of the Department of the Interior, suggested that it might be included in the committee's recommendations. Daley, as well as being widely regarded as the unofficial mayor of Canberra, was a long-term member of the University Association. With Garran's help, he prepared for the committee a
memorandum which argued the case for a postgraduate university along the lines that the University Association had been presenting over the last decade, and emphasising teaching and postgraduate research in matters of special concern to the Commonwealth. The exact content of the proposal mattered less than the fact that the long-term advocates of a university for Canberra had now managed to project their vision before the committee directly concerned with post-war educational planning.

The committee's final report, handed down in October 1944, amounted to a decisive statement that the Commonwealth was and should be deeply involved in education. It accepted Coombs's proposal for a Commonwealth Office of Education, with overall coordinating responsibilities; this was set up under R.C. Mills early the next year. It also stated unequivocally that there was an urgent need for a national centre of higher learning, along the lines of the memorandum which Daley had slipped into the committee's deliberations; and on Daley's suggestion, the report spelt out the areas which the institution might cover, namely, government, Pacific affairs, international relations, and Australian history and literature. Daley, though not officially a member of the committee, had made a considerable contribution, which Walker acknowledged by inviting him to sign the final report.

Dedman, pleased with these recommendations, brought them to Cabinet early in 1945 and suggested that they be referred immediately to a subcommittee of ministers. Shortly afterwards, he took over from Chifley responsibility for the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, which then absorbed the Department of War Organisation of Industry. This left Post-War Reconstruction, with Coombs still in the office of Director-General, more clearly in control of educational matters. The Cabinet subcommittee in turn referred Walker's recommendations to another interdepartmental committee, with Mills as chairman, along with Coombs representing Post-War Reconstruction, Daley from Interior, Knowles from Attorney-General's, H.J. Goodees from Treasury, and Garran present by invitation.

While the idea of a national university was being passed from one committee to the next, Wright and Conlon were pursuing their own idea for a national institute devoted entirely to medical research. Their catalyst was the Australian scientist Sir Howard Florey, who was head of the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology in Oxford. In 1940 Florey had published the results of his work on penicillin as a therapeutic agent, which made him a household name in Britain, Australia and many other parts of the world. Unlike most other great advances in medical science, the benefits of his discoveries could be understood and appreciated by anyone who had seen the effects of tuberculosis, meningitis, diphtheria or septicaemia. Eager to draw on Florey's expert knowledge, Prime Minister Curtin, prompted by the Commander-in-Chief, Blamey, invited him to visit Australia; and he spent several months in 1944 visiting all the mainland capitals and several country regions, and inspecting the major centres of medical research. It did not take him long to conclude that Australian research was in a parlous state, and he said so at various public lectures which were widely reported.

Wright was in the audience when Florey presented one of those lectures to the
Constitutional Club in Melbourne. In the late 1930s Wright had spent a year at the Dunn School, so he knew Florey well. Having had no success in arranging an appointment through official channels, he presented himself the next morning at the Melbourne Club, in his honorary colonel’s uniform—looking like a roselia, as Florey put it—and asked to have breakfast with the great man. Wright thought it would be worthwhile for Florey to meet Blamey, and succeeded through Conlon in arranging a meeting for that evening. The two men got on well and talked, in company with Conlon and Wright, much longer than Wright had expected, about the role of science in modern civilisation, and the prospects for medical research in Australia. After dinner, Conlon and Wright adjourned to the Department of Physiology at the University of Melbourne and talked on into the night with the help of a case of claret, which Wright well remembered when he told the story in later years. Wright concluded that Florey was nostalgic for home and might be interested in returning to Australia. Together, Wright and Conlon drafted a letter for the Commander-in-Chief to send to the Prime Minister, arguing the need for a national medical research institute and cautiously suggesting that Florey might be willing to head it. Curtin reacted enthusiastically when Blamey raised the idea informally, assuring him that there would be no problem coming up with the £200,000 to £250,000 thought to be necessary and suggesting that the proposed institute might be located in Canberra. At the end of November 1944 Blamey delivered his letter to the Prime Minister, urging him to put a concrete proposal to Florey before he left Australia. The next day Curtin was admitted to hospital with the illness that was eventually to kill him, and the moment was lost.

But not for long: some time over the next few months Wright and Coombs, probably with Conlon and possibly with others in the Conlon network, were talking among themselves about the prospects for a medical research institute when it occurred to Coombs that the institute might form part of the national university which was then in the wind. This was the meeting that Wright remembered as crucial and with which this chapter began.

Henceforth Coombs made the running. He took his new vision to the first meeting of the interdepartmental committee chaired by Mills, in April 1945, which decided that a University of Canberra should be set up immediately, with institutes of government and social medicine. ‘Government’ was probably intended to include most of the subject areas that had been listed in earlier proposals; ‘social medicine’ was not defined. The study of social medicine, meaning the links between social, environmental and genetic factors and disease and good health, was new in the 1930s, and the term itself did not achieve wide currency until a chair of social medicine was created in Oxford in 1942. While this approach bore little relationship to the sort of medical research Florey had in mind for his proposed institute, it would have had strong appeal to Coombs and his fellow planners, including the ministers who would have to find the money.

Several meetings later, the Mills committee came back to the Cabinet subcommittee with a formal proposal that the government establish a national...
university, to be styled the University of Canberra, to be mainly concerned with postgraduate studies and research, and to comprise institutes of social medicine and social sciences, which were presumably seen as offering a wider umbrella than government. The subcommittee made a few amendments, adding the word 'possibly' before the names of the institutes suggested by the Mills committee, and deleting the term 'University of Canberra'. Cabinet accepted these revised recommendations without change: except to add 'an Australian' before 'National University', thereby giving the proposed university, probably for the first time, its eventual title.

The idea takes shape

The choice of the name 'The Australian National University' was immediately controversial. According to Coombs, the name's strongest proponent was Arthur Calwell, the Minister for Information, who was a staunch nationalist and one of the keenest advocates of any measure that would make the Labor government appear to be truly 'national'. Outside Cabinet, almost everyone preferred 'The University of Canberra', which was in keeping with the British tradition for naming universities and which had long been associated with the proposed university for the capital. A third alternative was to commemorate John Curtin, who died in July 1945; but Dedman proposed, and Chifley, the new Prime Minister, agreed that Curtin's name might best be remembered in the institute of medical research, in which he had so large an interest.

W.K. Hancock, whom we will meet soon as the University's Adviser on the Social Sciences school, did not much like 'The Australian National University', though he saw its merits. The name, he later wrote, was challenging, like a defiant flag: 'we are marching forward, we measure ourselves against the world!'. But the flag also challenged interests closer to home. R.S. Parker, as Honorary Secretary of the University Association, presented a case that most academics throughout Australia would have supported: the proposed title was pretentious and cumbersome, suggesting an invidious comparison with other Australian universities and implying a comprehensive character and superior status which the university might not necessarily have; and he added: 'It may not even remain unique'. Moreover, in Parker's view the name smacked of nationalised knowledge, a nexus between state and university that was alien to educational history. Rivett was more forthright, complaining to Hancock that the name was awful and that, whenever he heard it, he wanted to add 'Pty Ltd'.

But Cabinet was firm and, despite representations from the committee of vice-chancellors and all the committees set up to advise on the university's development, the name stuck. In retrospect we may ask how it could have been otherwise. A University of Canberra, so named, funded (more generously) by the Commonwealth and with grander objectives than its counterparts in the state capitals, would have been even more vulnerable to criticism than the Australian National University
became. Cabinet must have realised that if the university was to survive it had to proclaim its national purpose and affirm by word and deed that it was not duplicating the work of the existing state institutions.

Coombs’s main object was to define the essentials of the new institution and to get it on to the statute books lest the government lose interest. It was not that Cabinet was showing signs of uninterest, or that there was any likelihood of the government changing; rather, he recognised that other pressing post-war objectives could seize Cabinet’s attention, leaving the proposed university to languish. He therefore added the university to his hefty portfolio of jobs to be done in a hurry.

Thanks to the continuing interest of the Council of Canberra University College, appropriate legislation already existed in draft form. Prepared some months earlier in the Solicitor-General’s office, it owed more to the Acts which governed several of the state universities than to the intended functions of the new institution. Nevertheless, it provided Coombs and his colleagues in Post-War Reconstruction with something to work on, and it helped them to sharpen their ideas about the institution’s functions and structure. By the end of 1945 a detailed proposal was ready for Cabinet.

The primary object of the university, as Coombs defined it, was to provide the opportunity for research work at the postgraduate level. This would be achieved through a number of research institutes, each with substantial autonomy. It should also be empowered to organise specialist training schools for the Public Service Board, government departments and other public authorities; and to provide undergraduate tuition through a university college, as at present, chiefly for residents of Canberra and the surrounding region.

Coombs envisaged a close relationship between the university and government, with the university able to initiate joint research projects with government departments and to appoint staff who would serve both the university and government. The relationship, however, should not be so close as to compromise the university’s autonomy. Hence the value of a charter, which would give the university ‘a point of view’ and provide some protection against undue academic isolation on the one hand or undue government interference on the other. An early draft of the bill began with a brief but uplifting preamble—

WHEREAS a free democracy has its basis in the decisions of the people, and if those decisions are to represent wisdom and maintain truth, it is essential that facilities be granted for the attainment of knowledge and for the fearless and informed discussion of vital issues;
AND WHEREAS it is expedient for these purposes to establish a University at Canberra, in the Australian Capital Territory

—before proceeding to matters of substance. But the Solicitor-General was known to disapprove of preambles, so Coombs’s ‘bill of rights’ did not get as far as Cabinet, leaving the relationship with government vaguer than he might have preferred it.

The core of the proposal lay in the description of the research schools, or ‘institutes’
as they were initially called. Coombs listed five institutes, including the two that had already been proposed to Cabinet, but under different titles. The medical school, which had recently been discussed by a separate interdepartmental committee, had been transformed into an institute of medical research rather than social medicine. This was a result of a long memorandum from Florey, written at Rivett’s request, which set out his concept of a medical research school. The school which had started as ‘government’ and become ‘social sciences’ was briefly ‘economics and politics’, before ‘social sciences’ was restored by an unidentified editorial pen. The three new institutes were Pacific affairs, town and regional planning, and ‘(atomic) physics’, the last two attended by question marks.

Sir Frederic Eggleston, who would soon become closely involved in the University’s planning, took credit for originating the idea of Pacific affairs in a despatch he wrote from Chungking in 1943, when he was Minister to China. And Coombs thought the Minister for External Affairs, H.V. Evatt, and the acting head of Evatt’s department, John Burton, were influential. But Pacific affairs in one form or another (linked sometimes with international relations or Oriental studies) had been discussed as an appropriate research area for at least a decade; and it was one of Garran’s favourite themes. Garran probably saved it at the last moment when, after it had fallen off the proposal for Cabinet, he stressed how important it was as a way of proclaiming the national character of the university. Town and regional planning did not get as far as Cabinet, perhaps because it found a home once the title ‘social sciences’ was restored.

According to Coombs, the physics institute owed its origins to one of his flatmates in Canberra, the Commonwealth Astronomer Richard van der Reit Woolley, who ran the Mount Stromlo Observatory sixteen kilometres out of town. In conversations with Coombs about the shape of the new institution, Woolley argued that a research university must have some involvement in the natural sciences. There ought to be, he said, an institute of physics, comprising astronomers observing the southern skies, together with theoretical physicists, ‘people sitting around with paper and pencils thinking highly abstract and scientific thoughts’. Perhaps Woolley imagined theoretical work in atomic physics; but more probably the word ‘atomic’ was introduced by Coombs and his colleagues shortly after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when suddenly it seemed that nuclear power might change the post-war world. Probably they had little concept at this stage of what atomic (changed by the editorial pen to ‘nuclear’) physics might involve; and certainly they had no notion of the experimental research that was soon to develop.

So the proposal that Cabinet approved towards the end of 1945 was firm about the institutes of medical research, social sciences and Pacific affairs, but tentative about nuclear physics. The rest of Coombs’s ideas, along with a development budget totalling £325 000 (plus £150 000 for medical research in other parts of Australia), were approved in general terms and referred back to Mills and his committee for elaboration. Winning Cabinet approval soon proved to be one of the easier stages of the enterprise. The Mills committee, deciding that it needed more advice to assist with detailed planning, set up panels of five or six experts in each of the four research areas and asked
them to comment on a range of matters, including the fields to be covered by each institute, relations between the institutes, ways of organising research, staff numbers and appropriate salaries, financial and accommodation needs, and relations with other universities. This opened the debate to members of the academic and research community who did not necessarily share the post-war reconstruction vision and who were as likely to see the Commonwealth institution as a rival for research funds.

The social sciences and Pacific affairs subcommittees came up with proposals which descended in detail to the size of individual salaries and the area of rooms for the various categories of staff and students. Both subcommittees devoted some time to nomenclature; both favoured ‘school’ over ‘institute’, a preference that was shortly accepted by the parent committee; and each had problems with their own school’s title. S.J. Butlin, Professor of Economics at the University of Sydney and a forthright member of the social sciences committee, thought ‘social sciences’ was ‘a rotten title’, and would have preferred ‘economics and government’; but that was not much liked by other committee members, so ‘social sciences’ remained for want of something better. ‘Pacific affairs’ was even more difficult, as nobody on the relevant subcommittee was sure of what it was intended to mean. The war had given ‘Pacific’, as in Pacific theatre, extended connotations, contrasting with the theatre of war in Europe. But it could also be construed as having a narrower application to the islands of the Pacific, including or excluding Melanesia. Opting for a broader meaning, the subcommittee suggested the title ‘School of Pacific and Asiatic Studies’; but one member, R.M. Crawford from the University of Melbourne, thought this limited rather than widened the scope of the school, which should embrace areas east of the Pacific. Better, he argued, to keep the simple title ‘School of Pacific Studies’ and define its scope as ‘somewhere ranging from the Americas to India’.

The subcommittee on the medical research school got off to a bad start. No sooner had it been nominated than a letter arrived, written on behalf of the potential chairman, the Commonwealth Director-General of Health, Frank McCallum, complaining testily that the intended school was headed in the wrong direction. McCallum understood the proposal to mean that henceforth all funds for medical research would be channelled through the university, and that the existing granting body, the National Health and Medical Research Council, was to be abolished, leaving decisions about the allocation of money in the hands of a governmental agency. Coombs stepped in to pacify him; and the subcommittee agreed in principle to Florey’s plan for the school on the understanding that he might be prepared to head it. So long as that was the case, the committee would be content: but should Florey decline the appointment, it seemed that there might be further trouble.

Bad luck attended the first meeting of the subcommittee on physical sciences. Leslie Martin, Professor of Physics at the University of Melbourne, who was understood to be sympathetic to the proposal, was supposed to have flown up for a meeting at Mount Stromlo. But someone forgot to buy his ticket, leaving a committee chaired by the Commonwealth Astronomer, Woolley, but dominated by members of the CSIR who were unimpressed by grand ideas about an independent institute of
nuclear research. They favoured something much more modest, and grumbled about being asked to advise on major questions in such a hurry.

But Coombs, Mills and their colleagues were not paying much attention to these squabbles. They might not have gone so far as Conlon, who dismissed the subcommittees as ‘bloody silly’, but they were surely wondering whether the meetings were worthwhile. Although the social sciences and Pacific affairs committees added something to the debate, the real value of all the discussions was political. Mills’s committee was now able to prepare a more detailed submission for Cabinet; and once Cabinet had approved the proposal, the government was able to tell parliament, with just a hint of disingenuousness, about the process of consultation.

The draft bill passed through Cabinet with a few small changes (including a change of name for Pacific Affairs to Pacific Studies), and then passed through parliament with almost equal ease. The Leader of the Opposition, Menzies, who was—and liked to be seen as—a warm supporter of higher education, questioned the government’s decision to locate schools of medical and physical science in Canberra, warned of the danger of depriving the state universities of funds, and expressed horror at the name ‘The Australian National University’. Nevertheless, overall he welcomed the initiative and generously acknowledged Dedman’s contribution. On 1 August 1946 the bill passed into law and the Australian National University came formally into being.

As Dedman told parliament, the bill was very straightforward. The functions of the University were defined in the Act as follows:

(a) To encourage, and provide facilities for, post-graduate research and study, both generally and in relation to subjects of national importance to Australia;

(b) To provide facilities for university education for persons who elect to avail themselves of those facilities and are eligible to do so;

(c) Subject to the Statutes, to award and confer degrees and diplomas.

It was permitted (but not required) to provide specialised training for members of the public service, and to incorporate Canberra University College, a provision which showed the influence of Garran, Daley and their colleagues during the drafting stages. The Act authorised the University to set up research schools, including the initial four, which were specified by name. There were to be a chancellor and a vice-chancellor, and a governing body to be known as the Council. This would comprise up to thirty members, including representatives of the federal parliament, persons appointed by the governor-general, the vice-chancellor, persons elected by convocation, the students and the staff, and up to three coopted members. Until the Council could be constituted, the University was to be governed by an interim council, made up entirely of members appointed by the governor-general.

The pedestrian wording of the Act gave no hint of the grand vision behind it: for that we need look to the Minister’s speech when he introduced the bill. Speaking with the conviction of a Scottish Presbyterian whose own efforts to gain a degree had been twice cut short by world wars, Dedman told parliament that there were innumerable
problems awaiting solution in Australia and the world if the future was to be made safe and if people were to benefit from recent developments in science and human relationships. Progress in physical science could either lead to unparalleled peace and prosperity or make them impossible. In medicine, the achievements of the war years had to be reapplied for civilian use. Human relationships had to be studied through the social sciences. And the whole field of Pacific studies demanded attention if Australians were to safeguard their own future and contribute to the councils of the nations.

In each of these areas, Dedman asserted, Australia could make a significant and perhaps unique contribution; and the means of making that contribution would be through the Australian National University, which would take its place among the great universities and would help Australia align itself with the enlightened nations of the world.

Reflecting many years later on the University's origins, Coombs remembered how he and his colleagues had looked forward to grappling with the post-war problems of poverty, waste, unemployment, social injustice, and international and racial misunderstanding:

We believed profoundly that the will to solve these problems was within us but were conscious that much of the knowledge necessary to their solution was lacking. It was this consciousness that underlay the decision to establish the University, which we saw as a kind of intellectual power house for the rebuilding of society.

The University was an expression of the optimism of the age.