The maestros

‘Pick the men and the rest will look after itself’

In April 1946 Coombs set out on a long trip to London, Washington and Tokyo with the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley. In London Chifley was to attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference, and Coombs was to assist him in matters relating chiefly to economic planning and international financial agreements. Coombs was also to talk to distinguished expatriate Australian scholars about the prospect of their taking up positions at the proposed national university, and if possible to arrange meetings between them and the Prime Minister.

Conlon and Wright were on tenterhooks. Ever since their meeting with Florey in 1944, they had been lobbying and manoeuvring for a medical institute. Now the moment of realisation—as part of Coombs’ larger scheme—seemed imminent. But nothing should be left to chance. Conlon had a session with Coombs before he left, to remind him of Florey’s requirements and issue stern instructions to bring the maestro, as he called him, back home. He wrote to Florey, introducing Coombs as the man destined to be ‘Australia’s No. 1 Public Servant’, the only one he knew who combined intelligence, learning and imagination, and who, above all, was ‘one of us’. The letter reached Florey ahead of Coombs, and Florey responded in brief, non-committal terms: sufficient, though, to encourage Conlon to cable Coombs, ‘Letter from maestro—auspices good’, and urge him to invite Florey to write his own ticket.

Coombs, though more circumspect than Conlon, needed no encouragement. Besides consulting Florey, who came down from Oxford to meet him, he talked with the historian W.K. Hancock, the political scientist K.C. Wheare, the physicists H.S.W. Massey and M.I.E. Oliphant, and the economist R.L. Hall. He arrived back in Australia buoyant. All these scholars, he told the Mills committee, were intensely interested in the proposed university, and if conditions were satisfactory, some of them would accept appointments in Canberra.

The high point of the discussions was a meeting between Chifley and Oliphant. Before that meeting, the prospects for a school of physical sciences looked gloomy. The physicist whom Coombs had approached first, Harrie Massey at the University of London, had reacted sceptically to his vague depiction of a school focused on theoretical studies. Massey had told Coombs that since the war and the development of the atomic bomb the main interest and excitement was in experimental physics; and if Australia was to attract distinguished people to work in that area, it would have to provide facilities comparable with those offered by institutions in Britain and the United States.
Coombs was starting to wonder whether it might be necessary to abandon the original, modest conception of the physics school, especially since the other expatriate physicist on his list, Mark Oliphant, was at the forefront of experimental research in nuclear physics. Clearly, there was no point in trying to woo Oliphant with a pittance; and if large funds were needed, the government had to be on side. Coombs concluded that Chifley should meet Oliphant, and arranged for the physicist to come down from Birmingham. Arriving in London on a warm spring day, Oliphant was greeted by Chifley who, with characteristic informality, asked him to come for a walk in the park. The two men strolled and talked for an hour or more about the problems of the time, Oliphant’s view of science and the world, and so on. Each was charmed by the other. Later they met again over dinner at the Savoy Hotel, accompanied by Coombs and other members of the delegation. Chifley, already immersed in discussions at the Prime Ministers’ Conference about defence strategies and the impact of the atomic bomb, was responsive; and Oliphant, as Coombs later recalled, was at his spellbinding best, conveying the excitement of his research on the Manhattan Project, speculating on a world dominated by atomic energy, and imagining Australia at the forefront of nuclear research. ‘The impact on Chifley’, Coombs later wrote, ‘was tremendous’.

Those meetings were critical for the University’s future. Besides helping to secure the talents of one of the world’s leading physicists, they introduced the prospect of an institution more ambitious in scope and more generously funded than Coombs or his colleagues at home would previously have dared to imagine. Oliphant mentioned to Chifley a figure of half a million pounds or more to set up the sort of physics school he had in mind. That was over four times the amount originally suggested to Cabinet. The Prime Minister, Oliphant later recalled, was taken aback, but not overwhelmed. And when Coombs warned him that if they were to attract Oliphant to Canberra it would cost ‘a hell of a lot of money’, Chifley replied, ‘If you can persuade Oliphant to head the school we will do whatever is necessary’.

There now seemed a genuine prospect of building the University around a group of Australian scholars of international standing. That had previously been the hope. But so far the plans of the four schools had been sketched without specific reference to the individuals who might run them, excepting the link between Florey and the medical research school; and Cabinet had approved a concept rather than a group of names. Now Oliphant’s enthusiasm, along with what Coombs interpreted to be positive signals from others he consulted, transformed hope to near certainty. Bringing the great men back to Australia came to be seen as the key to success. Dedman told parliament

Mark Oliphant alongside his synchrotron in Birmingham, 1950.
Oliphant Papers, Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide.
about the very eminent Australians who would be happy to return to Australia to work in a research university: ‘We must leave no stone unturned to secure their services’. For the next few years, an absolute determination to attract established scholars with overseas reputations to head the research schools became the dominant theme in University planning. Written plans receded in importance, in keeping with the principle Conlon enunciated to Wright: ‘Never mind about blue-prints, pick the men and the rest will look after itself’.

But if getting the right men was the key to success, did the converse also apply? What if some or all of them decided not to come? Would that leave the University floundering? Wright feared so, telling Oliphant, whom he had met in 1942, that because of the way the politicians had played the game, his participation was essential to getting the show under way. There were plenty of cynics, including the author of an editorial in the Sydney Sun entitled ‘How not to win professors’ who argued that the likes of Florey and Oliphant would scarcely be dazzled by what Australia had to offer.

Again Wright and Conlon determined that nothing should be left to chance, and still less to Mills and the Commonwealth Office of Education. Wright urged Florey and Oliphant not to be put off by the ‘office boys’, who did not have sole control of the project; and Conlon warned Coombs that the two maestros were not only famous and important, but also had minds and were human. The implication was that they should be given everything they wanted. Wright warned a friend, the Cabinet Minister Eddie Ward, that they were ‘a bit like prima donnas’, even though they were ‘such good chaps’; and if they were mishandled on even one occasion they might shear right off the idea of coming back to Australia.

Meanwhile, the bill passed into law and the Interim Council established under that Act came together. The first meeting took place in the Senate Committee Room in Parliament House, Canberra, in September 1946. Through Coombs’s influence, Wright found himself on the Council, but not Conlon. The Mills committee made up a majority of the members: Mills, Coombs, Goodes, Garran, Daley and Rivett, along with the new Solicitor-General, K.H. Bailey. The remaining four had no connection with any government department: Wright, Sir Frederic Eggleston (who had recently returned from diplomatic postings in the United States), Eric Askby (Professor of Botany at the University of Sydney) and Sir John Medley (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne). Mills was unanimously elected chairman, and Medley deputy chairman.
At that first meeting the Interim Council had to decide where to go next. Wright put forward the principle that the only way of getting the research schools started was to recruit men of sufficient calibre and allow them to decide what the schools should do. Accordingly, the meeting resolved to invite three expatriate professors to Australia to advise on how to proceed: Florey, Oliphant and Hancock. Although Hancock’s claim to fame was not as remarkable as that of the natural scientists, he was as well known among the Australian public as any scholar in the humanities could hope to be. Many Australians had read and talked about his book Australia, first published in London in 1930 and reissued during the war in an edition of 30,000 copies; and others had heard his wartime radio commentaries. He was an obvious choice to advise on the proposed school of social sciences. Coombs also had someone in mind for the Pacific Studies school; but as he had not yet been able to sound him out in London, Council fixed its attention on the three other schools first.

The men who received the invitation had much in common. All had been born and had grown up in Australia: Florey and Oliphant in Adelaide, and Hancock in Melbourne. All were of similar age: Florey and Hancock were 48, and Oliphant was nearly 46. All had completed first degrees at their local universities before winning scholarships which took them to England. By the mid-1940s each had spent the greater part of his working life outside Australia and had achieved international recognition in his own field.

Florey was the best known, especially after winning the Nobel Prize in 1945. He had left Australia for England late in 1921, taken out an outstanding degree from Oxford, then served in various research and teaching positions, chiefly in Cambridge and Sheffield universities, before being appointed in 1935 to his position in the Dunn School at Oxford. Since leaving Australia he had returned only twice: first in 1936, to see his dying mother; and then in 1944, when he had talked late into the night with Wright and Conlon about the prospects for a medical research institute.

Oliphant’s career had taken him out of Australia in 1927, first to the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge, where he worked under the Nobel Prize winner Lord Rutherford on the structure of the atomic nucleus, and then to a chair in Physics at the University of Birmingham. In 1937 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. During the war years he directed research on microwave radar for the Admiralty and then contributed to the Manhattan Project. Like Florey, Oliphant had made two trips home: for a few weeks’ vacation in 1931, and for several months in 1942, when he advised Australian scientists regarding the use and development of radar.
Hancock had divided his career more evenly between Britain and Australia. After graduating from Melbourne he spent two years at the University of Western Australia before taking up a Rhodes Scholarship at Balliol College, Oxford. In 1923 he became the first Australian to be elected a Fellow of All Souls. Repaying the duty that he understood Rhodes Scholars had to their own country, he accepted the chair of Modern History at the University of Adelaide in 1926, at the age of 28. Then it was back to England in 1934 as Professor of Modern History at Birmingham, where he overlapped for several years with Oliphant. In 1944 he was appointed Chichele Professor of Economic History at Oxford, though in fact he spent most of the war in the War Cabinet Offices in London, where he coordinated work on a series of British war histories. When the cable conveying the invitation arrived in September 1946 he had been out of Australia for more than a decade.

Each of the prospective advisers read this cable as a tentative invitation to direct one of the four schools. But their reactions were different. Oliphant telegraphed back that he would be delighted to advise the University and that he was in any case scheduled to visit Australia soon to talk about atomic energy. His enthusiasm for the project had, if anything, increased since his walk in the park with Chifley several months earlier. As he told Conlon, he wanted to see in Australia a strong and determined group devoted to the advancement of learning. He knew what Canberra had to offer, having been there several times during his visit to Australia in 1942. At the same time, he was impatient with the progress of his research in Birmingham. If the Australian government was serious about its willingness to provide ample funds, he was ready to begin his research anew.

Hancock was equally keen. His affection for Australia was as strong as Oliphant’s, but more complicated. The memories of his childhood in Gippsland had a deep hold on him; but so too did the richness of culture and heritage that he had experienced at All Souls. It was not impossible, he reflected in Australia, for Australians to be in love with two soils. But it was difficult if both soils demanded his presence. When he had left Adelaide for Birmingham in 1934 he had felt like a deserter. Twelve years later he acknowledged a compelling impulse to return.

Other, personal reasons influenced his response. One was the sheer exhaustion he had experienced, and was still experiencing, coordinating the war histories and trying to meet the deadlines imposed by publishers and his own demancing regime. The other was the health of his wife, Theaden, who was prone to bouts of depression and who had lately collapsed under the strain of wartime work and life. Hancock hoped a return to the country of her birth and the imposition of a more relaxed way of living would aid her recovery.

No sooner had he received the Council’s invitation to advise the University than he started sounding out potential colleagues. ‘There are to be slap-up arrangements for equipment, salaries, leave, travel, visiting savants, research fellowships and God knows what else’, he told one of them; and with the right people there was no reason why this university should not surpass the best research institutions in England or America. He also saw potential problems, relating especially to the location of the University in Canberra. Would the ‘paper-planned university’ repeat some of the
mistakes of the ‘paper-planned capital’? Was there a danger that scholars would segregate themselves from the main forces of Australian life? Could there be adequate safeguards against political interference? Above all, what would be the effects of isolation on wives (such as Theaden) who had no children, or whose children had grown up? ‘What would there be for these women except gardening, golf, bridge and diplomatic cocktail parties round and round in the same narrow circle?’

Florey’s concerns are more difficult to identify. His enthusiasm for a medical research institute had now almost evaporated. Perhaps this was due to changing circumstances in Britain, where the constraints of wartime were giving way to relatively generous conditions for scientific research, making it easier for him to do the work he wanted to do, but harder to attract a team to go with him to Australia. He told Wright: ‘it all boils down to this: What reasons can be adduced for suggesting to anyone in this country (or the U.S.A. etc.) at the present moment that they should go and work in a non-existent Institute in Canberra?’ Perhaps his attitude owed something to the award of the Nobel Prize, which had lifted his status even higher in the world of science and made Australia seem much more of a sacrifice. Also the gossip from Australia suggested that not everyone was enthusiastic about his idea for a medical research institute or the prospect of his coming home. Early in 1946 someone told him, in effect, that he would be better employed teaching people in England than ‘meddling in the little affairs of Australia’. ‘I took that as a hint’, he told Wright, ‘or more than a hint’.

But then Coombs came to see him, and Wright, Conlon and Rivett continued to write eager letters. So he maintained an interest that was half-hearted enough to worry his Australian supporters, but not sufficiently so to discourage all hope of his coming. As the concept took shape, so did his criticisms. He objected to the draft bill which Coombs sent him for comment, urging Coombs and his colleagues to frame the bill in a general way and leave the details until later. But Coombs, anxious to get the University on the statute books, took little notice. With the formation of the Interim Council, Florey became increasingly querulous—grumbling, as Wright paraphrased him, that nobody loved him and nobody told him anything. All in all, he told Wright, ‘it would be a mistake to build up this Medical research Institute with too specific reference to my personal wishes’. But he would be glad to come and give advice from time to time.

Coombs, having set his course, was not to be distracted by ambiguous signals. After visiting Florey, Oliphant and Hancock late in 1946, he reported to Wright that all should be well, provided their wives could be persuaded that they were not coming to outer darkness. He recognised that Oliphant’s enthusiasm offered the key to success; and when the physicist arrived in Australia on his scheduled visit early the next year, he determined that the government and the University should give him everything he wanted. Coombs advised the Prime Minister that Oliphant would come to Canberra only if he could do work of the same quality and standing as he was then doing in Birmingham. That meant a capital cost of half a million pounds over five years. Coombs explained to Chifley that ‘It was difficult to assess in financial terms the benefits which may derive from the work which could be done by Professor
Oliphant in an adequately equipped research institute; but if Oliphant's needs could be met, there was an excellent chance of attracting Florey and Hancock as well. Chifley was persuaded, and Cabinet approved the necessary funds, subject to Oliphant agreeing to come.

During Oliphant's visit, Wright worked hard to see that he did not fall into the wrong hands. He steered him towards Conlon who, during a three-hour dinner in Sydney, convinced him that the Council had a core of good people who would get things done, and managed to convey the impression that he was a prime mover in the whole enterprise. Together they concocted a cable, to be despatched by Oliphant and Florey once Oliphant reached home, asking that Wright be sent to England to talk directly, on Council's behalf, with the advisers. This was Conlon's last major contribution to the University. The sort of influence he exercised through personal contacts and backroom manoeuvres, which flourished during the exigencies of war, did not long survive the peace and the break-up of his wartime network. As he himself predicted soon after the war, his usefulness was nearly at an end. After a short and unsuccessful period as Principal of the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Sydney, he completed a medical course and practised medicine for a decade until his death in 1961, aged just 52.

Wright, by contrast, at the beginning of 1947 was playing a larger and more formal role, having got himself appointed Honorary Secretary to the Interim Council. It was therefore quite appropriate that the Council should agree to send him to England to negotiate with the advisers. The Council also decided to recruit an adviser for the Pacific Studies school. The task of picking the right man was less straightforward than for the other schools, as no Australian expatriate immediately came to mind. Conlon had put forward to Coombs two names: John Kerr, a young lawyer who had served with him in the Directorate of Army Research and who was now head of the Australian School of Pacific Administration; and Raymond Firth, who was Professor of Anthropology at the University of London. Kerr was impressive, but suffered from the drawback of being a local. Nevertheless, according to Conlon, Coombs agreed that the school could have him, provided Florey and Oliphant were certainties; and if they were not, they would have to go for Firth. As Florey and Oliphant remained doubtful, Kerr's chances slipped, leaving him free to follow a legal and judicial path that would eventually lead to the office of governor-general.

Firth was not ideal, in that he was not an Australian. He was, however, a New Zealander, the next best thing; and from 1930 to 1932 he had been a lecturer, then briefly acting professor, at the University of Sydney. Some members of Council also had reservations about whether an anthropologist was the best person to head the school. However, nobody could question his academic credentials; and he had published diversely on Pacific and South-east Asian anthropology, as well as anthropological theory. He also had an interest, which might have appealed to Coombs and Conlon in particular, in training cadets for the British Colonial Service. He was six months younger than Oliphant, and his background was similar to that of the other three advisers. After graduating from Auckland University College, he had studied at the London School of Economics and had continued his career in England.
When Coombs approached Firth with the Council’s invitation, it came as a complete surprise. He responded eagerly, welcoming the opportunity to play a part in what appeared to be an exciting project, and incidentally pleased that a visit to Australia would give him the opportunity to call in to New Zealand.

So eight months after the passage of the Australian National University Act, the Interim Council had picked its men. But winning them over was proving to be a hard job. And clear differences were emerging on the Council about how the courtship should proceed. Rivett suggested, as Wright and Conlon had done, that Florey be offered a blank cheque and trusted completely to fill it in. But it appeared, he told Florey with wide-eyed innocence, that some of his colleagues—‘administrators and professional organisers’—did not seem to view things ‘from the same simple and straightforward point of view that is usual amongst simple and straightforward seekers for scientific knowledge’.

Already the natural and social scientists were lining up against one another, as they would many times in the history of the University. In Interim Council discussions, Eggleston wanted to know exactly what the potential directors had in mind for their schools. Oliphant and Florey were not acting like prima donnas, he told fellow councillor John Medley: it was just that the scientific members of Council were placing them in that position. Eggleston still wanted Florey and Oliphant, who would give the University a great fillip. And if they did not come he was ready to be annoyed, as he believed the Council had done everything it could to meet their wishes.

Oxford and Canberra

Wright set out for England early in 1947, fearful that he might come home as ‘the boy who split the gravy’. He soon discovered that the maestros were not reticent in voicing their concerns. Would they be able to attract suitably qualified academic staff? Would the buildings be ready in time? Would there be an executive officer to relieve their burden of meetings and routine administrative tasks? What form of government, if any, would be appropriate for a research university? This last weighed most heavily with them, and they suggested that Wright should cross the Atlantic to find out how the American research universities went about their business.

In the course of a week, Wright trundled up and down the east coast of the USA and across the border to the University of Toronto, visiting ten universities and research institutions, including the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, the Rockefeller Institute, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. According to Wright, the Rochester Medical School, founded in the 1920s, came closest to the sort of arrangement contemplated for Canberra: appoint a chief to map out general fields of activity, then chiefs of divisions as they came into view, with the buildings being erected in the meantime. The overall image he presented was one of diversity; and his message to the maestros and the Council was that ‘any reasonable legal machinery is adequate for a university in which the
governing body and the staff have a high moral purpose'. In other words, forget the formal structure and rely on agreed commitment and goodwill.

According to Wright, who tended to interpret responses to suit his own wishes, the maestros accepted this approach. In fact they were far less trusting, as they demonstrated at a two-day meeting at Australia House in London at the end of March, attended by Coombs, Wright, all four prospective directors, and two new arrivals in England: Eric Ashby, a former member of the Interim Council, who had been appointed to the chair of Botany at the University of Manchester; and John Foster, formerly Registrar of the University of Melbourne and now Secretary to the Universities Bureau of the British Empire, which was based in London. Ashby's influence on the development of the ANU was peripheral, but Foster came to play a central role in the planning. At Wright's request he drafted a series of statutes which enabled Florey, Oliphant, Hancock and Firth to debate and influence the details of the University's proposed organisation and administrative arrangements, including the relationship between the council and the academic board, the powers of the vice-chancellor and the directors, and the prospect of undergraduate teaching. Those discussions gave the Advisers a clear sense of involvement in the evolving venture.

The level of commitment still varied from one Adviser to the next. Only Oliphant was unequivocal: he was 'sick of the shilly-shallying' and ready to sign on the dotted line, irrespective of Florey's decision. Hancock also seemed likely, in that he stressed that he wanted to reach a decision promptly: once he received a firm offer and the issues were clearly defined, he would be quick to let the University kknow—though he was careful at this stage to avoid implying what that decision might be. Florey remained unenthusiastic. Firth seemed encouraging about the project, but non-committal about whether or not he would accept appointment as director. At least all agreed to visit Australia soon to advise on arrangements for the four schools.

Deciding that it would be risky to press them too hard, Wright came up with a strategy designed to turn necessity to advantage. He now argued that there were benefits in not pressing the prospective directors to reach a decision until more progress had been made on the University's buildings and academic structure. Until that time, the Interim Council would continue in its current form, but would function with the help of the prospective directors, who would be formally constituted in England as an Academic Advisory Committee. This committee, which would be serviced in England by an administrative officer, would advise the Council regarding the statutes, budgetary matters, design of buildings, acquisition of books and equipment, and so on. On the committee's recommendation, Council would appoint a nucleus of junior staff (meaning anyone under the rank of professor), who would work in appropriate laboratories in various parts of the world until Canberra was ready to receive them, say in 1952.

Wright's plan was not well thought through, and he seemed to have in mind only the natural science schools. But the crucial element—the creation of an Academic Advisory Committee—seemed to solve an immediate problem. As well as buying time for Florey and Firth, it would allow Council, as Wright put it, to go to 'Chif' and say 'We are acting
on the advice of the committee'. So Council issued invitations to Florey, Oliphant, Hancock and Firth, each of whom readily accepted a proposal which did not appear to demand too firm a commitment. Hancock was careful, though, to decline the offered honorarium on the grounds that he didn't need it and he didn't think he would earn it.

A little carelessly, perhaps, the custodians in Australia entered into an arrangement which would shift to England a fair degree of responsibility for the University's development. Only one of them appears to have foreseen problems. L.F. (Fin) Crisp, a member of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction who was now acting as secretary to the Interim Council, warned Mills of dangers inherent in dual control, which he thought would certainly develop if the Academic Advisory Committee were given anything more than minimal secretarial assistance. For one thing, if academics were being recruited overseas there was a risk that Australians might not have an equal opportunity to compete or be considered for appointment. This was to be, after all, the Australian National University: and if the Academic Advisory Committee filled some of the posts with people whose connections with Australia were tenuous, the Australian taxpayers and their representatives in parliament might, rightly or wrongly, object. Crisp also warned Wright that harm could be done by seeming to abdicate control from the Australian end. But Wright was unconcerned.

By this time, the Interim Council had swung into a routine of monthly meetings, generally chaired by Mills and held in the Department of Post-War Reconstruction in Canberra. Although Wright, himself a member, was contemptuous of the Council's labours, it made significant progress with administrative and financial arrangements, appointing a Registrar, R.G. Osborne, who relieved Wright of his title of Honorary Secretary, and a Librarian, A.L.G. McDonald, from the University of Melbourne. It invited several academic visitors from overseas to lecture to Australian audiences, administered a scheme of research fellowships for established social scientists, set up an overseas scholarships scheme, and commissioned Laurie Fitzhardinge to survey the National Library's resources on Australian subjects. Before the Interim Council was due to dissolve at the end of 1947, parliament extended its life until a permanent council should come into existence, making provision for some new members as it did so.

Although the Council had a year's head start on the Academic Advisory Committee, the Committee quickly rivalled it in range of business and diligence. Mills thought it would not meet often. He was wrong: after the first meeting at Oxford in August 1947 it came together monthly for the next five months, and every two or three months after that, attended each time by John Foster and a secretary. Hancock's rooms at All Souls and Florey's office in the Dunn School became regular venues for detailed discussion of how things should develop in Canberra.

From the first meeting, the Advisers were inclined to lay down the law, insisting in particular that there should be no undergraduate or vocational teaching (except in special circumstances), and that each research school should be free to pursue its own program without interference by 'the University'. They tended to see themselves as a kind of professorial board, whose main duty was to defend academic standards and academic freedom in the fledgling institution against outside interference, which in
The Great Quadrangle at All Souls College, Oxford. Although this photograph dates from the early 1970s, the Great Quad was little different 25 years earlier.

All Souls College.

This case included interference by a Council dominated by public servants. In their view, evinced more by example than by specific declaration, the Advisory Committee should have principal if not sole control over academic matters.

The Council thought otherwise, though eagerness to retain the Advisers made it avoid a contest on specific issues. The Committee members suspected that Council was not telling them everything—which was true—and they were irritated that Council seemed to think it could interfere, as Oliphant put it, in anything it liked. Council members, in turn, became annoyed by what they saw as the Committee’s contradictory statements and testy tone. Meetings in Oxford and Canberra were not coordinated with one another, and problems arose when reports crossed in the post. To add to the confusion, some Council members corresponded privately with Committee members, producing what the Registrar Osborne called some unfortunate results.

Who should be the first vice-chancellor? Everyone agreed that the matter was urgent and the choice all-important. As Florey put it, the concept was like a pack of cards: ‘take out the Vice Chancellor, [and] the whole thing goes futt’. (He often mixed his metaphors.) The selection process began at the meeting in London in March 1947 and turned into a saga, partly because there was no hot candidate, but also because the choice had to be acceptable to as many of the planners as possible on both sides of the world. There was no agreed model of the ideal vice-chancellor. Coombs wanted a man of high intellectual attainment, who would be a welcome colleague among the heads of the research schools. Wright hoped for a forceful leader in educational matters throughout the Australian community. The Advisers tended to emphasise administrative capacity. Florey was after a good administrator, perhaps somebody approaching retiring age, and thought there must be lots of them poked away in offices in Whitehall. Oliphant looked for someone in his mid-forties, a genuine
academic who understood the nature of research, not a big man in the intellectual sense, but a bit of a social figure. All four Advisers wanted someone who would not interfere with the work of the directors of the research schools, and who would, in Florey’s words, act as a buffer between them and the government, as well as people with crack-brained ideas. As Wright shrewdly remarked, they wanted a man who would relieve them of their chores, but not their authority.

Oliphant had already come up with a possibility: Charles Morris, a former don who had been in charge of the supply of war materials for much of the war, and who was now a public school headmaster. The group in London interviewed him and were reasonably impressed. But there was something about him that did not seem quite right ... and then someone said of him that he would be happier in a no. 1 position than as part of a team. Also, he was very much a Balliol man, with little knowledge of Australian conditions. How would he fit in? Many other names of people in England were bandied about, but all those who might have been suitable were unavailable. Even Oliphant was becoming disheartened as he heard a familiar set of reasons: ‘Papa and Mamma are here and the children are in good schools, etc.’

As the Advisers did not appear to be getting anywhere, the task was thrown back to the Interim Council. Mills and Coombs decided that the person appointed had to be an Australian, though the Council still toyed with some English names. Everyone concerned in Australia wanted Coombs to take on the job, and Mills and Wright pressed him hard. Although he was ‘enormously attracted’ by the prospect, and went so far as to discuss the matter with the Prime Minister, he decided that he could not abandon his commitment to the cause of post-war planning.

Rivett now put forward the name of Sir Douglas Copland, a 53-year-old economist who was currently Australia’s Minister to China. Copland had spent most of his working life as a professor of economics or commerce, first in Hobart from 1920 to 1924, then in Melbourne until 1945. During the war he had served as Commonwealth Prices Commissioner and Economic Consultant to the Prime Minister. Copland was well known to everyone—and that was his major problem. In an academic world where the quality of one’s mind was most esteemed when it was self-evident, he was seen as something of a self-promoter, and this impression was sufficient to cast doubt on his academic credentials. Even Wright, who was no friend to academic pretensions, was annoyed by an address he gave at the University of Melbourne which seemed to belittle ‘stuffy academics’ and endorse the virtues of ‘real work’ in the outside world. But Rivett, supported on Council by Eggleston, argued strongly in his favour: ‘He has certain necessary qualities which will be most useful and, when they are no longer required, he will be old enough to be replaced’. Those qualities included proven administrative capacity, a flair for publicity, vast energy, and a determination to take no nonsense from anyone who might offer it. At the same time, he had characteristics which could be interpreted either as amiable weaknesses or as irritants. Some thought him overly fond of the company of important people and the status which accompanied high office. Although he was born and grew up in New Zealand, there was an Australian brashness about him. Coombs, who had shared a flat with
him (and the astronomer Woolley) in Canberra during the war, liked him but thought him pompous, as well as being a pedestrian economist. Wright conceded that he might be good for the institution, but risky for relations with the maestros: 'he would bash them or they would bash him and there would be a first class dust up'.

The maestros were of two minds. Oliphant, disappointed that Coombs could not be persuaded and wanting instant action, decided that Copland was the man. 'Give us a person to bully, preferably a vigorous and rather ruthless go-getter, and we will all be happier. I have heard some reassuring things about Copland who might do well for the initial period. What about appointing him and have done with it?' But Hancock (who knew Copland) and Florey (who did not) each dismissed him; privately as 'a showman' and 'not a gentleman', which probably meant that they did not think he would cut an appropriate figure in the senior common rooms at Oxford; and Hancock hinted that he would be much less interested in coming to Australia if Copland were appointed vice-chancellor. But he and Florey were hard to please, dismissing even Coombs as a possible candidate because they considered him a 'little' man who lacked both academic background and academic outlook.

Between the Council in Canberra and the Committee in Oxford, it was a wonder they managed to get anyone. Among the dozen or so names floated, Morris was too English, Copland too Australian; Ronald Walker was not an administrator; Wright was too good a researcher (which meant that nobody wanted him); Coombs was too short; and among those whom we have not met, Jackson of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration had no academic background, Wadham of Melbourne was too old and difficult, and Dodds of Oxford had 'a really terrifying wife'.

After several months of searching, and having satisfied itself that Coombs was definitely not available, Council narrowed the list of names to Copland and Leslie Melville, who had been since 1931 Economic Adviser to the Commonwealth Bank, where he had been Coombs's first employer. Coombs had introduced Melville into the discussion, and now he pressed his claims with enthusiasm, pointing out his intellectual distinction, administrative capacity and feeling for research, as well as his reputation as a cooperator. The Advisers, faced with what they regarded as a rather limited choice, expressed a firm preference for Melville. But Council, consciously or otherwise, decided that this was a matter that they were in the best position to judge and wherein they should have the final say. They chose Copland, and their choice ensured that much of the creative force in the University's development would remain in Canberra.
Easter 1948

Although the Advisers—Hancock and Florey in particular—may not have been impressed with Council’s failure to accept their advice, at least the vice-chancellor was now chosen and a significant source of tension was removed. The next stage involved each of the Advisers coming to Canberra for consultations; and by a combination of good management and good luck, all of them (and all their wives) were available in the Australian autumn. The lead-up to the visit provided more opportunities for strains and misunderstandings. Florey was peeved when the Council questioned his well-considered plan for him and his wife to come to Australia at different times. The Advisers wanted Foster to accompany them or, failing him, their secretary, Joan Clemenger. When Council said no, all four were irritated and Florey was furious, complaining to Oliphant that this was the sort of thing that drives professors mad and that it would have been avoided if the Committee had some real control. Foster, caught in the middle, confided to the Registrar, Osborne, that members of the Academic Advisory Committee suspected Council’s attitude towards them was not as indulgent as it once had been (which was true enough) and warned him that they were all ‘rather delicate plants’ who would need careful handling when they came to Australia. And he explained to Wright that ‘the boys’ were really seriously interested, and this made them extraordinarily touchy.

The meetings were scheduled to be held over several days before and after Easter, at the Institute of Anatomy, adjacent to the University site. Everyone hoped that Copland, whose appointment was formally announced at the beginning of March 1948, would be back in time, but difficulties in getting out of China delayed his arrival until after the first session. He made sure, however, that he was well prepared, drawing wry inspiration from his experience in China where ‘you seem to gain great face if you can give continued proof that you have some capacity for scholarship and that your natural home is amongst scholars’.

The discussions were in two parts: four days of meetings between the Interim Council and the Academic Advisory Committee, which twice went into informal session for what Mills, who was in the chair most of the time, referred to as ‘frank talk’; and separate meetings devoted to three of the four research schools. Each meeting lasted two days and was chaired by the appropriate Adviser and attended by senior academics and researchers from throughout Australia. Oliphant, who was already clear about where he was headed, decided that a meeting to discuss physical sciences would not be necessary. The conferences on the other schools proved to be significant occasions, giving the University its first detailed exposure to the wider academic community.

The general meetings proceeded as amiably as Mills and his Council could have wished, given that the Advisers were known to be tetchy. Discussion ranged broadly across the University’s structure and objectives, narrowing occasionally to matters of detail, such as the value of scholarships, study leave entitlements and the colour of bricks to be used in building. The Council tried hard to put the Advisers’ minds at ease on issues that had been worrying them, and on a few major questions discussion achieved
greater precision: as, for example, in their agreement that the University’s training function could be crystallised in the granting of the doctor’s degree (meaning the PhD).

A few issues were left vague and unresolved, reminding participants that the structure of the University was necessarily experimental. Discussion skirted around the question of who should be responsible for appointing senior staff. Florey argued that for the first ten years appointments should be left entirely to the directors of each school. Rivett, at the opposite extreme, argued that every position should be advertised. Then there was uncertainty about the respective roles of directors and professors. It was generally agreed that directors should be responsible for the work of their schools and should be allowed as much freedom as possible to develop the schools as they wished. At the same time professors should be given the right to pursue their own research and develop their departments as they wished. Nobody wanted or expected a director to direct. The Advisers, who had drawn up draft conditions of appointment for professors, concluded that ‘the director would not be a dictator to any professor who was capable of co-operating with others with a reasonable degree of good will’. But what of the professor who did not have that capacity? Nobody had the perfect solution as to who should have the final say.

There was nevertheless sufficient agreement for Copland to prepare a memorandum entitled ‘Basic Policy for Academic Development in the University’. This stated that the function of the ANU was primarily to prosecute research and, secondly, to train research workers. With equal force, the document outlined what the University would not be required to do: undergraduate teaching other than genuine honours work at a high standard; postgraduate vocational training; and work outside
the University (in other words, for government), except when undertaken as an emergency measure and with the appropriate director’s approval.

After reading the ‘Basic Policy’, Rivett offered Copland some wry advice, based on his twenty years as head of CSIR. The memorandum, he remarked, had been ‘well and worthily drawn up’—but now was the time to forget it.

Like all prophets or semi-prophets, its many authors suffer from the rather serious disadvantage of being unable either to see accurately into, or guess truly about, the future. Plans should always be most seriously considered, carefully written out and solemnly cremated. Their spirit will then persist but no one will be bothered with anything else about them!

Designing the schools

In Oxford as well as Canberra most of the collective work had so far been focused on the grand plan, the broad view of how the University as a whole would function. Apart from those early meetings when the Mills committee was at work, there had not been much discussion about the structure and functions of the individual schools. The Advisers, however, had been thinking independently about their schools, and by the time of the Easter conferences, each had a plan which showed, with varying degrees of precision, how his school would be composed, how much it would cost, and how it would work.

Florey had a head start, having presented his ideas in some detail in April 1945. Revisiting them over two years later, he elaborated and amended them in various ways, especially to recognise that the proposed John Curtin School of Medical Research was to be part of the Australian National University.

His starting point, when he first conceived the idea of a research institute, was the
current state of medical research in Australia. In his 1945 memorandum to Rivett he quoted the microbiologist Macfarlane Burnet, who remarked on returning from the United States that if all medical research in Australia stopped tomorrow, nobody would notice the difference. According to Florey, Burnet’s own institution, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, was the exception. The universities contributed little, apart from physiological work in Brisbane and in Wright’s department in Melbourne, and bacteriological research in Sydney. To Florey the reasons for this dismal situation were obvious: potential researchers had to spend too much time on undergraduate teaching and distractions such as routine hospital visits; financial support for medical research was totally inadequate; and research institutes tended to be dominated by medical practitioners who had no concept of what was involved in medical research. Australia could and did produce first-rate scientists, but understandably most of them drifted overseas.

To combat the problem, Florey advocated ‘radical procedures’. First, reconstitute the National Health and Medical Research Council with a membership who knew something about medical research. Then create a medical research institute on the basis of funding and conditions that would enable it to stand alongside the best such institutes overseas. This could be achieved, he argued, if the Australian government committed itself to providing a minimum of £200,000 to £250,000 per annum over ten years. If it were to have the necessary impact, everything—buildings, staff salaries, technical and administrative support—would have to be first-rate. From the outset, he envisaged close relations and a free exchange of staff between the proposed institute, and existing institutes and university departments, so that within a few years there would be an atmosphere of mental stimulation and competition which would benefit medical research throughout Australia.

What form should the institute take? Although Florey toyed with the idea of having an organisation devoted to a single discipline, perhaps along the lines of his own Dunn School at Oxford, he concluded that what was needed—especially once the decision was made to locate it in the barren wastes of Canberra—was a large institute with half a dozen or so departments, complementing one another but working on separate projects. While the departments, or divisions as he called them, were intended to range widely across the subject matter of medical research, the exact arrangements did not appear to be crucial, as the list put forward in 1945 differed significantly from the one he outlined nearly three years later. This second blueprint drew inspiration from the British National Institute of Medical Research, which was about to move to new premises at Mill Hill on the outskirts of London. The National Institute had seven divisions, together with a biological standards laboratory. Florey dropped the biological standards laboratory and shuffled the composition of the divisions to reflect his own experience and interests, giving emphasis to biochemistry and organic chemistry, which had proven so valuable in the development of penicillin, and including a division devoted to his own area of experimental pathology.

Florey considered his own scheme an improvement on the British model, which had been designed largely around certain individuals. He nevertheless attached prime importance to the task of recruiting the best possible men and building the school
around them. The professors would each have charge of a division and would be responsible for its early development, including organising laboratories and helping select staff. Below the professors, each department would have from one to five first-rate researchers, together with a number of research assistants, people who lacked the originality or experience to work independently but who would nevertheless make valuable members of research teams.

Where would the staff come from? By the time he was preparing his second report, he had convinced himself that it would be impossible to find British researchers who would be willing to move to Australia. This left three possible sources: Australians who were then working in Britain (and he listed half a dozen possibilities); people employed at other Australian universities and institutes; and young Australians who might be groomed for professorial positions. All of these presented problems: Australians in Britain might not want to move; a raid on other institutions could lead to deep antagonism towards the ANU; and training young researchers would take a long time. Best therefore to proceed gradually, setting up the divisions only when good people became available.

Florey quite liked the idea of his institute becoming part of a larger intellectual community. But one aspect of the changed status perplexed him: the role of the director. Viewing the medical school as an independent institute, he could write comfortably that the director should be responsible for the general direction of research. But once the director became a member of a university hierarchy, with professors under him, the situation became more complicated. Presumably the director would have charge of a division. But apart from that, was there a place for him? Florey depicted him as a chairman of professors, who would have to do his best to achieve ‘some uniformity of aim and some common standards of performance’, though he would not formulate any general research program or be responsible for the direction of research in the various departments. He would provide the oil to lubricate the machine; he would guard against any department building itself ‘a little independent kingdom’; he would ensure as far as possible that the departments worked together. In short, in Florey’s proposed school the director’s position would be ‘one of some delicacy’—a phrase whose aptness would impress directors in the 1980s and 1990s.

At the Easter conferences, Florey presented his ideas over two days at a meeting attended by sixteen other senior medical scientists. Confronting his colleagues’ anxieties head on, he announced at the outset that the main purpose of the conference was to dispel the ‘fairly widespread and somewhat justified’ distrust of the ANU proposal, part of which was based on ignorance. The fear was that the John Curtin School would receive generous funding at the expense of the rest of Australia—or, as Macfarlane Burnet put it, that there would be two universes of research in Australia, one of them starved for funds. Talking through these anxieties probably helped reduce them, and there was agreement that the problem could be circumvented if the University and the National Health and Medical Research Council coordinated their activities. But not everyone left the meeting convinced that the John Curtin School would benefit medical research throughout the nation.
On other matters, there was much agreement: the desirability of cooperation between the John Curtin School and the state institutions in recruiting scholars; the absolute necessity of protecting the University’s research program from government interference; and the benefits to be gained from a flexible approach to departmental structure. Florey’s divisional plan was generally well received; but there was also broad agreement that there should be room for an outstanding scientist—a geneticist perhaps—who might become available but who did not fit into the plan. Equally, it should be possible to accommodate new areas of research. The determining factor, said Wright, would be the interest of the individual researcher: as this was a university, good people would be appointed and they should be free to follow the course of research that they mapped out for themselves.

Although Oliphant shared many of Florey’s views about the nature of the institution and how it should run, his design for the Research School of Physical Sciences implied significant differences in their thinking. Where the powers and responsibilities of directors weighed heavily with Florey, for Oliphant they were scarcely an issue. Florey, uncertain of his own position, tended to view his school’s development in the abstract. Oliphant, on the other hand, saw himself from the outset as director of a school which would focus on research that he initiated. Their approaches differed too: Florey intended to cover a wide range of medical research; Oliphant wanted to concentrate on one area (if an extensive one) of the physical sciences. As the University grew, it might become possible to add other branches of physics (and chemistry) to the program of research. But for the first five years the school would need to limit its objectives.

Oliphant defined the proposed work of the school as ‘research in fundamental nuclear physics and in the related branch of chemistry—the chemistry of radioactive substances’. Nuclear physics was the area that had caught Chifley’s imagination as he and Oliphant strolled in the London park, and it was the basis for the government finding a vast sum of money for the Physical Sciences school, if Oliphant agreed to head it. Oliphant explained to the Interim Council that there were other developing areas of physics which might be pursued as an alternative to nuclear physics, namely, X-ray, low temperature or high temperature physics. But all of these were expensive, and none was as vital to Australia as work in the nuclear field.

Oliphant prepared his blueprint during his visit to Australia early in 1947, after he had spoken to the Interim Council and to colleagues from other parts of Australia, and he refined it after the Easter conferences. His modified scheme provided for the director, a professor of Experimental Physics (‘to share direction of the experimental programme with the Director’), and professors of Theoretical Physics and Radiochemistry. Then there were to be fifteen other academic staff and fifteen research students, plus technical and administrative staff, including the essential appointment of laboratory manager. Coming to Canberra, he told the Council, would involve great sacrifice for physicists (like himself) working in Britain; but once he had thrown in his lot with the University there would be no trouble recruiting, since his decision would convince first-class men that he had ‘a passionate belief in the future of the National University’. He calculated
that the school would cost at least £500 000 for capital expenditure over the first five years, and £65 050 annually for salaries and other running costs.

The plan for the Social Sciences school took the form of an eleven-page letter which Hancock wrote to Mills in mid-1947. With a characteristic blend of self-deprecation and self-confidence, he explained to Mills that he had chosen to express his ideas in the form of ‘epistolary chatter’ because he did not want to make the screech read like ‘a systematic exposition of scientific principles’. Elegantly written, the letter seemed almost deliberately imprecise. In contrast to the blueprints of Florey and Oliphant, it had little to say about money, which did not interest Hancock and which he thought ought to be left to the administrators—although a year later, during the Easter conferences, he did prepare a supplementary memorandum which estimated the annual cost of the school, three or four years after establishment, at £60 000. What the letter did provide, as the blueprints of Florey and Oliphant did not, was a detailed exposition of the work of the school and how it would be done.

‘Planning to me’, he later wrote, ‘means not so much the imposition of a design upon life as guidance bringing gradually to view a design already implicit in healthy growth’. Avoiding the term ‘departments’, which he took to suggest rigidity and segregation, he presented a list of headings which he referred to as ‘growing points’: Economics, Statistics, Population and Health Studies, Law, Political Science, Social Anthropology, Psychology, History and Philosophy, Sociology, Geography. Not all of these areas would require early appointments. Some researchers might embrace two or more; some headings, such as Social Anthropology, might fit more comfortably in Pacific Studies; others, notably Psychology, might wait until the school could define its needs more precisely. History and Philosophy were essential, to ensure that the school did not degenerate into ‘an aggregate of people myopically focussed upon their own tiny segment of place and time and research material’. But for the purposes of the school these should be seen less as subject areas than as fundamental training essential to many branches of social research.

So Hancock narrowed his list to half a dozen chief researchers, in Economics, Statistics, Demography, Law, Political Science and Anthropology. Hoping at first to escape the term professor, he soon decided it could not be avoided (though he did not say why). In addition, there were to be thirteen other staff of varying status, including a geographer, a cartographer, and a philosopher who would do ‘gadfly work’ around the school, stimulating his colleagues about methodological questions and encouraging them to set their research in a wide context. A year later, however, after comparing ideas with Firth and other colleagues, he moved towards ‘a more coherent grouping of subjects’, comprising Economics, Politics and Sociology, each of which would have a professorial head. And to provide a basis for historical research, he now advocated a readership in the Sources of Australian History. He concluded that the school at maturity should number at least twenty to twenty-five staff.

There was always some ambiguity about what Hancock meant by ‘growing points’. He liked to present them as areas of thought or perhaps of specific research. But in his own mind they generally took the form of individual researchers. ‘Ideas without
men', he later wrote, 'don’t excite me'. For Hancock, more than any other of his fellow Advisers, outstanding researchers were the foundations upon which the school would be built, and without which any paper plans would be worthless.

His discussion of staff arrangements led him to the question of relations with the Research School of Pacific Studies, and here he sounded a warning. As one school was based on mental disciplines and the other on geography, there would obviously be many points of overlap. It was therefore essential to have good relations between the schools and their directors. ‘A bad school of Pacific Studies, under a bad head, would make life very difficult indeed for the School of Social Sciences.’ But if Firth were in charge of Pacific Studies, all the potential problems would disappear in stimulating and fruitful collaboration. Working with him would be ‘a delight’.

When Firth came to the job of drafting a blueprint, he found that others had been at the drawing board before him, especially Eggleston, who had put forward his own plans well before Firth had been enlisted as an Adviser. Eggleston wanted the emphasis to be on Asia, and would have preferred the title ‘School of Pacific and Asiatic Studies’. He saw it as a means of remedying Australia’s ignorance of the region and of responding to the major questions confronting Australia and its neighbours. He looked forward to visits from Chinese and Indian scholars, who could impart first-hand knowledge of Asiatic cultures. The school was also to have a vocational purpose: as a former diplomat he recognised an urgent need for training diplomatic cadets and colonial officials.

Firth, although aware of Eggleston’s views, concluded (reasonably enough) that as the Interim Council had invited an anthropologist to advise them, they would be receptive to an emphasis on ‘human studies’ over politics. His anthropological perspective suggested that the major field of research should be the Pacific island territories for which Australia was responsible. Chinese and Japanese affairs should also be considered, but only to the extent that conditions in these countries affected Australia and its Pacific island territories.

Eggleston had never been in favour of having an anthropologist as director, preferring someone with ‘a broader approach’, and specifically a geographer. Now he was confronted with ‘a plan which concentrated somewhat narrowly on Anthropology in a limited area’. However, he and his fellow councillors concluded that any school which Firth directed would do distinguished work and therefore accepted the plan, with one major proviso: the school would also study the political problems of the Pacific, including the role of the major powers in the region and the development of new national communities. Thus the most significant element of what we might call the ‘Pacific affairs approach’, championed by Eggleston the diplomat, was244

ted on
to the ‘Pacific studies approach’, prepared by Firth the anthropologist.

In many respects the approaches were, almost literally, oceans apart. The differences came out strongly at the Easter conferences, especially during the discussion of how history should be covered in the school. Firth argued that the minitiae of the Pacific might prove to be ‘the ultimate explanatory forces behind the history of the area’, and Hancock, in his support, warned against synthesising in
Hancock addresses the conference on research in the social sciences, Easter 1948. Identifiable faces include, at the far left of the photograph and looking towards Hancock, R.M. Crawford (Professor of History, University of Melbourne); moving to his left, Herbert (Joe) Burton (Associate Professor of Economic History, Melbourne), E.H. Clark, R.G. Osborne, Hancock and Mills; at the centre of the far table, J.M. Ward (Challis Professor of History and later Vice-Chancellor, University of Sydney); to his right, Gordon Greenwood, Professor of History, University of Queensland) and two to his left, Richard Downing (Senior Lecturer in Economics, University of Melbourne, and later Chairman of the ABC); Firth is furthest to the right of the photograph: Eggleston is in the foreground, hand on forehead, and Paul Hasluck (Reader in History, University of Western Australia, and later Minister in the Menzies government and Governor-General) two to his right.

*Australian Official Photograph, ANU Collection.*

advance of sufficient detail. Eggleston, on the other hand, spoke of ‘the stockbroker who spent his life making decisions on insufficient evidence and ended up by being a millionaire’. His concerns were immediate and urgent: what was needed was a good political history which would provide a sound basis for understanding the present.

Firth never got around to amending his plan to meet Council’s wishes. Early in 1949, having reached the conclusion that he and his wife were culturally Europeans and that they would not be prepared to come permanently to Australia, he resigned from the Academic Advisory Committee. Eggleston at once seized the opportunity to do away with the ‘microcosmic approach’ and substituted a ‘broader conception of the scope of the School’. In a revised plan which he worked out with Copland, the geographical boundaries were extended to Asia, including India, South-east Asia, China and Japan, and the emphasis of research was reoriented to practical questions
facing Australia. Firth’s three sections were replaced by seven major departments: Geography, Demography, Political Science, History, Anthropology, Economics and Linguistics. The Department of Demography would study overpopulation in the region and its effects on world tension; Political Science would analyse developments as the European powers withdrew from the region; and Anthropology would focus on the problems arising out of the clash of races, the political aspects of tribal organisation and the behaviour of peoples in various stages of development.

While the new blueprint supposedly drew on Firth’s plan, in fact it owed much more to Eggleston. Firth’s situation was therefore rather incongruous when, in mid-1949, he was persuaded to resume the role of Adviser and charged with giving effect to the plan over the next three years, one of which he would spend in Canberra. By this time, however, the selection and appointment of new staff had assumed priority. Theoretical points about the school’s overall purpose and geographical scope were overtaken by the practicalities of getting on with the job.

The intended relationship between the Pacific Studies and Social Sciences schools remained ambiguous. During the Easter discussions, the economist (and future Vice-Chancellor) J.G. Crawford remarked that it would be almost impossible to differentiate between the work of the two schools, and the historian and diplomat (and future Governor-General) Paul Hasluck left the conference doubting whether Pacific Studies should exist at all. Eggleston, however, was confident that each school would rely on work done in the other, and overlapping would be avoided. Firth came closest to providing a resolution to the problem in his happy vision of ‘a large building with two doors, one of which was labelled School of Social Sciences and the other School of Pacific Studies’. Although he elaborated the picture, probably none of the planners knew for certain how the researchers behind one door differed from those behind the other: except, of course, that one group enjoyed ocean views while the other had windows on the world.

There was an occasional hint that research in Pacific Studies might be more empirical than work in Social Sciences. Eggleston was no friend to what he called ‘mere descriptive fact-finding’. But his own comments to the effect that Pacific Studies would be concerned with practical questions and Social Sciences with ‘fundamental social truths’ did, in the absence of any clearer definition, suggest a more empirical role for the Pacific Studies school. So too did his eagerness that the school should embark on the production of a Pacific atlas, intended as an indispensable research tool for scholars in both schools. Crawford, speaking about economics in Pacific Studies, was more explicit: fact-finding should play an important part, while the study of universals would have to be limited. The theorist, he argued, would probably be better placed in Social Sciences.

Was there any feature of the school that would bind it together, beyond its regional orientation? At the end of the Easter conferences, Firth remarked that several people seemed bothered about the apparent lack of theoretical unity. There was, however, general agreement that the school would have ‘value and interest’ as a focus. Firth also thought it would need a general theory of society as a background to all its activities. But what exactly he had in mind the school would never know.
Hancock had left Australia after the Easter conferences fairly confident that he would be returning as a foundation director and generally pleased with how discussions had gone. At the second meeting with the Interim Council, he later wrote, everybody seemed to be in agreement with everybody else. With the benefit of hindsight he saw this as a bad omen.

There was, as Wright had predicted, ‘a first class dust up’. Hancock made it famous several years later when, in his autobiographical work *Country and Calling*, he told just enough of the story to make everyone who read it want to know more. His account focused on a meeting between himself and the Vice-Chancellor on a bench in London’s St James’s Park; and, perhaps deliberately, he blurred the circumstances which preceded it. That meeting and its context reveal so much of where the University, and especially the Research School of Social Sciences, was headed that we should pause near the bench to compose a wider and sharper picture.

The exchange occurred a year after the Easter conferences. As soon as he arrived back in Oxford Hancock threw himself into the task of recruiting a group of senior colleagues, four or five men of first quality. Success in this endeavour was the key to his coming: if he could recruit the nucleus of a professoriate, he would come; if not, he would not. From his investigations while in Australia, he concluded that, with one exception, there was little chance of finding anyone there. He therefore searched diligently within Britain and came up with some esteemed names: Max Beloff of Oxford or Nicholas Mansergh of the Royal Institute of International Affairs for Political Science, R.M. Titmuss of the London School of Economics for Sociology. Their responses, for the most part, were politely unenthusiastic: ‘The true pioneering spirit may be lacking’, said Beloff. Hancock even looked across the Atlantic, but with no more success.

What he most wanted was an economist, preferably ‘someone of experience and reputation, and middle age’. It appeared that such people were hard to come by, as opportunities for economists in various parts of the world were good. Perhaps Arthur Smithies, an Australian-born economist in the United States, might answer ‘the call of the kookaburra’, or at least give advice. But Smithies replied that he was quite at a loss to think of anyone in the United States who would be willing to go to Australia and whom he would recommend. There were plenty, he said, who would meet one of those conditions, but none who would meet both.

By the end of 1948, Hancock’s recruiting efforts were becoming embarrassing, not just for himself but for other people who had the University’s interests at heart. Trevor Swan, a colleague of Coombs attending a conference in Paris, wrote home that he had had lunch on three successive days with three different economists, each of whom confessed to a Canberra invitation. By February Hancock was prepared to scale down his requirements to ‘just one good man’ and decided to try Roland Wilson, another economist who had been recommended by Copland. If Wilson said no, he wrote, ‘I shall feel close to the edge of failure’.
Just when Hancock’s prospects seemed most gloomy, Firth made his decision to resign from the Academic Advisory Committee. Hancock was sorry to hear this; but, like Eggleston from another perspective, he immediately recognised the opportunity it offered. He had always had misgivings about the relationship between the two schools. Why not now give up the idea of a separate Research School of Pacific Studies and go for Social Sciences, allowing it to make the most of its Pacific opportunities? In a few years, a Pacific Studies school might grow out of this ‘joint school’. This would solve the problem of recruitment: with the field of research thus widened, there should be no problem finding two or three professors very quickly. As luck would have it, he had just heard from his old friend W.R. Crocker, who was then Chief of the Africa Section in the Trusteeship Department of the United Nations in New York, and keen to return to Australia. Why not appoint him to a chair of International Organisation? Then there was J.W. Davidson, a young Cambridge man, whom Firth had already enlisted as Professor of Pacific History.

After mulling over the idea for a couple of weeks, Hancock put it forward enthusiastically in a letter to Copland, but with a significant revision. Why not get both schools under way in conjunction under a single director, who would have responsibility for building them until such time as Council decided that each had grown sufficiently to be able to stand apart? So confident was he of getting his men that he told Copland that he would accept the position of director immediately, if Council agreed to his proposal.

But Council did not agree. While Mills and Copland might have been prepared to compromise, several other members were adamant—especially Eggleston, who had already prepared the memorandum designed to bend the Pacific school towards its original objectives. Leaving aside the question of what work the school might be expected
to do, Eggleston was determined that it should remain an integral part of the University. After all, an emphasis on Pacific studies had helped persuade the government to accept the university proposal in the first place, and to make a fundamental change at this early stage might jeopardise the whole scheme. So Council determined to leave the immediate future of the school to Copland and Eggleston, and instructed Copland to tell Hancock firmly and politely that his idea was not acceptable.

This rebuttal was unexpected and unwelcome. Hancock, armed with a rejection from yet another economist, spelt out to Copland the dimensions of the problem as he saw it and warned Council that it was in danger of adopting ways and means which would cause the miscarriage of both schools. He also passed on a comment from Davidson that, now that Firth had withdrawn, he would be prepared to go to Canberra with Hancock but with nobody else, adding that other men were likely to make the same condition. This was a bad tactic, serving only to confirm Eggleston's view that Council should stand its ground. And the veiled threat was undermined when Davidson, in Canberra shortly after Hancock had approached him, said nothing about coming only if Hancock were appointed director.

In mid-April 1949, Copland set out on a visit to Britain and the United States that had been planned well before Hancock had broached his scheme for a single director. If he had any illusions about the import of his forthcoming negotiations, they were dispelled by a letter from John Foster who warned that Hancock was about to pull out and that, with two Advisers gone, the others were likely to follow suit. But Eggleston, having read the same letter, steeled Copland's hand: 'The matter', he told Copland, 'is personal to Hancock; he is unable to get a team in Social Studies and now wants to make a radical change in arrangements, a change which does not seem to be in consonance with our responsibilities under the Act'. As for the other members of the Committee, what reason could they possibly give for dropping out simply because Hancock refused the University's offer? 'I resent this ganging up very much', he added privately, 'and I would not mind if none of them came'. The University would succeed without them; he had never favoured Oliphant's concentration on nuclear physics, and it seemed now that Rivett and one or two others shared his misgivings—'so no irreparable damage would be done if they all refused'.

The careful planning was showing signs of turning into a muddle.

Arriving in London on Thursday 21 April, Copland seemed little weighed down by the responsibilities he was carrying. The next day he wrote a cheery note to 'My dear Keith', looking forward to the lunch they had arranged for next week, hoping he hadn't been unduly worried, and expressing confidence that all the problems could be satisfactorily solved. On Saturday he saw Oliphant, and Firth (who had already agreed to remain as Adviser until a successor could be found), and explained to them Council's point of view. Then, on Wednesday, came the meeting with Hancock. recalled so wistfully by Hancock in Country and Calling:

The Vice-Chancellor has just arrived from Canberra and he and I are sitting together on a bench in Saint James's Park. He opens the talk and I follow.
Within ten minutes everything is finished between the Australian National University and me. The Vice-Chancellor and I linger a little in the sunshine and chat amiably about this and that.

My misery that day and for many days and weeks to come was great ...

Several months after the meeting he recounted it to Firth in similar terms. Copland, he said, had mentioned other workable schemes, but he was adamant that his own proposal would not be considered. 'When he told me that I felt sick. It happened in the first five minutes and we broke then.'

Did he mean 'we broke for lunch'? Or perhaps 'we broke to resume for a longer session later in the day'? Or if the rupture came so soon, did all later discussion seem to Hancock to be nothing more than amiable chat about this and that? For more discussion there certainly was, and almost certainly it took place on that same day. Copland, in a private letter to Mills the following Monday, recorded a discussion extending over four hours, which explored various options for getting the two schools under way. But Hancock, Copland reported, had apparently made up his mind that the two schools should be associated under him in their initial stages. That left no room for compromise. For his part, Hancock complained that Copland 'never really explored my mind' and concluded that Council, in its obstinacy, had condemned itself to many years of chasing shadows. A few days after the meeting on the park bench, the Academic Advisory Committee held a meeting at All Souls, with the Vice-Chancellor present, and Hancock formally submitted his resignation.

In the days that followed, Hancock continued to hope for some compromise; but Copland showed no sign of backing down, or even of seeking some resolution which would bring him back into the fold. So Hancock became, as he told Mills, 'very sore at the National University' and convinced that it would end up a second-rate show. Towards the end of Copland's month-long stay, Hancock invited him to his home for tea in what was presumably intended as a gesture of goodwill. It went badly, with Mrs Hancock telling Copland exactly what she thought of Australia, the University and its Vice-Chancellor, including a remark that he was a second-rate economist. But relations between the two men remained cordial: 'As chaps', Hancock told Mills, 'we got on very well and we parted excellent friends'. And Copland congratulated himself and Hancock on how they had managed to disagree with such affability.

In the meantime, Copland galloped ahead with his own and Council's plans for the two schools, spurred on now by a desire 'to show Hancock that we mean business'. Immediately after Hancock's resignation, the Vice-Chancellor approached K.C. Wheare and found him (by implicit contrast with Hancock) 'a very satisfactory person with whom to do business'. Wheare, another Australian at Oxford, where he was Gladstone Professor of Government and Public Administration and a Fellow of All Souls, had been mooted for some time as a substitute for Hancock should negotiations come unstuck; and now he agreed willingly to act as Adviser on the Social Sciences, making it clear that he had no intention of coming permanently to Australia. For the moment, a problem was solved. Copland solved another by talking again to
Firth, who gave indications that he might yet be prepared to continue as Adviser and take charge of the Research School of Pacific Studies during its first few years. He also met Florey who, despite his earlier prejudices about Copland’s qualifications as a gentleman, appears to have enjoyed his company. ‘We shall now be able to curse each other without any ill feeling’, Copland told him, ‘so when you feel like it just let yourself go’. Oliphant, though unhappy about Hancock’s departure, was pleased that Copland had proven himself ‘a man of action’.

So by the time he boarded the Queen Mary to cross the Atlantic, the Vice-Chancellor was pleased with himself, especially since Council, through Mills, had congratulated him for handling a difficult situation so well. The story, however, had an anticlimax which suggested that his diplomatic skills were better exercised in person than on paper. Hancock was anxious about the form in which his departure should be announced to the press, especially after he had been offered and had accepted a new appointment as Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London. However, after coming up with a draft which Copland thought too explicit, he decided to trust the Vice-Chancellor to prepare a form of words which accurately represented the manner of his ‘signing off’. Copland, showing little appreciation of Hancock’s acute sensitivity on the matter, blundered in with a statement that could be taken to imply that he had abandoned Australia for a better job in London. This was exactly what Hancock had wanted to avoid. Having trusted Copland, he now felt betrayed, especially after receiving critical letters from ‘a few fanatical fools’. But he remained silent, at least in public, until he told as much of the story as he cared to tell in Country and Calling.

In the months that followed, Hancock reflected unhappily on what might have been had he said to Copland: ‘Dave, old man,’ (he meant Doug), ‘don’t let us fling ultimate about. Let us give each other a week or two to think.’ But he didn’t, and was left to ponder how the separation had come about. While he tended to blame the Council, he also conceded that the negotiations had come for him at a bad time: he had just emerged from a battle with the British civil service over the official war histories and he was weighed down with worry about the health of his wife. Some close to him were inclined to blame Theaden Hancock for stampeding her husband into the wrong decision. Most, including Hancock’s friends, thought he had made a mistake; though at least one fellow historian, his old friend Fred Alexander in Perth, congratulated him on a lucky escape.

Whatever immediate stresses may have influenced the final parting, problems in the relationship had been signalled long before. The issue that brought matters to a head was Hancock’s proposal for starting the two social science schools under one director. Behind that lay the larger problem of recruitment, meaning who was recruited and how it was done. On both matters, Hancock and some members of the Council, especially Eggleston, were at opposite extremes. Hancock’s concept of recruiting was based on personal relationships. The type of person he would be prepared to appoint would, of course, be an outstanding scholar; but he (or, just possibly, she) would also be able to work with him as a member of an integrated team which shared his own high ideals of
scholarship. Hancock would probably know such people, at least by reputation. He did not approve of advertising for senior positions, arguing that crowds of mediocre people would apply while the good men held back. This was the Oxford way. In Australia, however, there was a distinct preference for advertising, or at least for conducting recruitment procedures in an impersonal manner. Eggleston complained to Copland that Hancock's activities were 'inconsistent with the impersonality which should attach to intellectual tasks' ... 'I have always disapproved of Hancock's excessively personal method of approach—will you go if I am Director?'

The matter was complicated by Hancock's status as prospective director. He wanted to be able to approach people with a 'firm offer' which would be contingent on his accepting the position of director. Council believed that only a confirmed director should be able to make a firm offer. Coombs managed to find a way around the dilemma, but only after irritation had risen high on both sides.

The question of who should be appointed was probably more vexing to Eggleston and his colleagues than to Hancock, who seemed largely impervious to his compatriots' sensitivities on the matter. Eggleston thought that, instead of pursuing an 'all star cast', he ought to be looking for young Australians. Copland urged him to think about the inspiration and satisfaction that comes with training relatively young men and creating a school with an international reputation. But Hancock had no wish to be, as he put it, 'King of the kids'; and while he was prepared to concede a slight preference for Australians if they were available, he understood that they were not, since if they were really outstanding they would be well known overseas. What eventually decided the argument was Hancock's evident failure to attract the sort of people he wanted. Reluctant to admit his failure, he wrote to Mills: 'If I could have got some chaps I could have made a start'. But then he removed a word and added a full-stop to convince both himself and Mills: 'I could have got some chaps. I could have made a start.'

There were still deeper divisions, which Hancock only became aware of through correspondence with Eggleston late in 1949. Eggleston in many respects was Hancock's antithesis. Steeped in the history of the Commonwealth and the experiences of wartime Britain, Hancock's perspective in the late 1940s was profoundly British. He wanted the Australian National University to be in the image of Oxford, and more precisely, of All Souls. Eggleston had never been to Oxford. He had not even been to university, except as a part-time law student at the University of Melbourne, which he described as 'lifeless and boring'. That did not stop him pursuing an outstanding career in politics, law and diplomacy. Between the wars he achieved some prominence as a public philosopher. Above all he was, in the words of his biographer, an 'intellectual nationalist'. His view of the new University was shaped by Australia's wartime experience and the promises of post-war reconstruction.

The two men were most at odds about what Eggleston described as the intellectual objective of the school. Eggleston was unequivocal: the school should be concerned with 'fundamental social truths'. 'The faith of the social scientist', he later reflected, 'is that, if we can formulate reliable scientific conclusions, they will be a guide to human conduct and that informed conduct will increase the effectiveness of social life
& lead to a progressive solution to our problems’. At that moment, Eggleston believed, the social sciences were failing western civilisation by offering no systematic methodology, no definition of basic concepts, no synoptic view, and no understanding of their intrinsic unity. This was largely the fault of the British universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, and their ‘euphemistic concept’ of the humanities as a loose group of independent studies.

We want economists who are aware that their main decisions are political in character; political scientists who understand how dependent they are on law, and lawyers who understand how the law must give substance to political concepts; historians who are capable of showing how institutions work; and a philosophy which shows how knowledge and thought are articulated in institutions and conduct.

Hancock liked to call himself a craftsman. While not much concerned about nomenclature, he would have preferred the school to be called ‘Social Studies’ rather than ‘Social Sciences’. He was suspicious of what he called ‘the ’ologies’, telling his colleagues at the Easter conferences that there was ‘a good deal of nonsense in some of the enthusiastic demands made for research in the social sciences’. For example, he thought the school should have a good psychologist at some time, but at the moment he could not tell the difference between a good one and a bad one. The accent of the school should be heavily on the advancement (meaning the accumulation) of knowledge, for which the starting point should be empirical surveys: hence the urgent need for a Reader in the Sources of Australian History.

These different views extended to the way research should be planned and carried out. Eggleston demanded collaborative research from the outset, with clearly defined objectives. He was impatient with Hancock’s notion of growing points, and wanted instead a comprehensive plan. Hancock’s approach was evolutionary: cooperation could not be imposed; it could emerge only as selected scholars worked alongside one another in the appropriate intellectual environment. He wanted each scholar to be free to pursue his own interests; Eggleston expected researchers to work in teams.

So Eggleston lost no time grieving when Hancock departed and indeed welcomed his resignation as an opportunity to reshape Social Sciences as he and Copland were then recasting Pacific Studies. Although Wheare played a part as Adviser, Eggleston, more committed and determined, and with more time to spare, took the lead in drawing up a new plan; and on his advice the Interim Council concluded that four main chairs were necessary: in Political Science, Economics, Social Philosophy and Law. Readers in Demography and Statistics would probably be appointed within the Department of Economics, though a chair in Statistics might be established if a statistician with broad social interests happened to come along. The key ingredient was Social Philosophy, which Eggleston intended to cover ‘the fundamental problems of the social sciences’, such as community, social force, political authority, and the way communities make decisions and formulate policy. He also argued successfully for a chair of History which, so long as Hancock was the likely director, had not received much attention.
But Eggleston had neither the wish nor capacity, owing to old age and infirmity, to assume Hancock’s role as prospective director. As there appeared to be no other likely candidate, the school was left to follow the course that had been set in 1946 when Council, having settled on the strategy of finding the right men to lead each school, adopted a fallback position: where no outstanding man was available, the school should be established as a federation of departments. Hancock warned Eggleston that unless the Social Sciences and Pacific Studies schools had at least one full-time, first-rate director, the ‘separate competitive specialisms’ might fall apart exactly as Eggleston had feared. ‘You run the risk of collecting a rabble of individualists.’ But Eggleston wasn’t much interested in advice from Hancock and responded curtly that if they were unable to find a director, they would certainly appoint people who were inspired by the idea of cooperation.

In the second half of 1949, three years after the ANU Act had passed through parliament, only one of the original four Advisers had signed up, one had signed off, and two were keeping their options open. Oliphant was enthusiastically wielding the maestro’s baton (and occasionally using it to beat anyone who questioned his conducting style). Florey, with only one foot on the podium, was conducting more than one orchestra at the same time, but nobody wanted him to move aside. The situation in the social science schools was more confused. Eggleston’s objectives, which had more in common with the original intentions of Coombs and his colleagues than with traditional models imported from England, appeared to have triumphed, and it now seemed that the research schools of Social Sciences and Pacific Studies would be directed towards meeting immediate national needs. Although Firth might still be an Adviser, he was administering what was partially at least someone else’s plan. And Hancock had not merely gone, but Mills, Copland, Eggleston and Coombs were doing their best to forget him.

In the development of the social science schools, did the maestros have a long-term impact? Perhaps Conlon’s term for the Advisers was misleading: at this stage there were no players in the social sciences for the maestros to conduct. Soon they would begin to arrive in Canberra: but it would be some years before anyone could say whether or not Firth and Hancock had left a significant mark.