THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH GRANTS COMMITTEE: AN ACCOUNT OF THE WAY THINGS WERE*

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Publicly-funded research granting bodies depend for their prosperity and survival on a clear understanding of the need to make their processes and outcomes important not only to the recipients but to the Government which provides the funding. This paper examines the processes and perspective of the Australian Research Grants Committee in the last years of its existence and suggests that its abolition and replacement by a different body are understandable in those terms.

Keywords: ARGC, Government funding, research, research policy

There seems to be an almost universal human tendency to remember the past with affection when the present seems overfull of problems. In the world of 'research', a great word of the second half of the 20th century, the present is a bad time, short of public money, low on public gratitude, and chockfull of priorities of one kind and another. Tension is abundant.

Those with thinning hair and long memories tell their listeners that it wasn't always like this: once there was enough money, and researchers had importance and real autonomy. Something went wrong. The politicians and bureaucrats got control, and the real point of doing research was lost.

I am not one of these storytellers, and on the whole I think the present is an improvement. More people are doing research, there is in fact more money available, and I have no difficulty with the proposition that if public money in quantity is being devoted to an activity then it is right that the public knows what it is getting for its money.

The domain of research-funding bodies is well-endowed with examples of transition. Governments, perpetually perplexed by the dilemma of how much money to provide for what kinds of research activities, and sure that they could efficiently and effectively spend less if only they knew how, find good reason for bringing into being new bodies for providing advice and carrying out programs. Research-funding bodies which survive learn how to persuade governments that there is no point in replacing themselves with somebody new. Such organisations tend to have a

* This article has been adapted from an autobiography in progress.

good political nose and/or great public reputation; the first attribute is a good predictor of the second. Bodies which do not survive have lost their capacity to persuade, or their reputation, or both. Losing the first is a likely predictor of losing the second.

The Australian Research Grants Committee was established in 1964 and recommended its first grants in 1965. It was replaced by a much more functionally comprehensive and better funded Australian Research Council in 1988, and the following account of the ARGC provides some insight into why the change occurred. The story is told from the perspective of one of the participants, not as an example of policy analysis. I do not have to be told that there are other possible participant stories, and I am aware that others besides myself had important roles to play. Perhaps my storytelling will prompt others to add their own accounts. As the beginning of the story I was 43 years old, a political scientist with a decent track record who had won a large grant from the ARGC in 1978. I was well-published, a professor in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University, and someone who had scarcely given a thought to the basic questions of research policy: why does the public want to spend money like this anyway, to whom should the money go, and what should happen then?

RECRUITMENT

In September 1980 I received a phone call from Bruce Miller, the Professor of International Relations in the ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies. He was short and to the point: his term on the Australian Research Grants Committee was coming to an end — would I be interested in following him on that Committee? Of course, he went on to say, he was only sounding me out — it was the Minister who did the choosing. But there would be no point in his putting my name forward if I would be unavailable or uninterested. We chatted about the work likely to be involved. He thought I would enjoy it all, but it meant a real commitment of time. I said I would think about it and get back to him.

I was excited and flattered by the prospect. I didn't know how people got on to bodies like the ARGC, and it had not occurred to me that I was likely to be approached. In retrospect I can see that I was a plausible candidate. Bruce Miller was a political scientist with a wide intellectual range. It would be sensible to replace him with a social scientist with something like his span, since the other members of the small humanities and economics sub-committee, which covered all the humanities, political science, education and anthropology as well as economics, were Graeme Clarke, a classicist, and Gus Sinclair, an economist. I had some claim to being an historian as well as a political scientist, and because of my own research interests possessed a wide acquaintance with parts of the social sciences; Bruce Miller had watched my career with a certain amount of approval, and had complimented me on my first book. I came to see that the ARGC was made up of people like me: researchers who had made a name, had given a good account of themselves to the sub-committee when seeking money, and were to a large degree the choice of the departing sub-committee member and his colleagues.

What was crucial in all of this was that the ARGC was, and had been almost from the beginning, a self-selecting oligarchy. You could not apply to be a member. Your name was discussed by the sub-committee into which you would go; if its members approved, your name was then canvassed with the Chairman; if he approved you were gently sounded out; and if all was well the Minister was given a list of three names, with yours at the top. Then you received a letter of invitation from the Minister. The procedures were very like those which apply in exclusive clubs, and the ARGC was in its way a most exclusive club. Indeed, the club metaphor was used in lunch and dinner speeches by members and former members alike, and its former members were a most distinguished group. Five years on the ARGC (the normal term) gave you a wide circle of acquaintances from across the disciplines and across the universities. The camaraderie was real, and was based on large amounts of shared hard work in a good and common cause.

I knew little of this at the time. I did have a immediate problem, in that I was to spend the first half of 1981 in Oxford on study leave, and the main work of the ARGC, interviewing applicants and budgeting, would begin almost as I returned from England. Bruce said that he would be happy to act in the position until I returned. My Vice-Chancellor, Tony Low, was perfectly happy about it all. (Vice-Chancellors are usually enthusiastic for academic staff to serve on government committees, if only because their appointment suggests that the University is full of talented people.) So I said yes, and in due course I received my letter of invitation from the Minister for Science and the Environment, David Thomson.

THE ORIGINS OF 'THE BEST CLUB IN AUSTRALIA'

The ARGC was the principal source of money for researchers in universities who wanted to do something relatively expensive and were not in fields where there were other designated funding bodies (like medicine) or in fields where industries were keen to have research done (like agriculture, or the kind of biochemistry that underlies the development of pharmaceutical drugs). In practice this meant that the ARGC was principally concerned with research in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. The Committee had seven sub-committees to cover these broad areas, and a Chairman, who was also a member and chairman of one of the sub-committees. In 1981 the Committee was wholly male and, with the exception of a couple of distinguished scientists from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), wholly professorial in status. The Chairman was Max Brennan, then a physicist from Flinders University. He received an honorarium for filling that office; the rest of us received a daily sitting fee each time the Committee met or went 'on tour'.

The ARGC was one of the legacies of a Committee (known after its chair, Professor Sir Leslie Martin, as 'the Martin Committee') set up by the Federal Government in the early 1960s to plot a new future for higher education in Australia. The ARGC was the Australian response to a perceived gap that was discovered in many industrial countries as university enrolments rapidly increased in the 1950s and 1960s. More students meant more staff, and it was now almost axiomatic that

those staff should be trained in research, or be able to receive that training on a part-time basis as staff candidates for the PhD. Research training would have to take place in universities, but they were not properly funded for that role. The ARGC was set up within months of the establishment in Britain of the Science Research Council, later the Science and Engineering Research Council, although it was inspired also by the example of the National Science Foundation of the USA, and was at one time intended to have had a similar name. The ARGC's first Chairman was Professor R. N. Robertson FRS, a most distinguished botanist from the University of Adelaide who was also a member of the executive of the CSIRO. In a pattern that became traditional, the committee appointed to assist him consisted almost entirely of academics and CSIRO scientists.

The establishment of the ARGC was not universally welcomed, because the Commonwealth passed to it £2 million of the £5 million recommended for research support in the universities by the Australian Universities Commission (AUC — the Government's funding body) in its *Second Report*, and the universities reacted negatively. In the 1960s the Commonwealth and the States shared the responsibility for funding universities, and the Commonwealth had expected the States to match its own financial support for the ARGC. But the States quickly moved away from doing so, since they had no role in the selection of its members and there was no consultation with the States about its policies. The Minister responsible both for the establishment of the ARGC and for developing its place in the emerging research system of the late 1960s was Senator John Gorton, a man not lacking in self-confidence and not given to great respect for vice-chancellors, the AUC or the role of the States in Australian politics. In consequence, the Committee's first few years were full of of high politics and drama. But by the time John Gorton had become Prime Minister and was replaced as the relevant Minister by another future Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, the Committee had achieved through its own work a generally respected position as the Commonwealth's chief agency for supporting research in the universities, and had the confidence of the Government, the universities and the AUC.

The scale of the money available to it in its early years, the prestige of its awards, and the scrupulousness with which the Committee went about its business meant that within a few years the ARGC had altered and enhanced the place of research in the university system. Australia, like Britain, now had 'dual support' for research in universities. The Government provided the AUC with a special research grant, which went to the universities essentially to support postgraduate training, while it also provided the ARGC with a grant which was to support the best research in the country, irrespective of the university or the State from which the researcher came. One consequence was that research came to be perceived as an activity distinct from teaching and one funded for some from outside the university. Another was that the research activities of universities came to be driven by the active researchers who could secure external funds. Money begets money, especially in research. An ambitious and successful researcher in physics or chemistry could, through success in gaining large grants for equipment and technical staff, significantly affect the university's own budgetary decisions, the pattern of courses, the hiring of

staff and the deployment of capital. Perhaps it was always like this, but it seemed that universities became less collegial as research became more important, if only because those good at research achieved more rapid promotion and in some cases did less teaching than those who were not so good — or, at least, not so good at gaining grants.

In democratic political systems it is rare for any government or semi-government organisation to continue to sustain its initial impetus. The ARGC was an appropriate political response to a set of national policy issues in the mid 1960s. By the 1970s it was just one of a number of Commonwealth agencies with insufficient funds to do things it thought were necessary, and little ability to attract the attention of Cabinet. It had not been seen by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972 as an instrument that might help to change Australia, and it was almost wiped out, apparently by oversight, in that government's last Budget, that for 1975/76. It was saved by the action of the universities, which produced the necessary money as a short-term loan when the Government admitted its error. In the late 1970s the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), which had the responsibility of supporting medical research, and had formerly been funded at a fraction of the ARGC level, began to win systematic increases in its allocation. By 1981, when I joined the ARGC, the funding of medical research by the Commonwealth through this agency was actually greater than the Commonwealth's funding of all other kinds of research through the ARGC. We were, though I knew it not, an agency with declining clout.

WORKING, THE ARGC WAY

The procedures used by the Committee were straightforward enough. Like so much of the work of universities, the activity of the ARGC was set in an annual cycle. Each year researchers were invited to apply for money, and the applications closed in March. If you wanted research money you needed to complete a form in which you set out what you wanted to do and why it was worth doing, how much it would cost, what you would spend the money on and what you had published in the last few years. The ARGC's sub-committees were not constituted to be a technically expert jury. Rather, as we liked to say, we sat as a panel of judges on the work of the jury. However, we chose the jury. Each sub-committee would meet in April to choose assessors who were expert enough to evaluate the proposal; we then met again a few weeks later to consider the written assessments, and decide whom we wanted to interview. In July and August the whole Committee, accompanied by the public servants who supported the ARGC, went on tour around the Australian universities to interview as many of the applicants as could be fitted in to the time available; a few sub-committees interviewed practically all of them.

At the end of the interview tour, in late August, each sub-committee would decide how it would allocate the funds that might be available to it, a percentage of the whole determined by a formula that took account both of the number and of the quality of the applicants dealt with by that sub-committee. A meeting of the whole Committee in September, after the Commonwealth Government's Budget had been

brought down, made final adjustments to these amounts and caused greater or lesser variation in the sums going to particular individuals or teams. A long list of the successful applicants, their universities, the titles of their projects and the sums to go to each, was then conveyed to the Minister by the Chairman. The Minister signed and made a public announcement in October, after which there was a good deal of public rejoicing and sometimes a little public wailing. The Committee met again in November for what was called the 'policy' meeting, which reviewed the year, made some alterations to the rules, the procedures, or the design of the application form, and then dispersed until the first meeting in the new year, when the whole business would start again.

At the heart of the process was the notion of 'peer review', the assumption, built into the procedures, that the people best fitted to evaluate the worth of a proposal were people who had already achieved eminence in the same area. All research granting bodies, the world over, relied on this assumption. The Committee maintained long lists of experts from all over the world who were thought to be expert in this or that sub-field. Each year, in the first meeting, we pored over hundreds of pages of computer printout looking for experts in particular specialties. By their nature, the lists were often out of date (assessments were occasionally sought from the recently dead), and they were arranged in traditional academic categories. From time to time, sub-committee chairmen would spend a few days trying to put their lists in order, but usually the task was put off to another day. As a result, one of the possessions of each sub-committee was a kind of folk memory of who was a 'good' assessor in a given field (that is, someone who could be relied on to give sensible advice, in typescript and in time). This memory was precious, and had to be acquired quickly by the new sub-committee member, along with the names and departments of those useful people who were not themselves appropriate assessors but had knowledge or networks which could provide the names of those who were.

Peer review as the ARGC practised it was sometimes a rough and ready business. The 18 of us who made up the Committee covered a fair stretch of intellectual territory, but there were still gaps. Those from disciplines not represented on the committee — such as, in my day, law, education or geography — had to rely on our skill and application in finding the right assessors. We did not always succeed, but if we made egregious errors we tried to correct the mistake in the following year, if the applicant re-applied. We learned by doing, and it was an immense learning task. In my first year I read well over 400 applications for money in the entire domain of humanities and social sciences, with the exception of psychology, sociology and most of their adjectival variants, which were the responsibility of the social sciences sub-committee, led by Peter Sheehan.

It was probably true that applicants from disciplines represented on the Committee were more equitably treated than the others, but that did not necessarily mean that they were funded! From time to time disappointed applicants would write to the Minister or to the Chairman pointing out that while they themselves had not been supported it had not passed their attention that applicants in the department of Professor X, an ARGC member, had done surpassingly well. (Academics are fond of irony.) We had our own procedural rules to guard against favouritism of this

kind, and to guide us in the even more delicate question of how to evaluate members of the Committee who were themselves seeking funds. When Chairman I investigated every complaint of this kind in order to advise the Minister should the matter be raised in Parliament, as sometimes occurred. In five years I did not encounter one case where I believed the sub-committee had behaved questionably. During that period I received a letter pointing out that since Professor Y had joined the ARGC the money gained by his particular research field had risen most appreciably. I discovered in this case that the increase in funds had reflected almost precisely an increase not only in the number of applications but in the number judged to be of high quality. But the charge set me thinking about my own discipline: I went back into the reports and discovered that since I had joined the ARGC political science had done rather less well than before I joined it. I scratched my head and passed to other things.

Yet although the ARGC refused — at least publicly — to consider itself as a jury, it nonetheless played a decisive part in deciding who was funded and who was not. We learned to discount assessments from particular individuals, and to recognise 'mafias' of both the positive and negative kind. In some research fields no application, however unimpressive, would get less than star rating from the external assessors; in others, damning with faint praise was their norm. We had to learn to make an appropriate correction. One Oxford assessor remarked that 'if this project were worth doing it would be being done in my department' (we funded it). Another British referee thought that although a given project was not in the mainstream of the discipline it might well be appropriate for the colonies. Americans were rather more generous. Some Australian assessors, distinguished in their fields, wrote perfunctory and useless assessments. A few assessments were plainly spiteful. New research areas and inter-disciplinary areas were a special problem, for there were no established journals or bodies of experts. Our sub-committee had little success with feminist research projects, since feminists to whom we turned for expert comment tended to damn the proposals completely. Eventually we disregarded the assessors, made our own judgment, and funded one or two. Projects of a marxist persuasion presented a similar difficulty. There were few of them, because marxist scholars tended to be heavily theoretical and relatively uninterested in empirical research, while the bias of the ARGC was toward empirical research (on the whole, theoreticians don't need money so much as time, libraries and colleagues). Mainstream researchers asked to assess were contemptuous of the proposals, and there were few scholars within the marxist canon who were appropriate assessors and likely to respond at all. Eventually we funded one that seemed interesting to us, though not to the assessors, and others followed.

Our strategy was almost entirely 'reactive'. We waited for applications to come in, and then we considered them. We did not see it as our business to go out and look for applicants, although as individual members (or even as sub-committees, in one case) we were wont to advise our colleagues back in the universities that they should be more active in seeking research funds, partly because research was good for you and partly because more applications in political science should, other things being equal, lead to more funds for political science. We did a little advising at the

edges — pointing out to two competing research groups that they might be better off collaborating rather than competing, or getting the potential users of a desired facility to work together to put in supporting applications. Such collaboration was hard to achieve in the humanities, and I thought we ought to have a more *dirigiste* approach, investigating the gaps in Australia's intellectual infrastructure for the humanities (library collections, indexes, encyclopaedias and the like) and seeking good scholars prepared to put time into providing these necessities. Such an approach seemed outside our terms of reference and outside the general conventions under which we worked, and I could attract little support for it.

The weight of work, once the cycle was under way, meant that we had to restrict the time we spent arguing out the merits of a particular application, and for the most part we came to our rankings quickly. Each year we would read three or four assessments on each project, and as the year advanced the large black boxes which the department provided to us to hold and carry the applications grew heavier. My first year's paper made a stack the best part of a metre high, and by the end of the process names, projects, universities and fields swam around my head. But memory is a tenacious thing. In my second year I found I could recall quite a lot as the new batch of proposals came forward. By my fifth year I felt almost paternal about some of the projects, having watched their birth and early development and been responsible for an essential part of their nourishment.

Because the Committee met several times a year over several days, and travelled around Australia once a year over a period of several weeks, its members ate and lived together to a degree unusual for government committees. Furthermore, while the whole ARGC game was intensely competitive, there was little overt competition between sub-committees. In the early 1980s we were in something of a steady state, with about the same number of applicants every year, and essentially the same amount of money after inflation had been allowed for. In consequence, there was much less disciplinary rivalry and jealousy than was characteristic of an academic board of a university. The Committee had few dogmatists, and even the eccentrics were rare. One of the chemists once remarked at lunch, in complete good humour, that though he rather liked archaeology, it was best thought of as a hobby, wasn't it, and not really research. I responded somewhat tartly that, all in all, Australia's standing in international archaeology had been very high for the best part of a century, and the same could not be said for chemistry. I could have added, but managed to hold my tongue, that physicists dismissed chemistry as not really of interest for a real researcher — except for the parts of it that were really physics. Such sallies were exceptional: once appointed, one was prepared to regard one's colleagues as at least of equal calibre to oneself, and to accept that the discipline of each had a proper place in the ARGC's scheme of things.

RESEARCH AS A DIET

For five years I read every application for money submitted by researchers in the humanities and much of the social sciences — in all, well over 1500 applications. At the end of that time I had a firm sense of who the good researchers were, who would deliver on time, who had interesting questions to ask, who was worth a

gamble, who was running on reputation. My colleagues in the natural sciences, some of whom had *interviewed* every applicant for the past five years, had an even more comprehensive sense of the research cultures of the various departments, an important consideration if one is asked to provide money to purchase a large and expensive instrument for research. Who else will use it? How good are they? Are they attracting postgraduate students? Are they getting money from elsewhere? How co-operative are they with other groups in that city or further afield?

A steady diet of anything inevitably leads to one's developing a discriminating taste, and it is no different with research proposals. I quickly learned to ask the applicant (or, in the absence of the applicant, my colleagues or myself) why the proposal was thought to be an interesting one. Interesting to whom? Why? Who should cheer if the project were successful? The interconnectedness of the humanities and social sciences often means that a reasonably well-read interviewer can pursue these questions profitably without having detailed knowledge of the subject area. I think the same is true in the physical and biological sciences, but there the disciplinary walls seem higher, and there is greater respect for territory: whatever they might think privately, physicists are usually careful not to ask questions of chemists which might be thought invasive.

I also learned early in my ARGC experience to play the ignoramus, in part because it required little effort, and in part because my two colleagues already had well-developed interrogating styles: Graeme Clarke had the barrister's trick of leading the defendant gently into appalling error, while Gus Sinclair assumed the bluff no-nonsense approach of an experienced police sergeant. My own 'Look, I don't know much about this at all — could you tell me in simple terms why it's important that you do this work?' was a useful supplement, and it was both appropriate and most useful when later I was to interview scientists. Occasionally, it backfired. An economist seeking a lot of money for a large exercise in econometrics was most put off by being quizzed by an apparent moron, and commented acidly that it might be more useful to everybody if I were replaced on the interviewing panel by somebody more competent. The only response possible was that I had to advise the Minister about whether projects were worth supporting, and the Minister wasn't an econometrician either.

Physical scientists rarely made that kind of mistake, since they are used to dealing with people who not only don't have the vaguest idea what a hadron shower is but will get it completely wrong if they guess. I learned that any good researcher will jump at the chance to tell you why his or her research project is important, and in the process you will learn a great deal that is interesting and useful. All of us who served on the ARGC greatly appreciated the education we received, and lamented at the end of our time that there seemed no way to pass our learning on.

Yet not every researcher had an interesting question. Indeed, my first day as a touring ARGC member was an intellectually deadening experience. We were at one of the older universities, and throughout the day seemed to be meeting applicants of a grey hue who had proposals that hardly seemed to interest them, and entirely failed to enthuse us. 'Is it always like this?' I asked Graeme. He replied that it was like that here, but that it would warm up as we went to the newer univer-

sities. And he was right. Departments with younger staff members and shorter histories often provided the high spots of the tour, though I also learned in time that enthusiasm for a research idea on the part of its proponent was not a sure sign of its worth.

By the end of my five-year term I had come to some relatively firm views about the kind of research we were funding and what the ARGC was all about. We were about excellent research, and funding it properly. We relied on a peer-review system, and could see no alternative to it; indeed, anything else would be 'political' or patronage, and we were opposed to that. I had no doubt about the best people we were funding: they were people with impressive track records, interesting questions, great confidence, and a capacity to control their budgets and manage their research. We had perhaps 200 of them, and you could give them money with every confidence that they would achieve what they set out to achieve, or sometimes produce something even better by going off at a tangent. Then there were several hundred more who were worth supporting this year, because everything was going well with them, but might miss out on another occasion, perhaps because they had too many projects going, or were failing to publish quickly enough, or were getting involved with university administration or some other activity. You could say of them that they were a good bet, but you would not expect all of them to succeed. And then there was the group about whose members one had more reservations. This one was given star rating by his assessors, but none of us thought the project was genuinely interesting; that one wanted more money to explore yet again his familiar territory. Another was proposing something that had divided the assessors, some thinking it brilliant, others thinking it rubbish or old hat; if we funded it we would be somewhat nervous about the consequences, and if we didn't we would feel regret at the lost opportunity.

THE URGE FOR REFORM

It would be easy to give the impression that all was well within the ARGC, and that nothing of significance needed to be done. Its members certainly worked extremely hard, and were models of disinterestedness in the decisions they made. At every university we were welcomed, usually by the vice-chancellor, given a fine lunch or dinner (sometimes both), applauded for our work, and generally made much of. But after one year's experience of the system I could sense that there was something inherently wrong. I could not articulate my misgivings at the time, and felt too much of a novice to speak up. Only in hindsight does it all seem altogether obvious.

The most powerful clue was the fact that we seemed to have an indexed grant. The ARGC was essentially a transfer mechanism that took a small parcel of public money from the Department of Finance and distributed it through the university system. Our parcel seemed to be fixed in size, and in the world of public finance in the 1980s no growth equalled no current interest. We ourselves could not see this, because our attention was fixed so firmly on our *clients*, the researchers in the universities, that we had no time for our *paymasters*, the ministers and the public servants who advised them.

We knew that our minister, David Thomson, who came once a year to have lunch and wish us well, was in fact the minister lowest in seniority in the Fraser Government. We did not draw the inference that our activity was of small importance in the government's scheme of things, and one reason was that everywhere we went in the university world we were told exactly the opposite — that what we did was supremely important. We did not really notice that while our Chairman had easy and direct access to the Minister, the public servants who looked after us, though admirably devoted both to their work and to us, were remarkably junior, or that the senior officials of the department were apparently not much interested in what we did.

The truth was not unconnected to the pleasant clubbiness of the ARGC. What we did was of no interest to anyone outside the university world because no-one outside it could see any benefit to themselves flowing from it, and we were not powerful or important enough for others to look after our interests thoughtfully, just in case. Within the university world our work was very important indeed, because a certain way to achieve promotion was to demonstrate a capacity to win research grants from a body like the ARGC. Of course, our own rhetoric was quite different in its perspective. We constantly stressed the importance of basic research, and how it underpinned modern civilisation. We would point out that, for example, the transistor and the silicon chip were the results of research carried out by people who were not looking for results like these at all. We would refer to Fleming and Florey's discovery of penicillin, which every Australian of our generation knew about and believed also to have been an accidental discovery. We talked about 'serendipity', the coinage which made accidental discovery almost the essence of the research endeavour. (In fact, had anyone sought money from us on the argument that he or she would do some research in the hope that an accidental discovery would arise, we would have thought them barmy.)

Our position on research was a simple one: all applied research depended on basic research; the best basic research would lead to major advances in human understanding; the best way to do basic research was to support the best researchers to do what they wanted to do, without constraints of any kind; and we were the best people to decide who the best researchers were. It was in our view a powerful and coherent position, and it had been accepted without much question in the 1960s, when research was taken up with enthusiasm. Fifteen years later it had lost a lot of its force. Australia was good at basic research, but was becoming poorer. Britain was the home of basic research and of many Nobel prizewinners; but Britain was agreed to have serious economic problems. Japan was not famous for basic research, and was becoming rapidly richer. In the early 1980s these contrasts were becoming discussed within government, and the feeling grew that maybe Australia needed to be good at applied research as well as, or rather than, basic research. The problem was that the universities were wedded to basic research for both ideological and practical reasons, and the CSIRO had accepted much of the 'basic is good' outlook, even though it was formally intended to serve the interest of Australian industry. In consequence, our funding was unlikely to grow.

We were reluctant to explore these issues at our policy meetings or at any other

time. The closest we came to the larger context in which we operated was in lamenting the lack of money available to us, and envying the success of the NHMRC. Most members saw 'policy' as discussions of the measures needed to improve the efficiency of what we did, not discussions of what we were for and how that complemented other activities of the government and of the Australian community. If we had more money we would do our job better. It was as simple as that. Moreover, we were not chosen as members for our skills at policymaking or for our knowledge of the world or of the political process. If we moved into these domains during meetings, as we did increasingly as the 1980s progressed, members were likely to voice their uneasiness. Because of my own discipline I was more at home in these discussions, but I had so much to learn about the ARGC system, and so much reading to do, that for the first two or three years I was comparatively silent. In that I was like most other members: we tended to speak out in our last year or so, when we were chairmen of our sub-committees (and thus members of the ARGC's 'executive'), and were prepared to battle for particular changes that we thought were necessary.

The election of the Hawke Labor Government in 1983 was generally welcomed by the Committee, whatever the political preferences of its members as individuals, because Barry Jones MP was known to have had written into the ALP's election policy a pledge to increase the ARGC's funding by 10 per cent a year for three years, and he was the new Minister for Science and Technology. Though an arts graduate, Barry was a devoted supporter of the physical and biological sciences, and one who believed that the world of the future would rest almost entirely on technological and scientific knowledge. Australia would have to excel in those areas or risk becoming a third-world nation. His book *Sleepers, Wake!* expressed the kind of dissatisfaction with complacent Australia that Donald Horne had set out first in *The Lucky Country* twenty years before, but coupled it with a wide-eyed enthusiasm for the role of technology in a future Australia. I knew him slightly, and liked his approach and his spirit.

He began well, and the first Budget of the new Government, for 1983/84 included the first instalment of the election promise. Perhaps in anticipation, the researchers of the university world applied in much greater number in 1983, and in consequence we seemed to have relatively less money at our discretion than had been true the previous year. The prospect of even more funds had the same effect in 1984, but in the Hawke Government's second budget there was an unaccountable absence: the promised second 10 per cent increase in ARGC funding was simply not there.

Barry was embarrassed, for good reason, but the effects on us were calamitous. We had many more applicants, and no more money. What should we do? I was now in my fourth year, and the chairman of my sub-committee. I was well aware that what we were doing, and had been doing for years, was shaving the budgets of our applicants in order to be able to fund more of them. The problem was intense in the physical and biological sciences, where the costs of equipment and consumables kept rising. Here the language of the sub-committees included phrases like 'keeping the research alive', which meant dribbling a little money into a de-

partment so that something could continue to be done. In many cases, by starving them of the funds they needed, we were forcing people to take longer over their research than was sensible, and our failure to fund them properly was resented. So I proposed a draconian solution, which seemed in harmony with the mood of the Committee: we should fund our best applicants properly and stop when we ran out of money. If we did that we would reduce the number of grantees by about a third, there would be a tremendous fuss, and the issue of funding would be back on the agenda. Of course it was risky, and our minister would not have appreciated our action. But we were in that sullen, rebellious spirit which follows a major psychological let-down, and in wider contexts is the immediate precursor of events like the French Revolution.

But most thought that too radical. Instead, we decided that we would give out hundreds of 'nil grants' — official pieces of paper which said that the applicant's research project had been judged worthy of funding, but there was no money. That was a political statement, since it directed the blame of the disappointed not to ourselves, but to the Minister and his colleagues. We had in the previous year decided to take a leaf out of the book of the NHMRC and mount an official and public 'Case for Funds', setting out what we did and why it was important that more public money be spent on it. Now we agreed to make that case even stronger. I wrote for the (Melbourne) *Age* a strong piece setting out a full-blooded defence of funding for research, and a particular defence of public funding, the publication of which soothed my spirit and cheered the research community (I received an unusually large amount of supportive mail for this piece).

And I was asked, and agreed, that I become a sort of detective. I would find out what had happened, why we seemed so unsuccessful in gaining money, and what we should do to overcome our problems.

THE 'CHANGE OR DIE' SCENARIO

I was well placed to conduct such an operation. I had lived in the national capital on three separate occasions, and knew it well. Some of my friends were now in high places in politics and government. For a few weeks I made appointments, took people to lunch and used the telephone. I had expected to find that the persistent failure to fund us properly was connected to policy considerations of a complicated nature. The reality was unexpected and quite flattening. We had virtually no support at all, and our own view of the importance of what we did was, to say the least of it, not widely shared. One of my friends, Mike Keating, at that time the head of the Department of Finance, said without heat that he thought that any money spent on the ARGC was probably wasted, and that the whole operation ought to be closed down. When I protested, he asked me what the nation had obtained from the millions of dollars that had gone to the universities through the ARGC sieve. When I started on the 'basic research is the key...' argument, he asked me what the evidence for that was. I let the debate end. I could have gone on to quote an American study that suggested that advances in medicine came from basic research, not applied research. But I knew he could have countered with another American study

that reached the opposite conclusion from a study of defence-related research. He could then have floored me with the Japanese or Korean examples, where rapid economic growth seemed to have accompanied a deliberate eschewing of basic research in favour of applied research and development. I too was aware of the apparent paradox of the North Asian economies, and had seen the Korean example at first hand. I felt that there had to be an explanation that did not make basic research a luxury that countries engaged in when they were rich, but I did not know what it was.

The result of my labours was deeply worrying, and I poured out my anxieties in a paper addressed to my colleagues, which I called 'The ARGS in the Future —A Paper to Provoke Discussion' (the ARGS was the Scheme, of which we were the controlling Committee). I did not put a sweet coating on the unpalatable truth:

> There is widespread indifference to the view expressed by the Committee that basic research is in a state of crisis; indeed, it is not much believed.... Research itself is not objected to; indeed, there is growing demand for 'mission-oriented' research, and money to support it... It is widely believed (the unkind view) that much research in universities is self-indulgent, or (the kind view) that researchers are hopeless at showing how basic research pays off in the long run... It is widely believed that enough is being spent on basic research, and that the future lies in applied research, and especially in technology.

Since the Government had declared that public expenditure was to be kept at a fixed proportion of gross domestic product, I went on, competition for funds would occur within government departments rather than between them. Since ours was a small and junior department, and public and elite opinion were not with us, it seemed quite unlikely that we could expect any appreciable increase in funding.

What then? I thought we had a number of options, and that it was imperative that we choose one of them, or a blend of them. We could, for example, try to trade increases in annual allocations for guaranteed triennial funding on the university model (universities knew what their funding would be in successive three-year periods, where we learned about the level of our funding at each annual budget: triennial funding was a cherished dream).

If we couldn't achieve that, we could move to triennial allocation ourselves, and make most of our grants for three years. That would give us a large forward commitment, which was sensible in itself, given the long-term nature of most of the work we funded. Three-year commitments might also protect us against unexpected attempts to reduce our funding or close us down. The NH&MRC did this, and it seemed to work there.

Or we could try to arrange the transfer to us of the Special Research Grant, which the Government provided directly to the universities; it currently stood at $15 million, compared with our $22 million. We could ask for $3 million a year for the next five years. That might be attractive to some in Government, though it would put us absolutely offside with the vice-chancellors.

We could try to leave our small and junior department and shelter under the wing of Education and Youth Affairs, which had more money, a more powerful minister and some responsibility for the universities. But that would put us offside with our own minister.

We could seek the establishment of a national research council of a powerful kind that should report to the Prime Minister, 'even if this involves the abolition of the ARGS, so long as the key elements of this Scheme (competitive applications, peer review, emphasis on quality) are preserved'. We all knew that the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC), the Government's advisory council on research policy, was considering such a possibility.

We could (and this with tongue in cheek, though the desperation comes through) 'recommend to the Minister the abolition of the ARGC on the ground that it has been unable to prevent the deterioration of basic research facilities and does not wish to bear responsibility for their final collapse(!); recommend that he ask Cabinet to consider what it wants and why it wants it.'

And finally, we could do nothing, which is what I most feared. All the other options involved fights of one kind or another. The ARGC was not equipped either in its membership or its traditions for the kind of political battle which seemed to me inevitable if we were to survive, let alone to prosper.

Designing and carrying out *strategies* is hard work, and not to the taste of most people, if only because the risks are so apparent, and the prospects of success so uncertain. But there were some *tactics* that I thought we should employ, whatever the strategy we finally adopted.

> We should abandon the notion that we advise the Minister as to the funds needed, and he then produces the necessary money. The gap is now ludicrous, and is growing. To avoid the kind of embarrassments which occurred this year, we should each year proceed as though our funding were fixed at a constant level. A 90% target would be safer still. If this were done, and sub-committees allowed to commit (in their minds) up to 90% of their last year's entitlement, our work would be more efficient, we would give clearer cues to applicants, and we would be spared much anger and hostility.

And we had to take our public relations much more seriously than we had done. We needed a permanent sub-committee which would try to produce each year a generally interesting publication: 'a series of stories of how it is that people decide to do research, what they achieve, and how that research leads in time to improvements in the lives of others; the examples must be our own though international models are everywhere...'. We needed to pay much greater attention to public servants and politicians, and in general adopt the model already available to us in the NH&MRC, which was assiduous at enlisting the aid of MPs and Senators in its approaches to Government.

'If we did all these things', I concluded, 'I believe the ARGS would be in a much stronger and better-funded position in five years. We would also be a more consciously "political" committee, and not everyone would want that. But the alternative seems to be to do nothing, and that does not seem a promising line of attack.'

I posted this off to my colleagues, discussed it by phone with our Chairman, now Peter Sheehan, and arranged to have it placed on the agenda at the November 1984 policy meeting. The Committee was perplexed. It couldn't deny the seriousness of the problem, but didn't like the alternatives. Most of the options involved high politics, which were out of the experience of most members. We were certainly

doing something — the ARGC's new Case for Funding was in draft form — and the public relations tactics I proposed had in one form or another been canvassed before, and were generally endorsed. So no new decisions were taken. As so often, we would look at the matters again next year.

The discussion paper crystallised a lot of my own thinking about what the ARGC was for and where it was going. Its soberness came from a deep anxiety that what we were doing was hard to justify to anyone outside the university world, and was in real jeopardy. I was used to thinking about political choices that faced governments and other institutions, but I could see no easy ones available for us. Although the paper was not referred to formally again, it was to have an outcome. In 1985 Peter Sheehan was in his last year as Chairman, and during the winter he asked me whether I wished to be considered as his successor.

Again, the procedures were clublike. The convention was that he would discuss the question of his successor with each member in turn and communicate a summary of these views to the Minister, who would make up his own mind. All previous chairmen after the first had been members of the Committee, and indeed without an intimate knowledge of the rules and procedures a chairman would be something of a passenger until he learned them.

Not surprisingly, I was both attracted by and apprehensive at the prospect of being the next chairman. I loved the work and believed that I could steer the Committee into a more secure and successful phase of its existence. At the same time, my private view was that the ARGC in its current form was probably doomed. Who would want to be the captain of a sinking ship? But the challenge excited me more than it repelled me, and I told Peter that I was prepared to have my name go forward. I was not especially confident of the result, since Peter was like me a social scientist, and given that the natural scientists outnumbered the social science and humanities members by 13 to 5 the argument that he should be followed by a natural scientist might well get the numbers.

There was silence for some months, and then I began to hear through my own network that I was a 'probable'. At length Peter said that the Minister would be talking to me about it very soon. I asked what the view of my colleagues had been. He replied that I was the choice of a majority of the members and of a majority of the natural scientists as well. I was surprised and very pleased. That was probably the highpoint of my standing with the science community. Thereafter it was mostly downhill.