

Ian Ross as Chairman of the Australian Research Council

While Ian Ross was very well known within the ANU, he was also well known outside it, as a member and then Chairman of the Australian Research Grants Committee, the precursor of the Australian Research Council. The ARGC, formed in 1964, was the principal funding body for research within the Australian universities in fields other than clinical medicine until it was subsumed into the ARC in 1988. The Committee consisted of specialists with high standing in their separate fields, who met in small sub-committees to consider the applications for funding that came in their hundreds from all over Australia. The initial meeting would be followed by the receipt and consideration of assessments from other specialists, and an interview tour whose purpose was to tease out ambiguities or inconsistencies. Then followed meetings to decide on rankings of applicants and on funding. Since funding was never sufficient to support all the best applicants, a good deal of negotiation went on within sub-committees and in the ARGC itself before the final submission was sent to the Minister. An end-of-year meeting considered improvements that could be made, farewelled those members who be leaving and proposed names to be suggested to the Minister as replacements.

In all of this the role of the Chairman was crucial. He would consult with the sub-committee chairs about funding and replacements, and acted as the conduit between the Minister and the Committee, and more broadly between the Minister and the research community. Most importantly, he had to make sure that his disparate group of specialists worked well together, did not quarrel about funding allocations and, since there was a lot of travel involved, enjoyed each other's company. The private joke of members was that they all belonged to 'the best club in Australia'.

Ian Ross was a splendid Chairman. A seasoned professional and a great human being, he managed both to engender complete respectability with his own impeccable scholarly credentials, and at the same time to command universal respect for his wily, political acumen and a sound understanding of the relevance of industry. A merry man who valued human contacts, he was naturally communicative and curious, with a respect for each of the disciplines represented. He would talk humanities with the scientists and science with the social scientists, and encourage them to talk to each other — which they did. Ian's acumen was always accompanied by wonderful network knowledge and an easy relationship with those who mattered. His judgement never faltered, and one came to have complete confidence in his ability to look after the ARGC at any time, no matter where the situation took him or with whom he was in conversation. As a scientist he knew the ropes of academia, but as a professional he also knew the in and outs of politics and the politicians with whom he had to deal.

With Ian as Chairman the Committee operated more much like a club than a

government committee. The names of potential new members would be discussed among committee members over several glasses of red wine in Ian's hotel room. More glasses of red were consumed at convivial dinners that emphasised steak rather than today's lean and mean menus. When the venue allowed, he would lead rousing renditions of songs from the ARGC Songbook. On these occasions Ian would be in his element: boisterous but contained, with stories to tell and comparisons to be exploited, a conviction not only of the unity of knowledge but also of the value of what we were doing and of the work we were fostering. As Chairman he fostered strong bonds between Committee members and undoubtedly made it easier for the Committee to make the hard decisions about the allocation of funds between the discipline-based expert panels.

He was an epitome of the best of the ARGC, a most effective and likeable Chairman, and that is another major reason for which he should be remembered.

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(written with the assistance of Max Brennan, Bruce Miller and Peter Sheehan)