Interview with Emeritus Professor David Craig, physical and theoretical chemist

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Biographical introduction: This interview, with Professor David Craig, is part of the E- F's Oral History Program, involving retired members of staff of ANU who were part of the university in the early decades of its life. The program was initiated and developed by ANU Emeritus Faculty as a contribution to university and community understanding of the origins and development of ANU over the past sixty years. Emeritus Faculty has a special interest in this era, since the Faculty's membership includes many of the people who helped shape ANU in its early days, to make it the pre-eminent university it is today.

David Craig is emeritus professor of chemistry in ANU and a member of Emeritus Faculty. He was born in Sydney in 1919, educated at Shore School and the University of Sydney, and served in the AIF in the Second World War. After the war, he completed a PhD at University College London, then in 1952 returned to Sydney University to become Professor of Physical Chemistry.

David was appointed Professor of Theoretical Chemistry at University College London in 1956, from where he was enticed back to Australia in 1967 to become (with Arthur Birch) one of the founding professors in the Research School of Chemistry at ANU. He served two terms as Dean of that School, and was also a member of the Executive of CSIRO in that time. In 1968 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and in 1990 President of the Australian Academy of Science.

Interview abstract: schools, where professors (as departmental heads) focused on their specialties and often were not inclined to encourage cooperation across departmental boundaries.

In 1967, both David and Arthur arrived at ANU to commission the new building, and from that point, to begin their extended association with the Research School of Chemistry and the ANU. Arthur Birch was appointed the first dean, with David succeeding him three years later, then with later appointed professors joining in the succession.

David Craig's primary research interests were in physical and theoretical chemistry. He initiated, then sustained, close interactions with other scientists in ANU, and with staff at Sydney and Melbourne Universities, and the CSIRO. He also continued collaborations with UK and US scientists which he had established previously. David was an appointed member of the CSIRO Executive from 1980-85.

For nearly 20 years David's leadership and own research activities contributed importantly to the growing reputation of the Research School of Chemistry, as it (and thus ANU) became a preeminent centre for chemistry research internationally. He ascribes this success, and probably that of other successful research schools at ANU (preceding or coming after RSC) to the appointment of the best people available, people with imaginative and fundamental ideas, who were then given the resources to pursue their programs without distraction over an extended period. David believes that ANU's present standing as a centre of international excellence at the top level is owed to this formula. However, the past may have seen the best, and he now voices concern over the growing encroachment of commercial influences on basic research, reflected in Federal Government reduction of block funding, notionally replaced by purpose-specific funding from sources which require targeting of the funds to projects and priorities decided beyond the university.
David retired from his position as professor in the Research School of Chemistry in 1984, though he actively continued his research, and mentoring and advising within and beyond the university, as a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Chemistry in the Faculty of Science, the undergraduate/postgraduate teaching arm of the ANU.

In 1990, David was elected President of the Australian Academy of Science, a position he held for five years.

Today he continues his work in theoretical chemistry as a Visiting Fellow, and remains involved with the Academy of Science. Each day he travels the three kilometers or so between ANU or the Academy and his home, where he lives with his wife Veronica, near the house they first occupied in O’Connor more than four decades ago.