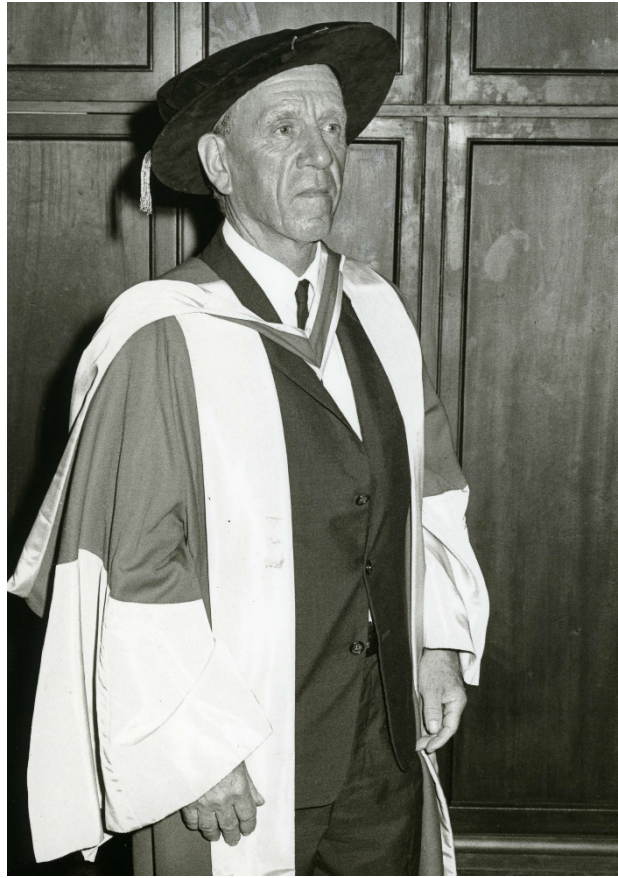
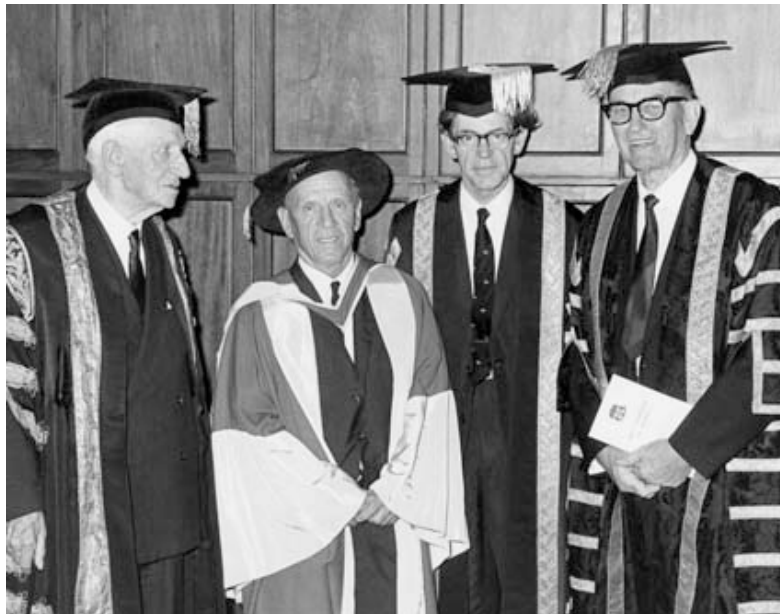


## Dr Herbert Cole Coombs

The degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon Dr Herbert Cole Coombs by the Chancellor Sir Charles George McDonald KCMG KSG on 27 March 1969.



Dr Herbert Cole Coombs, *photo G3\_224\_0484*,  
*University of Sydney Archives.*



From left: Chancellor Sir Charles George McDonald KCMG KSG, Dr Coombs, Vice-Chancellor Professor Bruce Williams and Deputy Chancellor the Reverend Bertram Russell Wyllie, *photo, copyright National Archives of Australia: M2153, 16.*

## Citation

*Presented by the Vice-Chancellor and Priricipal, Professor B R Williams:*

Mr Chancellor, we honour today Herbert Cole Coombs - a man who has made an outstanding contribution to the economic, cultural and academic life of Australia.

Dr Coombs is widely known by his nickname which has stuck to him since schooldays. "A nugget", he once explained, "is a small and irregularly shaped piece of metal." The Penguin Dictionary, however, defines a nugget as a rough lump of native gold; and, the roughness apart, that is more suitably descriptive of him. He was head of our central bank for nineteen years. There he was able to give substance to his vision, given form in his years as Director General of Postwar Reconstruction, of a new type of controlled economy which would ensure full employment and growth in the interest of the people of Australia. This controlled economy, with central banking complementing fiscal policy, was not evolved without strong opposition from some of the controlled, but, by firmness, tact, clarity of mind, and personal integrity, he succeeded. When he retired to start another career, his eminence as a central banker was recognised throughout the world.

He has made equally great contributions to our cultural life. He helped to launch and nurture the Elizabethan Theatre Trust and was its Chairman. He was Director of the Australian Ballet Foundation. He gave great encouragement to the plastic arts. His appointment as Chairman of the new Australian Council for the Arts had a rare touch of inevitability. He was appointed Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs at the same time, an appointment which reflected his abiding concern for the underprivileged; a concern which he also showed for poor countries in our region while he was Governor of the Reserve Bank.

Despite the cares of his Bank, his Ballet and his Theatre Trust, he devoted considerable time and thought to the ANU. He was one of its founders, and has served on its Council from the beginning. As Pro-Chancellor in the period when ANU Chancellors resided in Britain, he was the effective head of the University even before he succeeded Lord Florey as Chancellor.

The child is father of the man. At the University of Western Australia, Coombs was President of the Guild of Undergraduates. He was, I gather, a student activist who, among other things, agitated for the reform of Senate. Senate rejected his proposal that the President of the Guild should be an *ex officio* member of Senate, but invited him to attend its meetings, as an experiment. The historian of the University reports that he conducted himself with decorum and that at his last Senate meeting, before departing to the University of London to write a doctoral dissertation on central banking, there was a cordial exchange of courtesies.

Characteristically, he was not a typical student activist. In his retiring address to the Guild he expressed the view that "the public, the Senate and even the students themselves were taking the students too seriously", and he counselled a sense of humour "to give a proper balance".

It was no surprise that when he was installed recently as Chancellor of the ANU he chose to address the assembly on the reasons for student unrest in various parts of the world; nor that he reached these two conclusions - the first, that membership of a university should, for a student, be a relationship with persons, and not just a course of instruction or a programme of research; the second, that although a university should provide knowledge of the social processes of the community and train men and women to conduct them, it should equally cultivate such a degree of detachment from society as enabled it to question its unstated assumptions and its conventional wisdom. "Let us", he said splendidly, "give our students the chance to know that the world of learning and of intellectual endeavour is a joyous place, and a source of abiding content. Above all, let us remember that the University can, by taking thought, fulfil its obligations to the society which supports it, but yet stand sufficiently outside it to see it clearly and to see it whole."

Mr Chancellor, I present to you for the award of the degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*), Herbert Cole Coombs.

*From The Gazette, May 1969*