

Following university, and aside from a short stint as a public servant, Corden's career was firmly grounded in the world of economics and academia. He soon established himself as an authority on trade protection, followed by a mid-career shift to international macroeconomics. Readers with scant knowledge of economics, however, may find their attention span challenged where Corden acquaints them with his various academic works, albeit in relatively simplified language and avoiding technical detail.

In Part II of his autobiography, Corden reverts to a more chronological approach to reflect on his 50-year career in economics, giving entertaining accounts of his career highlights which included teaching positions at Oxford University and John Hopkins University in Washington. He also acquaints the reader with his wide circle of friends and colleagues, which reads as an impressive who's who of the economics world including—to name a few—James Meade, John Hicks, John Crawford, Trevor Swan and Fred Gruen.

Regarding his professional achievements, Corden retains a distinct humility. He views his vocational success as largely a product of luck and circumstance, rather than any innate personal qualities. He cites his main achievement as changing 'elite opinion' on trade reform and drawing public attention to the costs of trade protection. While his modesty is commendable, the book cannot fail to convince the reader that Corden is not only a man of exceptional intelligence but also someone who displayed remarkable dedication and drive from a very young age.

Corden's own political philosophy is harder to neatly categorise. He believes in the economics of free trade but expressly denies being a neoliberal or 'market fundamentalist'. He maintains faith in both the role of government to correct market failures and the social democratic ideals of a welfare state. Related to this, he concedes a rational basis for President Trump's concerns about free trade. He believes that calls for protectionism ultimately reflect the 'conservative social welfare function'—the need to avoid declines in sectional incomes. But he also believes this reflects a failure of the welfare system to sufficiently compensate the

'losers' of international trade. This sense of realism may help to explain why Corden never proposed policy reforms that were too radical, but instead advocated for gradual tariff reform.

Corden's legacy to Australia serves as a timely reminder of the need to build the theoretical and empirical evidence base for major economic reform and to communicate it effectively to the public. Given the toxic nature of current debate over economic reform in Australia, policymakers would do well to remember this.

**Eugenie Joseph is a Senior Policy Analyst in the Economics program at The Centre for Independent Studies.**



### **Australia Reimagined: Towards a More Compassionate, Less Anxious Society**

By Hugh Mackay  
Pan Macmillan, 2018,  
\$34.99  
ISBN 9781743534823



**Reviewed by Robert Forsyth**

In *Australia Reimagined* Hugh Mackay, longtime social researcher and prolific writer, outlines his suggestions for a better Australia. But while the author comes across impressively many of his specific proposals do not.

Mackay believes that Australians are 'both troubled and chirpy' (p.285). We are troubled in that we are 'a more fragmented society than we have ever been' and we are in the grip of an 'epidemic of anxiety' (p.6). The troubles he has in mind include the widespread loss of faith in institutions, anxiety about technological change, pessimism about our

overall quality of life, increasing economic inequality, lower educational achievement, our treatment of asylum seekers, and the lack of sufficient progress on gender equality. Some of the items on this list will give the reader the immediate impression that Mackay is approaching things from a rather narrow cultural and political point of view, although he seems unaware of this.

At the same time, Mackay believes Australians are chirpy because, despite everything, much is going well: we have a robust parliamentary democracy, we are reasonably well educated, with relatively low unemployment, good healthcare, a great physical environment, and pride ourselves on the 'fair go'. Perhaps the problem is that we are too well off, he wonders. Maybe things need to get worse before they get better:

Given our paradoxical blend of dissatisfaction and complacency it might require even more serious instability, perhaps amounting to chaos, to convince us to look for more imaginative solutions to the problems that beset us and make us the troubled nation that we are (p.16).

Mackay is, however, no pessimist. *Australia Reimagined* brims with positive suggestions for the way forward. His main thesis is clearly outlined on the very first page in the subtitle to his introduction 'Compassion changes everything' (p.1.) A little later he unpacks this theme:

Social cohesion, grounded in compassion and mutual respect, is the key to true greatness for any society. By contrast, social fragmentation—exacerbated by rampant individualism and competitive materialism—inevitably damages the social fabric and diminishes our capacity for greatness (p.7).

The case for compassion and respect is attractively made in a number of places in the book. In chapter 2 on anxiety Mackay asserts, 'I repeat: compassion—not just belonging—is the great antidote to anxiety' (p.68). In his discussion of social

media, he emphasises that the essence of human communication is emotional vulnerability and warns of the dehumanising distance of the internet. In the book's most impressive chapter entitled 'The better world you dream of starts in your street', he suggests taking responsibility at the local level where actions can make a real difference in building the much-needed social capital on which the health of any society depends. Here he is at his most convincing when giving wise advice on a more personal level:

There is no magic wand for building a better society. No messianic leader can do it for us; no self-help manual has the answer. The truth is so amazingly simple, it's easy to overlook. . . . You'd like to see a more peaceful world? Then start by making your street, your family, your workplace more peaceful (p.173).

It is when he ventures into the world of public policy that the book falters. Mackay constantly oversimplifies. For example, he briefly discusses the deeply complicated question of border protection policy as if it was only about unattractive Australian values. In passing he refers to what he calls 'the alleged threat of international terrorism' (p.13). Entirely innocent of the existence of dangerous Jihadist movements, he states that 'our participation in the murky complexities of Afghanistan and Syria raises . . . deep questions about what the hell we are doing there and whose side we're on' (p.291). The only danger with Islamic fundamentalists is that they are at risk of 'hardline, dogmatic Christians wanting hypocritically to attack what they see as offensive passages in the Koran' (p.221).

When Mackay does enter into more lengthy discussion the results are no better. Despite some excellent advice that the main way to stand up for tolerance, compassion and mutual respect is by example (p.105), the general treatment of multiculturalism in chapter 3 ('Whose afraid of diversity?') seems to boil down to the difficult and confusing proposition 'we are actually defined by our diversity' (p.102). Yet when we come to gender (chapter 6 'Gender wars: a pathway to peace') the

previous talk of diversity goes out the window. While Mackay's treatment is more nuanced than some, at the end of the day for him there is only one way that history is going—'true cultural change' (p.207) means society will become 'gender blind'. He proposes quotas as the 'final big step' that is needed 'before the work of the gender revolution can come fully to fruition and we can get on with establishing a new social order' (205-6). There is to be no diversity on gender roles. Again, it is those pesky 'ultraconservative Christians' who are ignoring 'cultural evolution' (p.200).

Which brings us to Mackay's discussion of religion in chapter 7. His title says it all, 'Religion's noblest role: promoting compassion'. Yet he wants to have it both ways. He is sure that 'Australia is far from finished with religion' (p.215) but then accepts Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that 'God is dead' in the imagination of the post-Enlightenment West, including as a source of morality. He confidently asserts that 'we have come to realise that morality is a social construct' (p.221). In what sounds more like wishful thinking than fact, he claims that there is 'a big movement, like a silent tide, from an "out there" interpretation of God to an "in here" view of God as a loving spirit that is within us and among us.' Such a movement apparently makes atheism harder, for '[w]hat person of goodwill is not in favour of the idea that love—compassion, kindness, charity—is the most powerful force in the world' (p. 212). Maybe, but it does not seem that Mackay has actually read much of Nietzsche, who saw things differently: 'When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality. For the latter is absolutely not self-evident.'\*

Worse still, some of Mackay's big ideas in *Australia Reimagined* are simply extreme. In chapter 9 'Choice: the big threat to public education' he proposes the abolition of all public funding of private education. In chapter 8 'Politics: Is this the best we can do?' he argues that frustrations with the present political system are best overcome by replacing elections entirely with the random selection of

members of parliament from the electoral roll to serve for a limited term. This, he opines, 'is the closest thing to true democracy you can imagine, where every citizen has a statistically equal chance of being asked to serve in the parliament' (p.237). How such an unaccountable system of government—which Mackay admits would only give increased power to the unelected public service—is more democratic or would provide better outcomes is beyond imagining. The only reason he gives for this proposal not being adopted is the cynical observation that 'it's hard to imagine any parliament voting itself out of existence in favour of some purer form of democracy' (p.241). I would have thought that the good citizens of Australia would have something to say at any constitutional referendum that deprived them of any say in who governs them.

Surprisingly for a book entitled *Australia Reimagined*, there are whole areas of national life which are effectively ignored. Mackay shows little interest in economics other than to repeat the claim of increasing income inequality. He has little to say about Indigenous policy other than to criticise the Turnbull government's rejection of the proposed 'voice' to parliament. And there is nothing on energy, foreign affairs, identity politics, population, federalism, health, defence or productivity.

Mackay says his book 'draws on experience acquired during a 60-year career in social research' (p.315), but this does not justify the lack of references in the text or even an index. What he does give us is an impressionistic collection of wise observations and unanalysed thought bubbles. While it might seem churlish to be critical of a book that obviously means well and whose author is a model of the compassion and respect that he advocates, it could have been much better.



**The Right Reverend Robert Forsyth is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies.**

\* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 21.