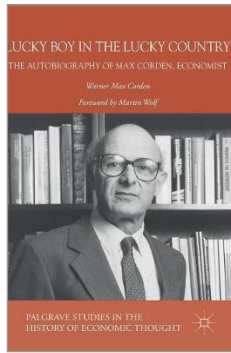


## Lucky Boy in the Lucky Country: The Autobiography of Max Corden, Economist

By Warner Max Corden  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018,  
243 pages, €119.59  
(hardcover) €95.19  
(ebook)  
ISBN: 9783319651651



### Reviewed by Eugenie Joseph

With news headlines early this year dominated by US President Donald Trump's moves to introduce import tariffs, it seems that old debates on free trade and protectionism are well and truly back in the spotlight. But in reality these debates are never truly won: the case for free trade must be re-prosecuted again and again, pointing to the tangible benefits that accrue to consumers in terms of lower prices for goods and to households in the form of greater wealth.

Given this context, there is nothing passé about the study of trade economics. There is still plenty to learn from recalling Australia's transition from a closed, highly protected economy of the mid-1900s to the largely open, free-trading economy of today. Australians should not take these past achievements for granted. A timely reminder is provided in the recently released *Lucky Boy in the Lucky Country*, the autobiography of Max Corden, one of Australia's most notable trade economists whose work on the theory of trade protection played a critical role in laying the foundations for trade liberalisation in this country.

From Breslau in Germany (now Wrocław in Poland) to high school in Melbourne to the vaulted spires of Oxford University and the political epicentre of Washington, Corden's life and professional career have spanned the world. Less well known but just as worthy of sharing is Corden's personal story and family background. Hence, the first part of his autobiography is dedicated to recounting his remarkable personal story, while Part II follows his professional life and career. But although *Lucky Boy*

*in the Lucky Country* is classified as an autobiography, it is also a personal memoir in the most complete sense: a mixture of biographical account, historical commentary, philosophical musings and reflections on his seminal works.

With living memories of the pre-World War II world now fading, Corden's account of his early childhood as a Jewish boy in pre-war Germany offers poignant and absorbing insights: a depiction of a young life profoundly formed by the political turmoil of that era. Corden paints an evocative picture of his early life under the shadow of Nazi rule in the 1930s, followed by a timely escape to boarding school in Britain—perhaps surprisingly, a happy interlude in his life which made him a lifelong Anglophile—and migration to Australia as a refugee with his parents and siblings on the eve of World War II.

Rather than a chronological approach, however, Corden then proceeds to take several detours to recount his family history, along with the heartbreaking story of his Jewish relatives caught up in the horrors of the Holocaust. He confronts the difficult truth that he could have been another victim, attributing his escape to the forces of luck which tragically eluded so many others, including close relatives.

There is also a sense that Corden, now in his nineties, has come to appreciate the significance of being a first-hand witness to an extraordinary period of history through living as a child in pre-war Nazi Germany. His extensive reflections on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe are interesting but ultimately less satisfying, given the wealth of historical analysis produced on this subject.

Against the backdrop of a world at war, Corden describes his arrival in a provincial but peaceful Australia and his largely happy integration into Melbourne life. The Australian education system appears to have served him well; Corden graduated from high school with good grades and won a university scholarship. Acting on advice from his pragmatic father, Corden put aside his personal inclination to study history—his favourite subject—in favour of commerce, which his father believed would lead to a better job. As commerce included studies in economics, his future was undoubtedly set in motion from this point.

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