



**Helen Hughes AO**  
**(1 October 1928 – 15 June 2013)**

**A Tribute**

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## **A Tribute**

Greg Lindsay AO  
The Hon Tony Abbott MP  
Noel Pearson  
Ron Duncan  
Glenys Byrne

CIS Policy Forum 26



**2014**



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Helen Hughes with Sara Hudson (former CIS Research Fellow in the Indigenous Affairs Research Program)

# Greg Lindsay AO

*Executive Director  
The Centre for Independent Studies*

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Nigel Scullion, Noel Pearson, Glenys Byrne, Ron Duncan, members of the Hughes family, and friends and colleagues of Helen—welcome to this special tribute to an extraordinary lady. I'd also like to express our appreciation to the Prime Minister for offering to host this event in such a magnificent location. Very fitting. Helen probably wouldn't have wanted something like this, but her passing extinguished a force of nature and it's important to acknowledge her impact on Australia and the world more generally.

This is not a memorial as such. She would have hated the idea. It is a tribute to her life's work.

Before I hand over to our four speakers, I will take just a few moments to give you a brief précis of Helen's involvement in the work of The Centre for Independent Studies. She often described it as the best part of her career.

Following her retirement from academic life, Helen engaged in a number of projects before settling in Sydney and joining the Centre as a Senior Fellow a little over 15 years ago. Her work in those early days at the CIS was on employment, and she continued her long professional interest in economic development, particularly in the Pacific. A meeting 10 years ago at the CIS with a couple of Aboriginal women from Arnhem Land started her on a new path that was to occupy her right to the end.

Her work on Indigenous education, health, housing, property rights and employment helped change the paradigm that had driven Indigenous policy for so long. Others such as Noel Pearson can also take credit ... and I am delighted he is here. Her book *Lands of Shame* was a transforming document. Apart from the many positive benefits that flowed from it, the book annoyed the hell out of

so many of those who had, at the time, more orthodox views of life in the remote communities. That would have given her great pleasure.

As a colleague, she was industrious and challenging in so many ways, but she was also a wonderful mentor to younger members of the CIS team who worked with her. I am delighted that some of them are here today.

Her output was extraordinary. Just a quick count of the publications and comments pieces online at the CIS website listed some 180 plus entries. There would have been much more in other outlets in her other careers, and we will no doubt be hearing of some of that shortly.

Her fingers were at the keyboard right until she had to leave for hospital. Her emails to me in the last week sketched out a major document she was planning, which she felt would tie everything together and be her last word, though somehow I doubted even that. Well, she didn't quite get to it, but what a mighty legacy she has left.

It is now time to hear from our other speakers and it's my pleasure to ask the Prime Minister to address us.

# The Hon. Tony Abbott MP

*Prime Minister of Australia*

Greg, it's a pleasure to be associated with today's event. Helen Hughes was a great Australian and she was, as you said, a force of nature. For a very long time, indeed, she was one of our most distinguished thinkers. As anyone who met her knows, she was passionate, she was engaged, and she could certainly give you a waspish response if the mood was upon her. But she also did marvellous, marvellous work over the best part of half a century.

Her first work was on the political economy of Nauru, and her last *Lands of Shame*. Along with authoring dozens of books and very significant journal articles, she was the Boyer Lecturer in the mid-1980s. She was variously described as Australia's greatest female economist and one of Australia's 100 most distinguished public intellectuals. I suspect she didn't think being subscribed as one of Australia's 100 most distinguished public intellectuals was such a distinction, but nevertheless she was so described.

As she moved from being a Marxist, indeed a member of the communist party in her youth, to being a passionate supporter of free markets, indeed that which in her early days she thought was an agent of oppression, she came to think in her later days was an agent of liberation.

Like many in this gathering, I probably took most attentive notice when Helen turned her talents to the issue of Indigenous Australia and what was to be done.

Helen was a fierce critic of the idea of Indigenous exceptionalism. Yes, Indigenous people are special. Every Australian, every human being, is special. Yes, Indigenous culture is unique to this country and for that reason we have a special duty to preserve the high culture of Indigenous Australia. And obviously we have a duty to all of our fellow Australians, including Indigenous Australians.

But as far as Helen was concerned, a policy of exceptionalism or the policies that had been based on exceptionalism had produced nothing but exceptional poverty, exceptional disadvantage, and exceptional human misery. So she was right to take aim at the folly that was based on this well-intentioned but, ultimately, misguided notion of Indigenous exceptionalism.

And yet, as Karl Marx said, 'The point is not to understand the world but to change it,' and that's the challenge that all of us have. That's the challenge the new government has. It's great to be here with Nigel Scullion, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs. No one in the Parliament is more committed to the real best interests of Indigenous people as Nigel.

It's also great to be here with Noel Pearson, my friend and sometime collaborator. Noel has been a prophetic voice in this field for a long time now and a prophet for our time in this and so many other areas of social disadvantage and what is to be done about it. And in Helen Hughes he had a strong and perceptive academic collaborator.

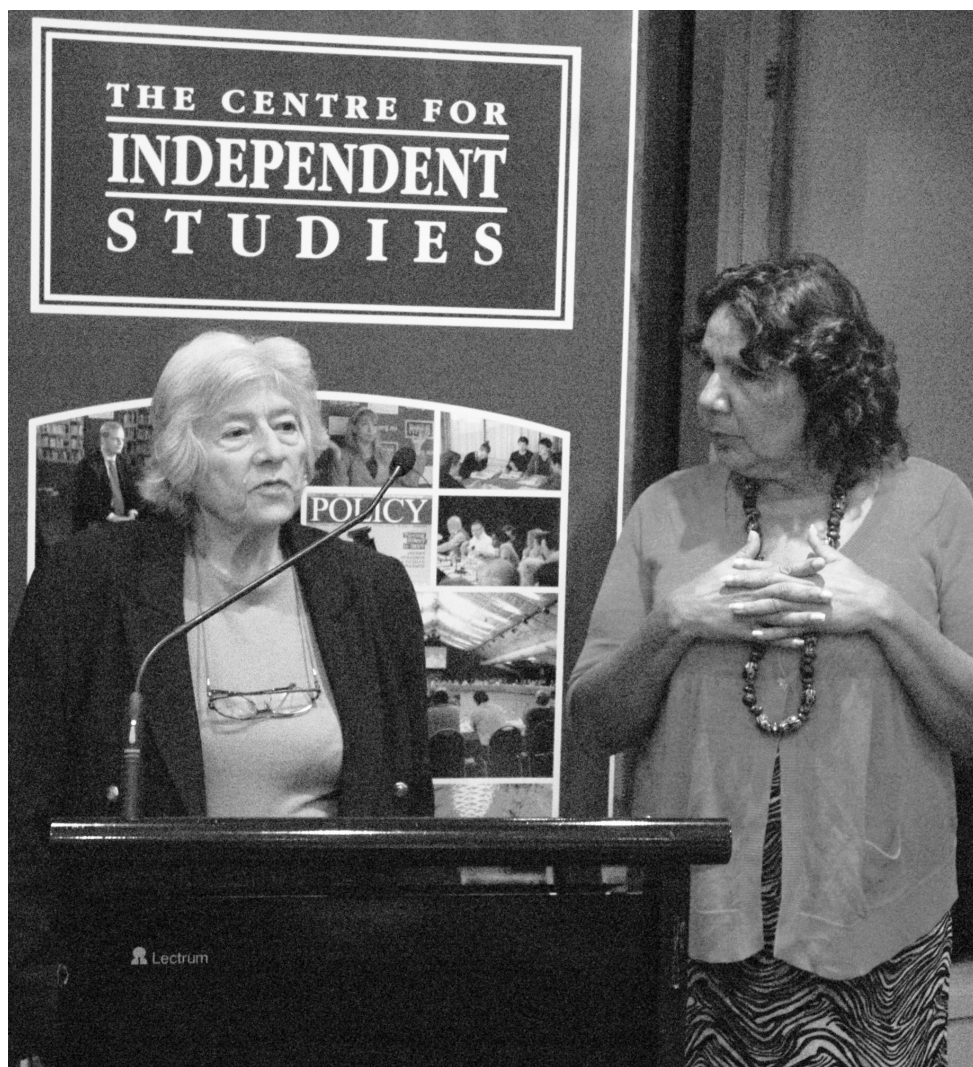
There are so many things that need to be done in Indigenous affairs, but any one day what must happen surely is the kids must go to school, the adults must go to work, and the Indigenous people should enjoy the ordinary tranquillity that every Australian has a right to expect. Indigenous people, no less than any other Australian, should be able to go about their lives free from harassment, persecution and violence. They should be as safe in their own homes and communities as every other Australian has a right to be.

So that's the immediate challenge of the new Commonwealth government and the ongoing challenge for the state and territory governments. I am pleased to say that at the most recent meeting of the Council of Australian Governments, perhaps the longest and most animated discussion was on this absolutely critical and central point of getting every Australian child, particularly every Indigenous child, to school. Not sometimes, not if they felt like it, not if the parents wanted it to happen, but getting every child to school, every single day.

Now it's one thing to wish this and another thing to bring it about. Nevertheless every Premier and Chief Minister, certainly this Prime Minister, left that meeting with the absolute stated objective of making this happen as quickly as we humanly could. Yes, we need better schools. Noel is better placed than just about anyone in our country to ensure that that happens and I look forward to working closely with him, as does Nigel and our Education Minister Christopher Pyne in the weeks and months and years ahead.

That is the foundation we have laid. And if we can say in a year or two that Indigenous school attendance rates have gone from (if we're lucky) 60% in the Northern Territory to a consistent 80% or 90%, that will be a significant start. When we achieve that, I'm sure an irascible Helen Hughes up there in the ether will look down on us, give us a brief smile, and say there is still more to do—and she'll be right. There will be more to do but every journey has got to begin somewhere, and this is the journey that I am determined the new government will begin. We will not rest until we are much further down this path than any previous government has ever gone.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to be here. It is an honour to be associated with the commemoration of a great Australian and a great life. I look forward to Helen's memory being preserved and her inspiration continuing down for the generations.



Helen Hughes with Alison Anderson, member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly

# Noel Pearson

*Chairman  
Cape York Group*

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Greg Lindsay, friends of the CIS, and members of the Hughes family.

A magnificent honour is conferred upon me to speak in tribute to the late Professor Helen Hughes for her noble contribution to the cause of my people. It is a great privilege of my life to have known her in the last decade of her large and busy life as an economist, intellectual and humanitarian.

It was not especially perspicacious but nevertheless correct when I told Consilium a number of years ago that when the story of Indigenous policy is told, the role of the CIS' Indigenous policy program, led by its redoubtable field marshall, Professor Hughes, in effecting tectonic shifts will be plain.

Professor Hughes brought a rigour and indomitable spirit to her work in the too often arid and dispiritingly stony fields of Indigenous affairs. She fortified and renewed those like me when we were weary and heavily laden. She was fearless and invigorating in her criticism, and passionate and relentless in her energy. Beneath that ferocious intellect lay a tender heart filled with empathy and compassion for the people to whom she would devote the last years of her life.

In the middle of 2012, during one of my darkest nights of the soul, I had cause to send the following message to Professor Hughes and her co-author son, Mark, following my reading of their CIS monograph on Indigenous education in the early hours of a June winter's morning:

Dear Helen and Mark,

Checking the Internet (when I was just supposed to be getting up for an early morning glass of water) meant that

I came across your piece in *The Australian* today, which led me to your latest monograph on the CIS website, which I have been reading these past hours.

Congratulations on this brilliant policy analysis. I think all of the work and insights you have garnered over the years on the subject of Indigenous education come together in this monograph. You have clarified the lines of argument in a way that is so helpful to me. Anyone truly serious about Indigenous education should take direction from your paper here.

When in my sickbed I came under exceptionally heavy fire from detractors, I received a message from our field marshal exhorting me to never be troubled by these people (her actual description denoting our diminutive brethren from Africa, I decline to repeat)—and it was a message of such salutary significance, at a time of most need, that I can never forget it. Oh, how I honour her memory and thank my God for her service to my mob.

She would not hesitate in chiding me if I failed to take the opportunity of this occasion to advance the cause to which she devoted herself these last years of her life: educating our future generations.

I spent my illness in 2012 thinking about school reform. I researched and read a mountain of literature. My room was plastered with drawings and notes. My main concern was how to tackle failing schools. I was not so interested in telling successful schools how to suck eggs, I wanted to think through how the bottom schools in the country might be turned around. There are up to 2,000 schools failing our children. That Indigenous schools help comprise this long and miserable tail is the source of my anxiety, though plainly Australian children of all backgrounds are being denied a future.

Let me outline the main reform principles upon which I alighted:

- embed sustainable school reform within a system reform context

- ensure that effective instruction is the keystone of whole school reform
- ensure high-performing school systems get three elements right:
  - get the right people to become teachers
  - develop teachers into effective instructors
  - ensure the system delivers the best possible instruction for each student
- stage autonomy according to school performance
- introduce direct instruction in target schools
- offer extra-curricular programs in Indigenous schools
- move towards universal use of proven teaching materials
- develop instructional leaders to propagate sustainable school reform.

I am pleased a member of the Hughes family, Robyn, joined us this year as principal of Djarragun College in Cairns. She took leave from North Sydney Boys High School, one of this city's smartest institutions of learning, to help us pick this school up off the dust. Robyn's love for Djarragun has grown equal to mine these past 12 months, and I commend her, her husband, John, and their daughters, for the courage and tenacity they have shown on behalf of our children at Djarragun.

Let me finally express my abiding gratitude to Greg Lindsay for bringing me into the intellectual fellowship of the CIS—showing a faultless generosity—enabling me to know Professor Helen Hughes and coming to so respect and love this lady for her grace and dedication.



Helen Hughes with Václav Klaus, former President of the Czech Republic

# Ron Duncan

*Emeritus Professor  
Crawford School of Public Policy  
Australian National University*

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the Hon. Nigel Scullion, the Hughes Family, and Greg Lindsay  
It is indeed an honour for me to be able to pay tribute to Helen Hughes tonight.

First, I would like to acknowledge that Helen had the greatest influence on my professional life, except for that of my wife.

Helen believed strongly that with good economics training, individuals could make a huge contribution to the welfare of their countries. She devoted her research, policy advice, and teaching life towards this end. I was the beneficiary of this devotion in several ways.

Helen recruited me from what is now the Productivity Commission to the World Bank in 1980. She argued that the international experience would be very good for the development of my skills as an economist—and she was right. Helen prevailed on me to stay in the World Bank, which I did—for 14 years.

When Helen retired from the World Bank in 1983, she moved to the Australian National University (ANU) where she took over what became the National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS). Under her leadership, NCDS, now the Crawford School of Public Policy, became the leading university centre training people from developing countries in post-graduate economics.

When Helen was retiring from the ANU in 1993, she insisted that I apply for her position and come back to Australia. I did and spent nine wonderful years carrying on her work. The NCDS training has been so effective that countries such as Vietnam have an ANU ‘mafia’ that has contributed mightily to their growth and development.

I saw Helen's enormous contribution to economics and economic policy as drawing heavily on her initial training in history, which allowed her to identify upcoming trends and events that others did not see. I can illustrate this with my first efforts in the World Bank.

Seeing that I wasn't occupied much elsewhere, Helen asked me to write a brief on the upcoming debt crisis in Mexico. This was well before there was much appreciation of the problem that was developing in Latin America.

Next, Helen recognised that China would be looking to the international finance agencies for help after beginning its reforms in 1979. Helen saw that the World Bank President, Robert McNamara, would eventually be invited to visit China and she wanted to be on the plane with him.

While at NCDS, Helen took a special interest in the Pacific islands and Papua New Guinea—recognising that the region was of great importance to Australia in many ways. Together with Maree Tait—who is here tonight—Helen commissioned a series of studies on the Pacific, *Pacific 2010*, or the 'Pacific Nightmare' as it became known.

The studies looked at what could transpire in the Pacific if their then trends in demography, education and health outcomes, and poor policies and institutions continued. Unfortunately, much of what was forecast has come true. Helen and Graeme, together with Maree, also established and published the *Pacific Economic Bulletin* for nine years. Unfortunately, after 25 years as the leading economics research journal on the Pacific, it is no longer being published.

After she retired from the ANU and joined The Centre for Independent Studies, Helen continued her interest in the Pacific, and wrote much about the lack of success with aid in the region. Later—much to the relief of AusAID, I suspect—Helen turned her attention to the plight of Australian Aborigines (which you have already heard much about tonight).

Helen was outspoken, and direct. (She usually took a front seat at seminars, right under the nose of the presenter.) She was also probably the most 'politically incorrect' person I have known—a

wonderful trait. I remember when I joined the World Bank, Helen gave me a little talk on how I should be 'culturally sensitive' because of the many different nationalities in the bank. Then, in the first meeting of directors I attended with her (Helen was the only woman at that level in bank at the time), she proceeded to comprehensively cuss out the 'idiots' who had prepared the paper being discussed. So I assumed the little talk was something she was obliged to say.

Helen was a great friend and mentor to the end. I miss her very much.

There should be more great characters like her. But, I guess, if there were, they wouldn't stand out so much.



# Glenys Byrne

*Senior Economist  
Department of Finance, Government of Australia*

**M**y thanks to Greg Lindsay and his staff for arranging this celebration and to Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his staff for hosting it.

The views I express tonight are my own or Helen's and not those of my employer, the Department of Finance.

I last heard from Helen on 23 May 2013 when she told me she planned to wrap up her work at the CIS that year because she was going to turn 85 in October and thought it timely that she retire and get a bit of leisure!

She added that if she lived until the end of this year, she would like to write her own obituary and wanted me to be a co-editor. When I received the very sad news of her passing in June, I not only felt shock and grief—I confess I also felt stranded as a co-editor of the official obituary.

Until 2004, when Helen was presented with the Economic Society's Distinguished Fellow Award, the society's honour board listed famous male economists only. Helen did not want any references to gender in my oration for her medal presentation, saying:

We need to make it clear that this is not about my being a woman, but being an economist, and about the role that professional economists bring to clarifying public debates and policy options.

However, compared to the men on the honour board, Helen had had some different experiences. She could not get a job in academia in Australia for several years after she returned with a Phd from the London School of Economics in 1955. At the same time, she witnessed men getting jobs in universities ahead of her whose Phd dissertations had not been passed on the first attempt.

In her early years in the academic workforce, Helen confronted discrimination against married women, women with children, and women who took men's jobs. Indeed, she said that her biggest problem working as a senior lecturer in the economics department at the University of Queensland in the early 1960s was constant resentment of her 'taking bread out of deserving men's mouths.'

In 1998, five years after she retired from the Australian National University (ANU), Helen blew the whistle on the ANU Department of Economics for poor teaching, harassment of female students by some male chauvinists she dubbed 'neanderthals,' and the poor management that had allowed this culture to continue. The department's response for several years was to 'shoot the messenger.'

It was in this context that Helen and I met over coffee at the Canberra Hyatt in early 2003. In 2002, the Economics Society of Australia, under Professor Phil Lewis' leadership, had established a Committee for Women in Economics—and this created new opportunities for us to have a bit of fun.

Apart from her enormous moral strength and courage, the following factors inspired me to ensure that Helen received due recognition for her contributions to the economics profession and public policy, and these are the things that really matter.

- Helen's passion for economics was stronger than that of any other economist I've ever met.
- Helen was always highly critical of the takeover of economics by mathematical economists from the 1970s onwards and crowding out training in economic history, history of economic thought, and rigorous logic. Helen saw economics essentially as a box of tools that can be used to analyse economic phenomena, and thus contribute to the evolution of policies that can improve living standards. The way she taught economics made it very interesting for her students. Bill Hayden described her teaching at the University of Queensland as 'inspired guidance.'
- Helen understood that, unless explained in plain English, economics is counterintuitive so sophisticated levels of expression are also important to be a good economist. (English was Helen's third

language, after Czech and German, and she said she picked it up in six months after arriving in Australia at age 11 in 1939. The fact that her articles often had us reaching for our dictionaries indicates that perhaps she strayed a bit too far from 'plain English'!

- Helen's passion for applied economic analysis does not in itself explain her achievements. A key thread cutting across her career was 'daring to be different.' She was at her best when challenging outdated assumptions and regulations, 'beggar my neighbour' policies, and ineffectual government interventions. For example, Helen drove the policy changes in Australia in the 1980s that changed Australian education into an export services industry. This started when Helen persuaded the Jackson committee reviewing Australia's overseas aid program in 1984 to go beyond its terms of reference. Her advice on immigration policy as a member of the Fitzgerald committee in 1988 helped contribute to an ongoing focus on skills in Australia's immigration program ... just two of her contributions.
- Finally, behind every great economist there is usually a great mentor. In Helen's case this was Heinz Arndt. Like Heinz, Helen tended to start debates at what she saw as the useful end of the spectrum of ideas and then not budge for sound intellectual reasons. This was always far more difficult than starting at the other end of the spectrum.

In her final correspondence to me in May, Helen considered her major legacies were The Centre for Development Studies graduate school at the ANU; her writings on aid, trade and development; and her work aimed at improving opportunities for Indigenous Australians. For me and younger generations of economists, Helen was and will remain a great influence because of her passion for applied economic analysis, her zero tolerance of abuses of power, and her courage to dare to be different.

# Selected publications by Helen Hughes for The Centre for Independent Studies

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## **Special Publication**

Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition, 2007

## **Policy Monographs**

- PM129 Indigenous Education 2012 (with Mark Hughes), 2012
- PM113 Private Housing on Indigenous Lands (with Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson), 2010
- PM110 Indigenous Education 2010, 2010
- PM107 Indigenous Employment, Unemployment and Labour Force Participation: Facts for Evidence Based Policies, 2010
- PM94 Revisiting Indigenous Education, 2009
- PM83 Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory, 2008
- PM72 Should Australia and New Zealand Open Their Doors to Guest Workers From the Pacific? Costs and Benefits, 2006
- PM54 Immigrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Global View, 2002
- PM34 Working Youth: Tackling Australian Youth Unemployment, 1996

## **Issue Analyses**

- IA98 The Bipolar Pacific, 2008
- IA88 Kava and after in the Nhulunbuy (Gulf of Carpentaria) Hinterland, 2007
- IA69 Annals of Aid: Vanuatu and The United States Millenium Challenge Corporation, 2006
- IA63 The Economics of Indigenous Deprivation and Proposals for Reform, 2005
- IA58 Papua New Guinea's Choice: A Tale of Two Nations, 2005
- IA54 A New Deal for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Communities (with Jenness Warin), 2005

- IA53     The Pacific is Viable! 2004
- IA50     From Riches to Rags What Are Nauru's Options and How Can Australia Help? 2004
- IA49     Can Papua New Guinea Come Back From the Brink? 2004
- IA33     Aid Has Failed the Pacific, 2003
- IA2      Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value: Moving Toward, Or Away From, Wage Justice for Women? 1998

## **Submissions**

NSW Community Discussion Paper: Improving Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal People (with Mark Hughes), 2012

Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (with Sara Hudson), 2011

Remote Participation and Employment Servicing Arrangements (with Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson), 2011

FaHCSIA Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2010 (with Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson), 2010

Indigenous Home Ownership Issues Paper 2010 (with Sara Hudson), 2010

Native Title Leading Practice Agreements Discussion Paper 2010 (with Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson), 2010

## **Policy Forum**

PF12     Australia's Asian Challenge, 1994

## **For Policy magazine**

### ***Book Reviews***

Arndt's Story: The Life of an Australian Economist, 2007

The End of Poverty: How We Can Make It Happen in Our Lifetime, 2005

Can Japan Compete? 2002

Balance ("Conversations With Petr Hajek About What Has Been, Is and Will Be"), 2002

### ***Feature Articles***

'Does Size Matter? Tuvalu and Nauru Compared' (with Steven Gosarevski), 2004

'Storm Warning,' 2003

'The Politics of Envy,' 2001

'Crony Capitalism and the East Asian Currency and Financial "Crises",' 1999

'Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value?' 1998

'Industrial Policy For Australia,' 1997

'"The Myth of Asia's Miracle": A Comment on Krugman,' 1995

### ***Review Articles***

'Is Globalisation Good or Bad For Poor People?' 2002

'Crisis or Signal? Asia's Economic Problems,' 1999

'Whither Development Assistance?' 1997

### ***Comment***

'The Politics of Envy,' 2002

### ***Obituary***

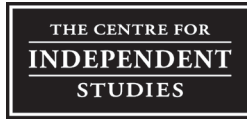
'A Tale of Two Refugees,' 2002

### ***Schools' Brief***

'Australia's Economic Record' (with Jennifer Buckingham), 2001

'Australia's Prospects in the Global Economy' (with Barry Maley, Jennifer Buckingham, and Lucy Sullivan), 1999





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The Centre meets the need for informed debate on issues of importance to a free and democratic society in which individuals and business flourish, unhindered by government intervention. In encouraging competition in ideas, The Centre for Independent Studies carries out an activities programme which includes:

- research
- holding lectures, seminars and policy forums
- publishing books and papers
- issuing a quarterly journal, *POLICY*

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# A TRIBUTE HELEN HUGHES

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**CIS Senior Fellow Professor Helen Hughes AO** passed away on 15 June 2013 after a lifetime dedicated to working passionately and fiercely on behalf of the poor and the powerless.

Helen was a distinguished economist with a particular focus on development economics and improving the lives of Indigenous Australians living in remote communities. In her later years, she became a mentor to numerous young people, guiding and hectoring them to better and brighter futures.

The Centre for Independent Studies held a commemoration ceremony on 17 December 2013 at Kirribilli House, Sydney, to celebrate Helen's life and work.

**CIS Executive Director Greg Lindsay AO** welcomed guests and offered an overview of Helen's time at the CIS before the keynote address was given by **Prime Minister the Hon. Tony Abbott MP**. Warm remarks followed by **Noel Pearson**, Chairman of the Cape York Group; **Emeritus Professor Ron Duncan** from the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University; and **Glenys Byrne**, Senior Economist at the Australian government's Department of Finance.

This publication brings together the four speeches, and a list of her publications for the CIS.

We hope you enjoy this tribute to the life's work of a good friend and a most remarkable woman.

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