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Distinguished Fellow of the Economic Society of Australia, 2001: Robert G. Gregory

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I Introduction

It has been said that economists agree on only two things: that economists never agree on anything; and that there should be no tariffs. Thus it is of great interest that the 30th Annual Conference of Australian Economists, held in Perth in September 2001, added a third point of consensus. It is that Professor Robert (Bob) Gregory should receive the Society's 2001 Distinguished Fellow Award.

Over the years the Distinguished Fellow Award has been made to individuals who have 'made an impact'. The type of impact has varied widely, from Trevor Swan's contributions to theory, to Noel Butlin's work on the construction of historical GDP series for Australia, to Alan Powell's work in quantitative economic modelling, and to John Nevile's policy orientated contribution to macroeconomic policy.

However, rarely has the Distinguished Fellow Award been made to someone who has made such a consummate impact in many different areas. Bob Gregory has achieved excellence across the board, with respect to scholarship, public service and academic leadership. He was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (in 1979), listed in the International Who's Who in Economics (for the first time in 1986), made an Officer of the Order of Australia for contributions to economics (in 1996), and elected President of both the Economics Society of Australia and the Society of Australian Labour Economists, respectively, in 1997–1999 and 2000–2001. Professor Gregory is a very distinguished fellow indeed.

What follows documents the nature, depth and significance of his influence. First, some context.

II Background

Bob Gregory was born in 1939 and raised in Coburg, Victoria, a lower middle class and unexceptional suburb in the north-west of Melbourne. In his early years he was a bit of a football star and a pretty good, but not outstanding, student ('about 12th in the class'[1]). As a youngster he did not think of himself as an academic type. He says that he '...wasn't all that smart'.

At the age of 14, Bob contracted polio, unluckily just a year before the Salk Vaccine became available. At that time polio was a very serious affliction, and it had critical consequences for his life. It meant that he spent most of a year away from school, in bed, listening to the radio. When he was able to return to school he was unable to sit down in class and as a result he was a half-time student only. Each afternoon he was excused from formal participation at school and spent the time studying at home.

In his later years at high school he became the top student, and this led him to enrol with scholarship offers in a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Melbourne in 1958. He says that his undergraduate involvement in economics was neither planned nor strategic – he just didn't have too many choices: 'I couldn't do Arts because I had no languages, and I had no Science'. In his Commerce Degree he finished top in almost every unit, and this opened up a host of academic opportunities.

The first of these was a Commonwealth Scholarship for Postgraduate Study in the UK, which in

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all quotes following are from a conversation between the author and Bob Gregory in December 2001.

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1962 took him to the London School of Economics for his PhD. While he had a breadth of opportunities he did not want to go to Cambridge or Oxford, for quintessential Australian egalitarian reasons: 'I didn't want to be at a place where students weren't allowed to walk on the grass'. This discomfort with hierarchy and formalism was not a passing phase; it reflects instead an essential part of Bob Gregory's value system and career aspirations.

With this as background we now leave the young Bob to explore the contributions which have resulted in his 2001 Distinguished Fellow Award.

III Scholarship

Arguably Bob Gregory has contributed as much, if not more, to scholarship within both the Australian and international economics community than any other living Australian economist. His achievements in this area can be traced to four characteristics of his work. One, he has always chosen to focus on the big picture and the most fundamental questions. Two, he has brought to these issues an extraordinary level of creativity and imagination. Three, he has never been constrained or intimidated by the latest preoccupation of the discipline, choosing instead to travel his own pathways. Finally, his written work is accessible to a wide audience. These points are now expanded on.

Unlike most successful scholars, Bob Gregory's PhD thesis, an analysis of the measurement of technical change in production functions, was not a major research contribution, and resulted in only one short published piece in 1965. The beginning of his influence arose from his Visiting Assistant Professorship to North–Western University in 1967–1969, a job he took because of his interest in experiencing the US academic environment. This sojourn produced his extensively cited paper on import demand functions, published in the *American Economic Review* (1971).

The essential point of the paper is the recognition that over the cycle, and in the short run, price signals are not the most important factor with respect to import performance. Rather, it seemed to be the case that domestic quantity constraints and, in response, substitution towards imports are critical. The work has been recognised as one of the top two empirical contributions in the economics of trade in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This piece marked the beginning of a plethora of research initiating themes that have engaged and changed the profession. Foremost among these was a paper in 1976 which pointed out the potentially deleterious effect of a mineral boom upon import-competing activity due to the appreciation of the real exchange rate resulting from an improved terms of trade. His analysis generated a considerable amount of public and political debate at the time, and he refers to this period as 'the 4 weeks I was in Parliament'.

The contribution became known as the 'Gregory Thesis', a phrase coined by an Australian journalist at the time. With the large rise in oil prices in the 1970s the effect was noticed elsewhere and earned the title the 'Dutch Disease'. In a survey of this literature Max Corden and J.P. Neary[2] pointed out that Bob was the first person to recognise the potential implications of such booms – that is, the 'Gregory Thesis' is appositely named, and continues to have a profound effect on academic and policy debate.

During the early years of his scholastic experience Bob became increasingly less interested in theoretical economics, and perhaps even uneasy with the nature and scope of mainstream journal contributions – this scepticism remains with him today. Thus while he clearly had a talent for international trade, it was not the economic area he wanted to pursue.

In the late 1970s his research interests turned to labour economics, with early collaborations with Ron Duncan and Peter Sheehan. This might seem to be a strange reorientation: after all, the economics of trade, with its strong microeconomic foundations, sits uneasily with the way labour economics then was. But his switch is not hard to understand, given his love of data and focus on policy issues related to the promotion of equality. In labour economics he flourished, and there are many original and path-breaking contributions.

In his early research in labour he analysed aggregate issues of employment and unemployment (1978a), wages (1978b, 1979b), labour supply (1980) and labour market segmentation (1981). A very significant contribution (1982, 1986) provided the basis of what Snower and Lindbeck later called the 'Insider-Outsider' perspective.

[2] Corden, W.M. and Neary, J.P. (1982), 'Booming Sector and De-Industrialisation in a Small Open Economy', *Economic Journal* **92** (368): 825–48.

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The basic idea is that the macro-economy is unlikely to move quickly to a real wage equilibrium (one that clears the market) in a recession because the stock of available (unemployed) labour is not a close substitute for those in jobs. He was the first person to test this proposition, and the concept is now standard fare in the literature. The ideas were publicised in his delivery of the Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce at the University of Adelaide in 1981.

At this time Bob was developing a rich understanding of the dynamics of the labour market, and this led to a series of papers exploring the nature and consequences of flows between different employment states (1983, 1984). It is an interest underpinning his recent foray into the movements of individuals between and within different areas of the social security system (2000, 2001).

In 1983 Bob Gregory took the Australian Studies Chair at Harvard University. This turned out to be important to his research confidence and orientation, primarily as a result of his interaction with the labour economists associated with the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). Over the 1970s he had become increasingly unconvinced of the capacity of mainstream approaches to economics to offer workable solutions to contemporary problems, and this reference point underlay the research of many NBER economists, most importantly, Richard Freeman.

Perhaps Bob's liaison with the NBER group encouraged him to continue to pursue an unconventional path, but it is more likely that he was always his own person. Whatever the reason, his lack of interest in the conventional research agenda led to new and exciting insights over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. He initiated different ways of thinking about labour economics, and these have found their way into many different applications and policy formulation.

An important example of the above relates to his innovations involving international comparisons of labour market outcomes. Specifically, in the 1980s he explored the influence on wages of markets and institutions in a unique way. His approach (with Anne Daly and others) was to compare earnings outcomes by juxtaposing behavioural parameters from one country to the other in order to measure the effects of legislation related to Equal Pay (1986, 1989 and 1992). This highly original research established that countries' institutional and legal arrangements are critical determinants of economic change.

Another very significant example of scholarly creativity lies in a series of papers written with Boyd Hunter (1995c, 1996a,b), which analyse the role of neighbourhood as a determinant of an individual's future earnings. Bob also: used his Equal Pay methodology to make international comparisons of indigenous and non-indigenous labour market outcomes (1991a, 1997); explored job-sharing and the reasons for the failure of real wages to fall in the 1930s (1988); illustrated the radical course in earnings distributions (the so-called 'disappearing middle') (1993); and described the essence of the intergenerational transmission of economic success and failure (1999). The thread drawing together these disparate topics is that of originality – few of these research areas had been explored in a systematic and rigorous way before Bob Gregory took them up.

IV Public Service

Unlike most academics Bob has been actively involved in the public arena in a number of ways. This began in the 1970s when he took a short-term position as a First Assistant Commissioner in the Industry Assistance Commission, and it was in that environment that he developed some of his influential work with respect to trade.

In recent years his interest in policy and his substantial reputation resulted in a plethora of roles as an economic adviser. The following examples testify to his formal involvement, but the informal one has been equally important.

From 1985 to 1995 he was a Member of the country's most important economic policy institution, the Board of the Reserve Bank of Australia. As those who know him would expect, his ability to explain complex concepts in a simple fashion and to tease out the implications of a graph meant that he had a profound effect upon the deliberations of that body. The then Governor of the RBA paid this tribute to him at the dinner marking Bob's retirement from the Board.

He has also been engaged directly with major federal government economic policy inquiries. He was the Principal Consultant of the 1990–1993 Aged Care Review and Nursing Home Funding Review. Further, in 1988 he was a member of the Wran Committee on Higher Education Financing, which recommended the world's first (and now much copied internationally) income contingent charging mechanism for higher education (HECS). Also, in 1993 he was a member

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of the Employment Opportunities Committee resulting in *Working Nation*, a policy which has since formed the basis of UK labour market intervention for the long-term unemployed. In short, Bob Gregory has been a consummate contributor to Australian economic policy reform.

His policy and public service talents have also been recognised and used internationally. For example, he has advised many non-Australian institutions, including the OECD, and the UK and US governments. In 2001 he contributed to the agenda of the State Development Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China.

It is obvious from the above that Bob's official record of public service is outstanding. What follows shows that it has been matched or even exceeded by his less formal contribution to public debate. Much of this has taken the form of media outreach.

Bob Gregory is a household name in Australia. This is a result of his almost ubiquitous involvement in media debate on a very large number of economic policy issues. Over the last 30 years he has given well over a thousand radio/television interviews on topics as diverse as: interpreting unemployment data; neighbourhood effects on labour market success; the role of labour market programs; education as a solution to unemployment; the determinants of immigrant economic integration; and factors contributing to indigenous labour market outcomes.

He is a compelling public debater, arguably unmatched by any other Australian economist. His public reputation in this context is formidable: I sometimes ask non-economists if they ever encounter economic discussion, and the response is typically something like the following. 'I heard/saw that Bob Gregory bloke recently – he made a lot of sense, for an economist that is'.

One of the reasons Bob Gregory 'makes a lot of sense' to the general public is that he has always seen himself, and has exceptional skills, as a teacher. As testament, when Bill Phillips offered him a job at the Australian National University's (ANU) Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) in the early 1970s, Bob told him he wasn't interested unless there was an opportunity for him to be involved in instruction. He subsequently took the job because it entailed the setting-up of Australia's first coursework Master of Economics Program. His success in this endeavour is now rightly seen to be a watershed in Australian postgraduate economics training.[3]

V Academic Leadership

Bob Gregory was appointed Professor and Head of the Economics Department in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU in 1987, a post he still holds. In this role he has had a profound effect on the general health of academic economics in Australia. One aspect of this has entailed his supervision of a very large number of PhD theses.

Most importantly, he has understood that RSSS has an obligation to Australian economics that lies well beyond ANU, and has acted in accordance with this precept. In this context he has sought to offer research appointments to those most likely to benefit from the RSSS environment and eventually attain high academic status. Almost without exception his judgement has turned out to be correct, and many of these appointments are among Australia's most recognised academic economists, including: Steven Dowrick, Simon Grant, Steven King, John Quiggin, Deborah Mitchell and Jeff Borland.

But it is not just in training and hiring that Bob has excelled. Because of his strong international reputation, he has been able to attract many extraordinary visitors to RSSS. With his encouragement these visitors have often engaged in domestic policy and/or academic debates above and beyond their contribution to the ANU. Some of the international visitors are the world's best in their fields and would be in any list of Who's Who in Economics, including: Professors Daniel Hamermesh, Walter Oi, Ken Wallis, Rick Hanushek, Barbara Wolfe, Olivia Mitchell, Dale Mortenson and Robert Haveman.

Bob Gregory's achievements are appreciated both within and well beyond the realms of the Australian academic economics community. In short, there is no doubt that he is an extraordinarily worthy recipient of the Economics Society Distinguished Fellow Award for 2001. The breadth, originality and quality of his work are standards for all of us to aspire to.

[3] It is of interest that the ANU rules did not allow for compulsory coursework in PhD programs at the time. The Masters of Economics Degree was made mandatory for an ANU Economics PhD in 1992.

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VI Postscript: A Personal Perspective

(i) Background

I had the honour of presenting the Distinguished Fellow Award at the 30th Conference of Australian Economists in Perth, September 2001. The Editors of *The Economic Record* have given permission for me to record below some of the more personal observations offered at that time; remarkably, Bob Gregory has said that he is relaxed about this. The comments fall into three categories: imagery and language; Bob 'direct speak'; and the amazing Gregory disorganisation phenomenon.

(ii) Imagery and Language

Bob Gregory has a great capacity with the spoken word, and its potential to clarify. I have always admired this talent. Three examples are worth recording.

The first is apparently about the reproductive activities of an amphibian, but is really a metaphor concerning methodology in economics. In the context of someone speculating about how green frogs fornicate, he said: 'A stupid way of analysing this would be to construct a model, such as with assumptions of rationality, perfect information and the like. The obvious thing to do is to go and watch them doing it'. This is clearly a criticism of mainstream economic theory, and a support for an empirical approach to economics.

The second example concerns his illustration of the value of modelling behaviour, rather than focusing on individual outcomes. On this topic he said: 'Imagine you're in a snowstorm. Look at the flakes. Some of them are going up, some of them are going sideways, and some of them are going down. At the time you can't really say anything about where a particular flake will go. But when the snowstorm is over you know that all of them will be on the ground'.

I thought this illustration of the power of models was terrific. In fact, a short time after I heard him say this I was interviewed for a university newspaper, the topic being the likely effects of the introduction of HECS on student access to universities – I had predicted at the time that there wouldn't be important consequences. The interviewer asked me to explain how I could know, given that HECS would have very different implications for individual students. I said: 'Imagine you're in a snowstorm. Look at the flakes. Some of them are going up, some of them are going sideways, and some of them are going down. At the time you can't really say anything about where a particular flake will go. But when the snowstorm is over you know that all of them will be on the ground'. The students thought I was really clever, and if cleverness extends to the choice of material to plagiarise this is certainly true.

The third example of Bob's imagery relates to Fred Gruen, one of our very favourite colleagues who died in 1997. In an obituary (1997) Bob wrote: 'Fred had the amazing ability to wear his coat without putting his arms in the sleeves. Whenever I tried this the coat fell off'.

(iii) Bob 'Direct Speak'

As wonderful and talented as people can be, they are never perfect. One of Bob's quirks is that he sometimes says exactly what he feels, and this is not always comforting. A typical example would entail a frequently heard Gregory remark at the RSSS weekly seminar series, along the lines of 'this paper misses the big point, which I'll now explain to you... '.

Deborah Cobb-Clark from RSSS has been collecting examples of Bob 'direct speak', and she tells me that that there are now enough to fill a small library. It would be inappropriate for me to steal her thunder (Deborah plans on reading out the best several hundred at Bob's retirement dinner), but I can at least record one little gem related to me.

Two years ago several of us at ANU were planning a conference related to child-care issues. We were at the stage of proposing possible topics, and in this context Deborah Mitchell suggested that my 1987 analysis (with John Beggs) of the forgone earnings from child rearing should be updated. Bob said, 'Yes, it's about time that someone did that stuff properly'.

(iv) The Amazing Gregory Disorganisation Phenomenon

All of us who work closely with Bob know that he is not the best organised person. In fact, he might well be the least organised person.[4] Perhaps this is a usual trade-off for creativity?

[4] That Bob still manages to survive is a minor miracle, and is due in large part due to the disorganisation correctional activities of Ms Rae Carson, his most important RSSS managerial colleague over the last 20 years or so.

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One memorable example occurred when Bob and I were jointly teaching the ANU Labour Economics Course. I had completed my lectures when he appeared in my office saying: 'We have a problem'.

I didn't think I had a problem at the time, but it became apparent that I did. He continued: 'I am supposed to lecture in 15 minutes but I am double-booked. I'm on a plane to Melbourne in half an hour.' So I had the problem, as did the students. My lecture was not memorable – an ungenerous albeit attentive student even said that it seemed to be the same as the one I gave the week before.

A second example relates to his experience on the Wran Committee in the late 1980s, which recommended HECS. As part of the consultation process government departments were asked to make submissions, and a particularly controversial one came marked as 'SECRET', but was subsequently leaked and became very public. Bob was one of a small number of people who had received the paper, and was phoned about the leak by the anxious and upset Secretary of the department.

In response to the inference that he might have leaked the document, Bob suggested, with some annoyance, that the Australian Federal Police should come to the ANU immediately where he would 'personally hand them my copy'. Not long after I walked into his room, only to find Bob furtively searching for the document under the piles of papers, old journals and odd socks that make up his office. 'It must be around here somewhere', he was saying, 'I saw it just the other day.' The paper turned out to be innocuously positioned at his home, in a plastic bag. No charges were laid.

A third case of the amazing Gregory disorganisation phenomenon is very recent. Just a few weeks ago Bob and I were travelling to Sydney together. At the airport, we checked in, got our boarding passes and walked to the gate – this process took about 90 seconds. At the gate Bob searched for his boarding pass, and couldn't find it. He said to me, 'I've lost my boarding pass already.' The critical word in the above comment is 'already'. That is, he knew he would naturally lose his boarding pass – because he's Bob – but after 90 seconds, only! This was a bit much, even for him.

The bottom line from these personal observations is that, not only is Bob a path-breaking, innovative and very talented economist, he's also very human. Thus there should be no surprises that, as well as holding him in very high esteem, members of the Australian profession regard him with the greatest affection.

Professor Robert G. Gregory: a most special Distinguished Fellow.

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