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F.H.G. Gruen: 1921-97

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Economics Society of Australia Distinguished Fellow 1997

Fred Gruen was awarded the 1997 Economics Society of Australia Distinguished Fellow for his contribution to the Australian economics profession. Throughout his life Professor Gruen's writings on economic policy were distinguished by their breadth, relevance and insight. His advice had direct influence on government policy, such as the 25 per cent tariff cut in 1973, and the reintroduction of the assets test on pensions in 1985. His contribution to the development of the economics profession included his role as President both of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society and the Australian Economics Society. Professor Gruen had a significant influence beyond economics, serving as President of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences.

This citation has been shortened to accompany the following obituary.

VINCE FITZGERALD — *Chairman*
1997 Selection Committee

Professor F.H.G. (Fred) Gruen died in Canberra on 29 October 1997. For much of his academic career Fred held ANU's Research School of Social Sciences chair in economics and used it to great effect to nurture and guide both academic and policy debate in economics. In these capacities, and because of the way he was, he was an icon of our profession.

In terms of formal recognition, he was the President of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society from 1961 to 1962, the President of the Victorian Branch of the Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand in 1970, and its national President from 1984 to 1986. He was elected to the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 1970, and was its President from 1975-78. In 1986 he was awarded the Order of Australia for contributions to education. He received the Distinguished Fellowship Award of the Economic Society of Australia in 1997. Following Fred's death, the Australian National University's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Deane Terrell, announced the endowment of a Chair in Economic Policy as a memorial to him. Fred Gruen was one of the most broadly appreciated and recognized economists in Australia.

(i) Fred Gruen's Early Personal Background

For those of us with unremarkable histories, Fred Gruen's youthful experiences are extraordinary.

Born in Austria in 1921, he had Jewish parents who operated a small business that went broke when Fred was a youngster. His parents separated

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F.H.G. Gruen

when Fred was about 15 years old, and not long after his father died.

In the highly disciplined and unimaginative educational environment of his early teenage years, Fred performed poorly. He resented and resisted rote learning approaches, often preferring ice skating. Later, attending a more liberal Austrian high school, he did better but was not a star. No one would have predicted the intellectual and economic policy influence of his future.

Assisted by an inheritance of about two hundred pounds, Fred was moved to a private English school in 1937. On arrival, knowing no English, Fred resorted to Latin to communicate with the teacher who met him, but he was the Physical Education Master who had no classics background!

About then Fred's mother was taken to a concentration camp and she later perished at Auschwitz. His sense of alienation and his tribulations continued with the 'internment' policy which began in England in 1940. In this program those from Germany or German-occupied territory were categorized in terms of risk, with Fred being considered to be in the moderately high group (because he had been writing to his mother), and he was put in detention.

Thus as a teenager the Austrian Fred Gruen found himself in England with no close family links, learning a new language unaided, and with almost no long-term acquaintances. He was soon deported—destination unknown (the rumours included Canada and Bermuda)—and eventually he ended up in an even stranger country, almost as far away as possible from his former home.

What an understatement it must have been when Fred described his younger days as 'fairly lonely and unhappy'. The remarkable thing is that such a consummately well-adjusted, successful and secure adult developed from beginnings as traumatic as his. Maybe where we come from does not determine where we end up after all?

Fred was put on the 'Dunera', a ship now famous in Australian immigration history because of the unusual professional success of its reluctant occupants. With about 1000 internees the Dunera docked at Sydney, Australia, in July 1940, and they were taken to a camp in Hay, NSW. Thus began Fred Gruen's life in Australia. It became a classic example of what the country can do for the immigrant and what the immigrant can do for the country.

Australia surprised him, and he wrote about it in his autobiography in the following terms:

> Apart from this feeling that one had been transported away from the world which was blowing itself to smithereens, there was a great feeling of strangeness: the brighter daylight, the guards' slouch hats we had never seen before, the unusual landscape—few conifers or deciduous trees—and finally the increasing sparseness of the vegetation as we travelled west by train for what seemed like an eternity.[1]

In Hay internees had a lot of choice about their use of time, playing chess and table tennis, and exploring educational options. Fred described this period quite positively. Perhaps this is because a large number of those interned were academically oriented, and there is no doubt that his experience with those in the camp directed him towards intellectual pursuits. It is certainly true that he became interested in university study and began—by correspondence—a Bachelor's degree at the University of Melbourne.

(ii) Fred Gruen's Career

After the war, Fred graduated in Economics from Melbourne University. He moved to Sydney and worked with the NSW Department of Agri-

[1] Gruen, 1988a, page 7.

culture as a research economist for about twelve years. He was good at this job, but wanted to pursue more academic pursuits. Seeking education and greater intellectual freedom, he took leave to study in the USA, taking Masters Degrees at the Universities of Wisconsin and Chicago in 1950–51.

Chicago then had the best economics talent in the world, with Tjalling Koopmans, Kenneth Arrow, Frank Knight, D. Gale Johnson, Jacob Marschak, Lloyd Metzler, Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman and Theodore Schultz on the staff. What an extraordinary environment it must have been for a budding and enthusiastic young economist.

In the early 1950s Fred returned to the NSW Department of Agriculture. In 1957 he became a part-time lecturer at the University of Sydney, and in 1959 he moved to the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU. There he worked with one of the best ever Australian economic minds, Trevor Swan, and some of his new recruits included Wilfred Salter and Ivor Pearce.

In 1964, he was appointed to the Chair of Agricultural Economics at Monash University, and was Acting Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Commerce at a time of considerable student unrest. While much of this hostility was directed to the Vietnam War, protest took various forms including attacks on the universities and the role of mainstream economics as a buttress for the *status quo*.

Fred's reaction to this confrontation was both constructive and courageous. He believed that the Australian involvement in Vietnam was not right, and stood up for his views, participating in the first Vietnam Moratorium march in Melbourne. This stance led to severe tensions with some senior Monash economists.

As well as writing on the issues, Fred established and institutionalized a process whereby students could make formal complaints about teaching problems. Some of the student disquiet clearly had a legitimate basis and under Fred's leadership was acted upon. This was not an easy period for him, but it was one in which his values and fortitude were demonstrated.

In 1972, probably with some relief, he accepted the position of Professor of Economics in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU. This was associated with a significant reorientation of his work and major professional achievements, all associated with his burgeoning interest in and talent for the big issues.

Fred's academic interests moved away from agricultural economics and in 1973 he took leave from ANU to become a Consultant to the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. He put into effect the suggestion of Heinz Arndt, Alf Rattigan and others that there should be a tariff cut, and this was done at the level of 25 per cent across-the-board, in July 1973. It was a policy initiative applauded by the Australian economics community, and is a significant milestone of economic reform that pleased Fred unreservedly.

In 1975, back at the ANU, Fred was clearly in the business of promoting Australian economics. He saw his Chair as a national one, and he was a regular and enthusiastic participant in innumerable conferences. He seemed to know everybody in economics, which helped considerably in his organization and editing of the watershed three-volume *Surveys of Australian Economics*, published over 1978-83. They covered, among other areas, the economics of health and education, immigration, resource economics, income distribution, and taxation, and started or established the careers of a host of young economists. The series remains a starting point for research on many issues.

In 1980 Fred founded the Centre for Economic Policy Research at the ANU, because he believed that in order to be influential economic policy research needed to have a separate funding and institutional base. The CEPR was one of Fred's most significant achievements, described in 1986 on Fred's retirement by Ross Gittins, as '. . . by far the most productive of the many university centres of applied economics research . . .'[2]

The CEPR continues to have two major roles, both part of Fred's original vision. The first is the organization of major conferences concerned with contemporary economic policy issues, of which three or four are held annually. The best known happened in 1984 in conjunction with the prestigious Brookings Institution, resulting in the very successful volume, *The Australian Economy: A View From the North*.

The Centre's other substantial achievement was the establishment of the Discussion Paper series, now numbering nearly four hundred. These papers are widely read and quoted, and I am reliably told they are among the most commonly 'gone missing' items from the Parliamentary Library.

Fred was editor of the papers from 1980 until mid-1997. Much of the quality of the output was

[2] Ross Gittins, 'A Most Useful Man Steps Down', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 1986.

due to his conscientious, even heavy, involvement. Many first drafts were returned covered in his distinctive large blue scribblings, always helpful, never obtuse and sometimes even a little bit rude because of his directness. I experienced this close-up when the first paper I submitted to him for consideration (in 1984) came back with the comment: 'Your English is bloody horrible!'

Fred's direct engagement in policy continued on a part-time basis through the 1980s and beyond. In 1985 he was appointed as Chair of an official committee which recommended an assets test on welfare payments that subsequently was implemented by the Hawke government; this reform clearly had a major impact on the government's ability to fund decent levels of assistance to those most in need, and Fred was justifiably proud of his contribution. Around this period he was Chairman of the housing industry Indicative Planning Council and was involved in a Commonwealth Government inquiry into dumping.

Like his long-term chess and intellectual sparring partner, Heinz Arndt, Fred never really retired, and after 1986 neither his policy input nor his academic output changed. He became an adviser to the ACT Government on youth education and employment issues, and at RSSS he continued to work every day, and—as usual—actively debated with colleagues. A regular contributor at seminars, he continued to produce interesting and policy-relevant research, and maintained his pervasive informal connections and influence with those who valued his advice—all of us.

Fred's economic policy interests remained broad, and he wrote papers on incomes policy, unemployment, microeconomic reform, the targeting of welfare payments and income distribution. In 1993 with Michelle Grattan he published the book, *Managing Government*, a balanced and critical assessment of the previous decade of the Labor Government.

(iii) Fred Gruen in Perspective

Fred Gruen: academic economist

It might be a surprise for many to know that Fred did significant theoretical work. A paper written in 1969 with Max Corden extended the usual two-product, two-factor and two-country model to analyze the effect of the imposition of a tariff on the real income of a country through a change in its terms of trade. It is shown that with three products and three factors, given factor-intensities similar to those in Australia, the imposition of the tariff is more likely to worsen than to improve the terms of trade, a prediction opposite to that of the standard model.

Fred was quietly proud of an earlier contribution which examined the effect of technical change on agriculture. Theory was advanced through the explicit incorporation of the supply reactions to technical change, a consideration previously ignored in the literature of agricultural economics. Like much of Fred's writing, the analysis is related to a peculiarly Australian question: the effect of the introduction of myxomatosis on product mix.

Fred's work places important store on economic theory, but theory did not own him. His reaction to the emergence of stagflation in the mid-1970s, which challenged fundamentally the Keynesian consensus, is telling:

> Like many of my colleagues, my faith in simple Keynesian demand management has been undermined . . . Unlike some of my colleagues, however, I have not gone so far as to believe that unemployment is always 'voluntary' or the result of wages which are too high, or of unemployment benefits which are too generous.[3]

For many in Fred's generation the apparent collapse of the Keynesian world was traumatic, and led some academics to despair of the value of economics.

Fred did not over-react or seek refuge in nihilism. Instead, like many things in his often difficult and always rich life, he saw the experience in a positive light; for him it promoted the importance of wages for macro-analysis.

Perhaps one reason that Fred responded sensibly to these events lies in his early experiences. After all, his life encountered great initial challenges, all of which were transcended eventually. This might explain that while the apparent demise of a paradigm was a calamity to others, it was not much more than a passing irritation and curiosity to Fred.

That Fred's academic interests were broad is demonstrated in his written response to the unrest at Monash in 1971 which labelled mainstream economics as reactionary. He wrote:

> There is one obvious sense in which economics is a conservative discipline, namely that it

[3] Gruen, 1986, p. 182.

> helps those currently responsible for running the economy to make more rational decisions and hence presumably to stay in power for longer. But this is as true of those Communist elites who choose to avail themselves of bourgeois economic know-how as it is of capitalist ones. I understand that Che Guevara introduced linear programming to Cuba. In this case an accepted part of the bourgeois economic toolkit may have helped to keep a Marxist regime in power.[4]

Fred's written work illustrates the importance of the multi-dimensional nature of inquiry. As Max Corden has observed, Fred's papers were like mini Royal Commissions because all areas of discourse—theory, data, and the political context—were covered.

An example of his political perspicacity is the following. In 1991 Fred and I wrote a paper on the Prices and Incomes Accord between the Federal Labor governments of the 1980s and the peak union council. The paper was pretty much two separate exercises integrated only by a large staple. Fred's job was to analyze the industrial and political economy factors, while I updated some econometric exercises testing the influence of the Accord on real unit cost and strike outcomes.

I was phoned by a leading ACTU researcher who said that the paper was the best piece that had been done on the Accord. 'Tell me more', I drooled, to which he said something like: 'Well, the econometrics was a bit silly and nobody believes it, but the political economy stuff was brilliant.'

This endorsement was not partisan, it was because Fred was right. Indeed, in general Fred was critical of research that he thought was ideologically motivated. As an indication of the value he placed on balance, he told me once that a paper of his must be pretty good '... because both the Left and the Right told me it was wrong'.

Fred's research had other salient characteristics. One is that he had 'a good nose'—the capacity to foretell and influence research agendas. In 1983, for example, he appears to have anticipated the later and now famous work of Calmfors and Driffel (1988). The idea is that a government could control wage inflation only if there was a weak union movement, or a consensus between strong unions and the government concerning restraint. He wrote:

> [a factor] ... likely to affect the ability to achieve consensus concerns the size, number and organisations of the relevant pressure groups. If the groups which need to be accommodated in any bargain are small in number and the negotiators on behalf of each group can 'deliver', incomes policies are much more likely to succeed.[5]

This point became fundamental to an understanding of corporatism generally, and the Accord in particular.

In terms of setting the agenda, in 1985 Fred's Edward Shann Memorial Lecture documented Australia's economic growth record and asked: 'Why have we performed with so little distinction?' It is a classic Gruen contribution,[6] in which he took a big policy question and explored the evidence in the political and institutional context. It encouraged younger and more technical Australian economists to take up the mantle with enthusiasm and success.

Finally, much of Fred's written work related to income distribution. In earlier days an issue was poverty, and later he focused on unemployment and the targeting of welfare. In Fred's view, an important weight should be given to the needs of the disadvantaged.

Combined with his use of theory, his concern for those in economic trouble made Fred an ideal Alfred Marshall-type economist: he had both a cool head and a warm heart. Such a balance implied unusual effectiveness in the policy arena, a point he understood well, saying to me once that policy is always more influenced by equity than by efficiency concerns.

Fred summed up his role by saying that:

> I suppose my main aim ... was to shed more light on the changing economic environment in Australia and how policy could best respond to the changed conditions. A lot of economics is now, as it has usually been, the subject of intense controversy. Progress in the discipline is often a sort of crab-walk between fact and theory. The reason for the slowness of our progress is that the ultimate test of any doctrine—conformity with the facts—often turns out to be inconclusive. Further, the changing environ-

[4] Gruen, 1971, p. 63.

[5] Gruen, 1983, page 13.

[6] Judged by Peter Kenyon to be the best of the Shann lectures in the review of 'A Decade of Shann Memorial Lectures 1981-91 and the Australian Economy', *Economic Record* 71, 213, June 1995, 209–12.

ment may make an analytical framework (not a simplification) adequate at one time and inadequate at another.[7]

In short, in his written work Fred took from theory and statistical analysis what is useful to everyday policy development, and mixed these contributions with a common sense drawn from a wealth and diversity of personal and professional experience; sensible, thoughtful, broad, balanced and compassionate, as he was in all arenas.

Fred Gruen: government adviser

While Fred's sojourn in the bureaucracy in 1973 had significant influence on policy, so too did policy make a major impact on him. He wrote of this experience in the following terms:

> Like most outside observers I had frequently been critical of the obtuseness and folly of many government policies. It is certainly a salutary experience to be suddenly within the group of public servants whose advice is being sought and, on occasions, acted upon. One becomes much more aware of the very many considerations ministers have to take into account.[8]

This sensitivity to the breadth essential for useful policy advice and analysis became a theme of all his later research.

Fred's achievements on dumping, the assets test and as Chair of the Indicative Planning Council were significant and high profile. But there were other, less direct, ways in which he made major contributions, such as through his participation in a large number of seminars and conferences run by the Office of the Economic Planning Advisory Committee in the mid-1980s. The then-Director, Fred Argy, wrote:

> I always had him at the top of my list of participants because he was not only well-informed on the literature and professionally objective, but also a fearsome debater; very critical, questioning and even mischievous in the way he challenged sloppy arguments and inaccurate facts. I saw him as exercising a marvellous discipline on everyone present.[9]

David Charles, a former Departmental Secretary, has expressed a similar view with respect to Fred's less formal role in the dumping inquiry, saying that he got a 'pretty robust reception' when he presented his work to the Australian Manufacturing Council: 'As might be expected, he met the challenge head on and did not back off when the heat was on—a sign of a strong mind and courageous spirit. He was no ivory tower hero.'[10]

Those of us interested in how academic economics can be made relevant to policy should follow closely his lessons. One is that Fred understood the tension between logical consistency and policy relevance, at least for the sorts of time periods with which governments are concerned. There is no doubt that he preferred to work with the tools at hand, loose ends and all, instead of waiting for comprehensive models with attractive long-term properties, writing: 'Applied economists obviously cannot wait until theory provides us with a clearer picture; the problems need assessment as they arise'.[11]

From the early 1970s to the late 1990s, Fred lunched each month with a group of economic figures from the top echelons of business and government. The discussion traversed the latest economic and political issues, and in my experience of these occasions Fred was always the keenest participant. He delighted in challenging most ideas, he proffered opinions on everything, he drew attention to related events in history and from other countries, and he enjoyed gently mocking the occasional silliness of the remarks of others. After each lunch most participants, including Fred, had more Gruen-consistent views.

An important indirect contribution not well known was his influence as mentor on several generations of Australian economists. There are many senior academic economists today that will testify to the importance of Fred's encouragement and support, and several outstanding examples of Fred changing people's professional directions.

Fred's professional and personal self-assuredness was an important reason for his influence. Fred was very comfortable with Fred, and was relaxed, almost indulgent, in telling stories against himself, including the following.

At Fred's time at the University of Chicago Theodore Schultz and others were working up the notion that skills development was like investment in plant and machinery, an intellectual revolution that eventually transformed labour economics and resulted in the awarding

[7] Gruen, 1988a, page 21.
[8] Gruen, 1988a, page 17–18.
[9] Fred Argy, private correspondence, 1998.
[10] David Charles, private correspondence, 1998.
[11] Gruen, 1986, page 4.

of several Nobel prizes, including one to Schultz. Without a hint of embarrassment Fred would relate that he told Schultz: 'this human capital stuff wouldn't really go anywhere and that he shouldn't waste his time on it'.

This openness reflected an abhorrence of dishonesty, and meant that he was not always gentle. A few years ago he roasted a paper with such enthusiasm that another commentator at the same conference rose to discuss a paper saying (quite loudly) to the author: 'Don't worry, I won't do a Gruen on you!'.

'Doing a Gruen' meant much more than being hard-hitting and critical. If Fred liked a piece of work he said so, publicly, privately and repeatedly. Where generosity means leadership, Fred had it, and he combined this with a remarkable unconcern about making a mistake.

Fred Gruen: personal role model

Many of us greatly admired the personal side of Fred. He was dedicated to his family (his wife Ann of 50 years, and sons David and Nick), and could not have achieved his remarkable professional success without the security and comfort that came from this part of his life. One only has to read his autobiography to feel the respect he had for Ann; one only had to see them together to see her significance to him.

He was not a proud man, but there was a certain pride evident in his discussion with me of David's success as one of the Reserve Bank of Australia's top researchers, and it was with similar pleasure he told me when Nick became adviser to John Dawkins, then Commonwealth Treasurer. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, we should not be surprised that his two sons have both become top-level economic researchers with a clear focus on big policy issues.

It would be remiss for a celebration of Fred Gruen not to note his great charm, style and presence. This has been documented by some of those who knew him best.

Professor Joe Isaac studied with Fred, and knew him well for most of his life. Joe wrote that when he first met him:

> Fred presented as a very confident young man, handsome despite the ill fitting Australian army uniform, articulate and with an opinion about everything we talked about. I recall being somewhat intimidated by his wide knowledge, his 'Viennese' style of politeness towards the ladies present, and his level of sophistication.[12]

Bob Gregory wrote of Fred that 'All his friends will remember his style of wearing a sports coat—draped over the shoulder but arms not in the sleeves. Whenever I tried to copy this the coat fell off'.[13]

When an American visitor to the University of Adelaide returned from giving a seminar at ANU in 1982, he said that he was very impressed with somebody he referred to, not by name, but as 'a Viennese gentleman'. Everybody knew whom he meant.

Finally, on the personal side, there was his appreciation of humour, and with this came a certain impishness. He wrote in the letters column of the *Australian Financial Review* about a colleague whom he thought was inconsistent in the use of data for political purposes: 'Really [name], your ideological slip is showing!' We can see this playful side in his eyes in the wonderful photograph of him at the beginning of the obituary.

Fred's way of relating to people meant that he had an appreciative and large group of colleagues and friends. He engendered loyalty, the best example being Cathy Baird, who held the CEPR together throughout all of Fred's years, motivated importantly by her strong affection for him.

His influence on Australian economics can be traced in a major way to Fred the person. He changed the academic and policy landscape not because he was intellectually astounding, and not because he pursued relentlessly a specifically defined area. He mattered because he had excellent judgement and balance, ensconced in common sense and breadth, and delivered always with confidence and courage.

Many of us want to be like him, but none of us really gets close. For some the edges are too rough, and for others important parts are missing. In comparison, Fred was rounded and complete—a consummate role model.

One of our very best, much loved and much missed.

[12] J.E. Isaac, private correspondence, 1998.

[13] R. G. Gregory, 'Economist was intellectual in the European tradition', *ANU Reporter*, 1997, page 8.

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