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IN CONVERSATION -19 ROY GREEN with JULIE HARE

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ZOOM



Roy Green
in conversation with
Julie Hare

The 'IN CONVERSATION' series portray prominent innovation scholars through intellectual-biographical interviews. The 19th episode features ROY GREEN in conversation with JULIE HARE on 17th Feb 2025.

MY BACKSTORY

Emeritus Professor Roy Green AM
University of Technology Sydney.

Life choices are part serendipity, part the cards you are handed and part the opportunities you take. Mine are seemingly all three, beginning with the choice to undertake a law degree at the University of Adelaide. It didn't take long for me to become more interested in what some of my friends were doing in the social sciences, especially economics, which enjoyed a high reputation at Adelaide in the 1970s. So I added an Arts degree majoring in economics, and completed my honours year with a dissertation on an obscure but fascinating debate between the Marxist economists Rosa Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin in the early part of the 20th century.



Contemporary politics also intruded at this time in the form of the dismissal of an elected Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, by the Governor-General, using reserve powers under a still monarchical Constitution. This episode persuaded me that the path of reform, let alone revolution, was a difficult one, and that in order to move it along a few notches I should join the Australian Labor Party. Even so, having completed my Law degree without much enthusiasm, I sought further inspiration by applying for my 'articles' (a kind of legal apprenticeship) with Elliott Johnston, a top QC and leading figure in the post-Khrushchev era Communist Party. If I was going to become a lawyer, it would at least be with someone who had distinguished himself over his long career with a concern for social justice and the rights of Australia's indigenous people.

First things first, however, as this was the chance for me and my then girlfriend to 'do Europe', with money earned from odd jobs during our student years. We travelled for six months to countries even my Dutch relatives had never seen, visiting towns, cities, museums, beaches and cathedrals. Towards the end of the trip a letter arrived via a post office box we had arranged in advance. It had been sent three months previously and had chased us around the continent. I had completely forgotten my application for a scholarship before I left Australia to undertake a PhD at Cambridge, with the support of my economics professor, Geoff Harcourt. The letter informed me that I had been awarded the scholarship by Trinity College and I was to be present for the start of term the following week.

After a mad scramble, I did manage to turn up in Cambridge only to find that my allotted supervisor, the famous economist Maurice Dobb, had died a week previously, just as I was picking up the letter of offer. Before I had time to reflect on this coincidence, it was suggested that I park myself briefly with another Cambridge economist, the then young but exceedingly busy Bob Rowthorn, and then transition for the PhD heavy lifting to eminent economic historian Michael Postan. He was interested in my choice of topic, which was to build on developments in classical and Marxian economics to provide a refutation of and alternative

to the increasingly fashionable monetarist interpretation of inflation in advanced economies. What has this got to do with innovation research and policy, you may ask? The answer is not much in any specific sense, but what this work did is enable me to develop a conceptual framework with which to analyse economic and social change.

Being an entirely theoretical PhD, it was tough going, and there was not much in the way of support structures for postgraduate students in those days. Professor Postan was inspiring (he had also supervised Eric Hobsbawm's PhD) but not of much assistance when it came to detail. He was also getting very old, and died just as we were getting into our stride. Two supervisors down and a third was a longer time coming, as doors would hurriedly close as I scouted the corridors. I was fortunate finally to be added to the stable of doctorates being supervised by a Cambridge rising star John Eatwell, later to receive a peerage for his contributions to government policy-making. However, my scholarship had run out and a further stipend from Clare Hall as a Research Fellow was parsimonious, so I really needed a job to finance myself to completion. I applied for and gained a policy adviser role with the British Labour Party in London, two years after they had been defeated by the resurgent Tories, led by Margaret Thatcher.

This was the life-changing moment when I became interested in innovation and industrial policy, more so it has to be said than with my PhD which took a back seat for a while. In my new role, I provided advice to then Shadow Ministers Tony Blair, John Prescott and several others who became household names in a Labour government many years later, and I had to grapple in this context with the phenomenon of British industrial decline and the impact of monetarism in practice. At one point around 1984, I was invited to the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex to give a talk, and there met the academic group who have shaped much of the discussion of national innovation systems, something lacking at that time in the UK, and Australia for that matter. With the PhD finished, ultimately to become a Macmillan book, *Classical Theories of Money, Output and Inflation*, my thoughts turned from life under Thatcherism to the newly elected Hawke Labor government down under.

I was an admirer of then Minister for Industrial Relations, Ralph Willis, who was an architect of the transformative Accord between the government and trade unions. While Thatcherism and Reaganism had reached Australia's shores, Labor was determined to navigate a different path through the market maze. Minister Willis had a job going as Policy Director in his department, to which I was appointed and then went on to be a senior adviser in his office. This was an exciting time for policy-making as Australia had to reinvent its protection-heavy industrial structure in the context of tariff cuts and financial deregulation. While the period has become associated with these 'neoliberal' reforms, there was also a commitment to very ambitious Industry Plans and Structural Adjustment Policy, as well as to the development of a more sophisticated research and innovation system. This resulted in Australia's first Science and Technology Statement in 1993, and then the 'Innovation Nation' White Paper in 1995.

Meanwhile the time came for me to resume an academic career before it was too late, and I took up a Senior Lecturer role at the University of Newcastle. Here I could start researching productivity, workplace relations and industrial and regional development policy, with the hope that Australia could make a structured transition to new, globally oriented, high value areas of manufacturing and related services. This hope was short-lived as the Labor government lost the 1996 election to John Howard's Liberal-National Party Coalition, which immediately went about defunding and abolishing the programs necessary for this transition.

Having just experienced several bleak years of Thatcherism, I was loathe to repeat them, and so now took up a new role as Professor of Management and Dean of the Faculty of Commerce, soon to be retitled the J E Cairnes School of Business & Economics, at the National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, also now retitled the University of Galway. I was already familiar with Ireland's innovation trajectory, having visited on sabbatical two years previously (and written up the public policy dimension), and I was keen to immerse myself in the next stages of this extraordinary economic and social transformation.

My aim was to build up the innovation research credentials of the Business School, with a view to engaging with this remarkably focused policy environment as well, and so I coordinated a competitive funding application for a new Centre for Innovation & Structural Change (CISC). This application was awarded EUR 3 million with the prospect of more to follow, and it led to NUI Galway becoming known in this space, including through projects with the European Commission and OECD. One of these projects was to analyse the origins and impact of ICT and medical technology investment in Ireland, particularly its role in building new SME supply chains and research partnerships with universities, with Science Foundation Ireland now guiding the development of the research and innovation system. At a national institutional level, I was invited to join the commercialisation board of Enterprise Ireland, the National Forum on the Workplace of the Future and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). My family and I were sad eventually to leave Ireland, but the time had come to look after aging parents and for our kids to do their growing up in Australia, and I returned to a new role in early 2006 as Dean of the Macquarie Graduate School of Management (MGSM).

MGSM was a highly regarded (and globally ranked) part of Macquarie University, now integrated with the broader Business School, which focused on MBAs and executive education programs. There was some scope for innovation research in this context, but not much as administration took up most of my time. However, I did get the opportunity to lead some work by the newly formed Society for Knowledge Economics, involving industry and academics, on a 'state of play' and program for the next government, with an election fast approaching. This also brought me into contact with then shadow Innovation Minister Kim Carr, who was pleased to build on this and other preparatory work when Labor succeeded in forming government in late 2007.

Australia was then experiencing an unprecedented commodity boom, which masked a structural deterioration in productivity performance and the continuing decline of manufacturing. Despite, or perhaps because of, these challenges, it was a creative time for policy-making, and I was asked to undertake a number of inquiries for the then Rudd Labor government and contribute to Minister Carr's visionary but ultimately doomed White Paper 'Powering Ideas – an innovation agenda for the 21st century'. I was also invited to join various advisory bodies, including for the Federal government's Enterprise Connect program, CSIRO Manufacturing Flagship and the Prime Minister's Manufacturing Taskforce, the latter descending into a desperate and self-defeating attempt under new Prime Minister Julia Gillard to devise policies that would not offend Treasury or the Productivity Commission. (The removal of Carr from his unique and comprehensive portfolio was a huge blow to our efforts, a blow from which we have not recovered.)

At the same time, I took the opportunity to move from Macquarie to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), as Dean of the Business School, which provided more scope for interdisciplinary research and teaching, for building productive partnerships with industry and the community and for developing a new mission and vision at the Business School

around creativity, technology and innovation. In the process, we engaged the iconic American architect Frank Gehry to design a new Business School building which would express our emergent vision in the architecture, and this he did to great acclaim. Not so successful were concerted attempts with academic colleagues and industry leaders to revive interest in innovation and industrial policy, apart from the brief interlude with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's National Innovation and Science Agenda, which drew quite fortuitously on our just published 2015 Senate Innovation System report.

Having served my two terms as Dean at the UTS Business School, I was gearing up for a more reclusive and cerebral 'retirement' when my plans for various publications previously 'kicked into the long grass' could at last be fulfilled, but instead I'm working harder than ever on a range of disparate but conceptually joined up activities. As well as being employed two days a week at UTS to assist the Vice Chancellor and senior executive, primarily on university-wide innovation and industry issues, I am chair and director of a number of boards outside academia which enable me to pursue my eclectic interests in research and education policy, regional development and industrial transformation in a very practical way. So to conclude, here they are in brief.

As chair of the Port of Newcastle, I am involved in transitioning the world's biggest coal export port to a more diversified business model, focusing on the development of a large-scale deepwater container terminal and a clean energy precinct, which will become an east coast green hydrogen hub in conjunction with offshore wind and solar. As chair of the Advanced Robotics for Manufacturing (ARM) Hub, a remarkable globally recognised high-performance operation, I am contributing to the process of transformative change for Australian SMEs, as they adopt and adapt to robotics, automation and AI. This to some extent draws on the findings of my 2009 report with Renu Agarwal and colleagues for the Federal government 'Management Matters – just how productive are we?' which highlighted the shortcomings of Australian management, as well as various pieces of work on the growing importance of place-based innovation ecosystems. Finally, in my role as a director on the boards of CSIRO and SmartSat CRC, I am part of the continuing efforts by many of us to build a world competitive research and innovation system in Australia, something which has become more rather than less challenging as remorselessly we slide down the Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity.

Now, with these new roles as well as remnants of the old ones, I can maintain a creaking but unrelenting platform for influence with government on how we shape innovation and industrial policy into the future, including its promising Future Made in Australia initiative with its twin themes of achieving net zero and greater economic resilience. Some may call this, in the words of Oscar Wilde, the 'triumph of hope over experience', but it's the kind of influence an academic background can prepare us for, with due deference to serendipity and circumstance.