

IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIAN L. TUPY



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Introduction

This publication covers edited extracts from the audience question sessions three Marian L Tupy presentations as 2026 Max Hartwell Scholar-in-Residence at the Centre for Independent Studies.

The first and second were public addresses in Melbourne and Canberra, called *Are Things Actually Getting Better for Humanity?* At these events, Tupy discussed the concept of 'superabundance', arguing that population growth and human creativity lead to increased resource abundance. He used time prices to show that despite inflation, many commodities have become cheaper relative to wages. He also emphasised the importance of freedom and innovation in driving progress.

The third was an address to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in Canberra where Tupy discussed his work on time prices and the abundance index, highlighting the methodology behind these metrics. He noted that between 1850 and 2018, the time price of resources fell by 98%, with blue-collar workers experiencing a 99.1% increase in the abundance of rice, as an example. For 1980-2018, globalisation led to a 72% decline in time prices for 50 major commodities, with Australia outperforming the global average. Tupy highlighted the importance of economic growth for societal well-being and countered negative perceptions by presenting data on increased abundance and productivity.

Are Things Actually Getting Better for Humanity?

Events in Melbourne and Canberra

Q: Your claim is not simply that things are cheaper or that people feel better off, but that human time buys vastly more resources than in the past, and it just holds even when population grows. But, in one minute, what is the single biggest mistake critics make when they say: “Well, that may be true globally, but it doesn’t reflect life in Australia today”. There is a cost-of-living crisis in this country, and people are very worried about what they experience with the unaffordability of commodities. You’re saying the price of everything is cheaper. The price has fallen. The time price has fallen. Actually we’re better off, we’re more abundant. What do you say to people who say that does not reflect my experience of daily life?

Marian: People have a lot of opinions and a lot of anecdotes that may not necessarily be true. Politicians deal with feelings. Economists and analysts should deal with facts. And we have looked at the data with the help of CIS and this is what the data has shown. Clearly, things are becoming cheaper, more affordable, more abundant in Australia. In those places where the market is allowed to function, whether it’s communications or transport or furnishings or toys and whatever else, they have become much more abundant since the 1970s. So the stats we revealed were not for rich people, they’re for blue-collar workers; your electricians, etc.

However, this is not universal. You are suffering from very similar problems that we are, which is to say, education, healthcare and housing. And that’s where CIS has a role of explaining to the Australian people that this is what happens when the market is not allowed to perform. In fact, my view is that the moment the government decides something is a human right, such as education or healthcare, it just becomes prohibitively expensive for everyone. And that’s exactly what’s happened in the United States and elsewhere.

Q: In terms of institutional factors; how do we strengthen the institutional foundation? This is a really important point because you talk about tradable goods, which is very important. But we also have linked this to family and social mobility and stability. Those are underpinned by institutions — when there is a crisis of institutional trust, how do we how do we address it?

Marian: These are not easy questions. Part of it is played by human psychology; the so-called money illusion. People see prices rising in the stores and they are very concerned. But they downplay increases in salaries. So the increase in income almost everybody gets every year, let's pocket it and assume as normal and people never compare the two, right? They never put the two together.

Those of you who are interested, we've launched what is called the American Abundance Index. The code is online. You can create an Australian abundance index where you put prices and wages together to show people they shouldn't simply deal with the money illusion. And looking at money, they also have to acknowledge that they are making more money.

The problem is, in the past five or six years, that has not been the case. We had inflation of 9% in 2022. And it's only now, in 2026, that we have got even. So that would have eaten into people's standard of living. Now look, I'm not a politician and I cannot tell you how to handle this. But CIS has a role to play in explaining a couple of things: the pernicious effect of inflation; the importance of stable money and also what specifically makes the three areas of education, health and housing more expensive rather than less.

When it comes to institutions, I'm still a believer that freedom of expression is very important. And no matter how many crazy people are out there, blaming the Jews or blaming QAnon or whatever else, freedom of speech should be the beginning and let the light be the best disinfectant and let the best ideas win in the long run.

So how to save institutions? I don't know exactly how. I do know that

clamping down on free speech is exactly what's going to make the situation even worse, because people are going to see monsters behind every rock, behind every tree.

Studying history is the most important thing humans can do. That's where the lessons are. The question is: how do you incentivise universities to do that? This obsesses me in the United States. The way you do it is basically by cutting out the subsidies because, ultimately, universities will realise they have to start saving money, or alternately, they are on the hook for the amount of money the government has given them.

Right now, there's a law in front of Congress to make universities partially responsible for repayment of the debt. So if you're going to give somebody a degree in *Star Wars* and it costs \$50,000 and that person is only capable of making coffee in Starbucks, then the university should have to pitch in 50% of the cost.

You'll be amazed how these parasitical organisations — the organisms that have been created — that is modern universities, how quickly they would start cutting down on nonsense and focusing on the things they should be doing. At the end of the day, the health of these institutions will be driven by what has always been the driving force behind the situation: competition.

In the United States we are fortunate to have 50 states and they are competing with one another. California is about to commit economic suicide by creating a wealth tax, so all the billionaires will leave for Texas and Florida. And that will be a salutary lesson for other states to adopt the opposite.

I don't know how the health of the polity or politics in Washington is going to improve but I do know the most exciting things happening in the United States are happening at the state level. I don't know enough about Australia to say whether you have the autonomy to pursue policies as different as they are between, say, Florida and California. In the US, this difference is resulting in people moving states. There's tremendous outflow of people from blue states into red states.

The US always has to be special. Take the way liberal means something completely different in the US than it does here, and the same with red. Red is Republican. Blue is democratic. Why? God knows. It doesn't make any sense.

But the point is Americans are leaving blue states for the red states and they will become more electorally powerful as a result of this population movement. So institutional competition — being able to show you can run a place better than the other guy — and learning those lessons, that is ultimately what is going to save us.

Q: You have compared, let's say, prices of televisions in the 1950s to those today. So having a television in the '50s isn't the same as having one now. Wouldn't it be better to compare our intelligent '50s to having a robot today? Put another way, it's like asking how many Stone Age tools can I purchase now?

Marian: We have not looked at provisions (such as TVs) because we didn't know how to adjust for quality. So we only deal with natural resources such as a kilo of beef, a tonne of coal or a tonne of iron commodities that don't change over time. We did produce analyses on, for example, American housing and Australians can do the same. You can adjust for the growth in square footage and you can adjust for small families.

Once you make such adjustments you can make an analysis that actually shows that square foot per person, living space per person, has actually got cheaper. And I suspect that will be the case in Australia as well. The bottom line is we have focused on things that don't change over time. But I realise that some of the biggest drivers of cost are things that change.

Health care today is very different from 1997. Part of the cost of health care in the United States — I don't know enough about Australia — is driven by the fact health care is so much better. I mean, there's a robot taking care of you rather than a guy smoking a cigarette. So that's better. Secondly, the only thing that continues to increase in price is human labour. Essentially, even in unproductive industries such as health care,

people need to be paid a lot of money to perform those jobs. So compare getting a massage in ancient Rome and getting one in Melbourne today. It's the same thing but a guy in Melbourne is now making million times more money than the guy in ancient Rome.

Why? Because if you didn't pay that to him, there would be no massages in Melbourne. The guy would be doing something else. So even though it hasn't become any more productive, he or she will be paid much more. And that's essentially what's happening in unproductive industries. To have nurses and to have X, Y and Z, you have to pay them more. Otherwise there would be no nurses, until we get robotic nurses.

So the biggest driver behind health care cost — certainly in the United States — is, first of all, you have to pay unproductive labour. Secondly, technology is much better. And thirdly, it is subsidies. And 90 cents out of every dollar spent in health care is not spent by the patients. It is spent by third parties. There is no desire, there is no incentive to cut the cost for you as a patient.

When you look at cosmetic surgery, prices are dropping like a rock. You get much more hair removal today than you did 20 years ago. Breast implants are much cheaper.

Why? Because you are paying for it out of your own pocket, even though it's still the nursing staff, it's still a night in the hospital, it's still an anaesthesiologist.

Q: What was the driving motivation, what has put you onto thinking about extending your anti-Malthusian point that more population means things will get better, not worse. In the United States with most people there is a common theme that things have stagnated or got worse. Why are you really looking to puncture that idea?

Marian: Ever since I started understanding the importance of economic growth, I've been obsessing about where growth comes from. The Bank of England has this incredible statistic. Prior to 1750, economic growth in Britain was 0.01% per year, which means that GDP per capita at that

rate doubles every 6000 years. From 1750 onwards, it was 2%, I think it's 1.5% per cent, at which point GDP per capita doubles every 50 years.

I realised the importance of GDP growth or economic growth and how highly correlated it is with other good things in life — happiness is correlated highly with GDP per capita; number of hours work decreases with GDP per capita. You can afford better hospitals, better health care, better education, etc.

So I really wanted to preserve growth. And about 10 or 11 years ago, I started working on resources. The biggest danger to growth wasn't protectionism. People were mostly concerned about the environment and the environmentalists — the extreme environmentalists — came in two flavours. One was global warming with climate change, and I wasn't going to do that because I'm not a hack and I don't have a PhD in physics or chemistry, which I think you need to understand global warming. But the other flavour of environmentalists was resources; claiming that basically, not only do additional people contribute to resource scarcity, but even if you don't have increasing population, with people richer as a result of capitalism, then you still run out of resources.

For them, the problem is wealthy population, because they believe that the more wealthy people are, even if you have a decreasing population, you are still over-consuming resources, and therefore you must destroy the world. So that's why I took on that particular battle.

Q: How has that evolved from the environmental left to today's world where you see it on the other side as well?

Marian: Yes. The right in the United States mirrors the left in so many ways. There's this horseshoe theory that extreme left and the right were so alike in their hatred of capitalism, in their hatred of individualism, in their hatred of free trade, they started to mirror one another. And so right now in the United States, basically the left's golden age is the 1970s and the right's golden age is the 1950s. And they all see in those eras the sort of era they would want to go back to.

The problem is that as people grow older, we become much more conservative, and we stop having new ideas. Actually, it's usually young people that have new ideas on average. On the average, obviously, as a general rule, the older the population gets, it also gets more risk-averse.

Q: In 2026 Australia, one of the pressing debates is immigration and people are complaining there's too much immigration. Population growth is growing too fast causing congestion and putting pressure on housing — and it's wrapped up with some cultural questions as well. But a lot of people are leaning against the immigration spurt that we have on economic grounds. What's your take on that?

Marian: I don't find the economic reasons persuasive. But immigration is beneficial — provided, of course, you live in a country where the market can react to the additional people ... Maybe we can build more roads to reduce congestion. We could do all sorts of things to lessen the impact of immigration on housing, the health system and the education system. But of course, we don't. So now you have this pressure — which is created by government not able, not allowing you to build.

On top of that, you have the insistence of people in some countries to give immigrants welfare. You also have immigrants who are told they cannot enter the job market because they are displacing the native population and so they are being put on welfare. That's another drag.

So obviously immigration in 2026 is not the same as in 1886 when immigrants didn't have access to welfare and you could build, as a capitalist, anything you wanted to build. My point is that you could fix the economic side if you want.

The cultural side seems more serious to me in a sense that people who live in Australia today have a private property right to this country and should be able to decide who comes in and who doesn't. It makes a lot of sense for you to try to bring in high-value individuals in a legal way. From what I've seen in Australia, it's a perfectly nice country for living and so a lot of people would like to. And then, of course, in Europe

there's an issue with the cultural incompatibility of immigrants from North Africa and Middle East and the European side.

Q: I absolutely agree with your realistic economic optimism. I sense that the optimism subsides somewhat when you move away from the economics to the culture of the population. And you're probably familiar with Mark Steyn's America Alone and Douglas Murray's Strange Death of Europe. You've got a situation where the young people aren't having enough children to even replace the population. You also have the influx of millions of people from basically Muslim countries. So you face a cultural issue, a philosophical issue. Overall, are you optimistic about the future of Europe or the West?

Marian: Honestly, I was heading into dark places, depression wise, especially during the Biden years, because there was a tremendous amount of self-censorship on the part of the American people. It was impossible to say anything positive about Western culture at all. Now, Donald Trump is an insane person but his election victory has freed people into saying things they were too terrified of saying before including, for example, young people taking an interest in Western civilisation started talking about the need to defend it. And I welcome that.

Jordan Peterson thinks liberalism destroys itself. However, you could make the same case for misinterpreting Christianity, because Christianity, improperly understood, produces a sense of guilt that other people can then take advantage of. There is a lot of guilt that arises from certain interpretation of the scriptures. And if people latch onto that, it can really be quite discombobulating for societies where you are meant to feel guilty about everything your ancestors did.

And then, of course, it's applied very unevenly; whereby it's only the British Empire which is bad and nobody is talking about all the other empires. And only America is specifically responsible for slavery. Kids are leaving universities thinking America is the only country in the history of the world to have had slavery.

And the problem is that for the past 50 years, maybe even longer, we say that we had a conversation about colonialism and slavery but we actually haven't. We only talked about the downsides of the empire and of slavery,

which then creates this over-exaggerated sense of guilt, which then destroys the legitimacy of our institutions, both economic and political. Whereas the conversation should really be one where we talk about the credit side and debit side of the ledger of any adventure, including the Imperial adventure. And for all the bad things the British did, there were also a lot of good things — even though today we don't want to colonise other people.

Whether the British Empire, for example, or the United States, has been net positive can be empirically adjudicated. How do you square off 300 years of slavery against antibiotics, electricity, the wheel and so on? But Western people are generally nice people, and they don't want to go around simply pointing these things out: "Okay, yes, we participated in slavery, but we also developed antibiotics ...". And the opposition takes advantage of that reticence.

Q: Consider the freedom side of the equation of superabundance. How important is global freedom in reference to trade in this context. In a world that is becoming more fragmented and restricted, how important is global trade to support that?

Marian: For superabundance, trade is probably not the most important thing, but it is a part of it. So obviously, in a large economy like the United States, with 340 million people, you can have a lot of competition taking place internally. So there is enough incentive for businessmen to be constantly on their toes, but it helps so much more if there is also international competition. Your typical innovator of, say, the iPhone, doesn't only have to worry about domestic competition, but also about foreign competition.

It's part of the same thing. What drives human progress is competition, not just economic competition, but institutional competition. Countries that allow for more innovation are obviously the ones where you end up with most progress. What made Europe different was that it was never united under one king after the fall of the Roman Empire. So you have countries that have to compete with one another, they have to allow for

more liberty so they can generate more growth to defend themselves from predators. That is not a problem in China or in India, because the Chinese are not worried about being conquered from outside. They are too powerful. They were worried about being destroyed from within, so they climbed out.

Q: You talked about increased population leading to innovation. From an Australian perspective, with about 28 million Australians and a US population of about 330 million, we have just been through an expansion of immigration. Do you know much about innovation in Australia that has come from that?

Marian: My view is that immigration is for you to decide. But I would feel comfortable enough to say that Australian society can swallow maybe tens of thousands of Russian or Ukraine scientists poached by Australia to perform stem research here.

Is Australia doing a good job scouring the world for people who could be doing research here and contributing to innovation here? That's question number one. If you think about IQ as being evenly distributed, around the world there are eight billion people, only 180 million of them have an IQ two standard deviations above the mean. So that's the pool out of which the geniuses of the future are going to come. Australia should be scouring the world for individuals like that and trying to entice them to come here.

Secondly, do you do enough of a good job in terms of adopting innovation that is produced in the rest of the world? I'm told that Australians are quite keen on AI, for example, which is the latest. Europeans are not keen on AI. Are you open enough, culturally and institutionally, to adopting new groundbreaking technologies?

Thirdly, do you have enough of institutional competition within Australia to make sure that the federal government cannot throttle economic growth? For all the failings of the United States, the competition between different states is fierce, and maybe a little bit more of that where one

state can basically reduce its state taxes to zero, like Florida did or Texas, and being able to poach smart people from states that oppress their businesses, their entrepreneurs — that may be another path to spur economic growth in Australia.

Q: One of the main insights that I drew out of this discussion was your point that for commodities or areas of production where the market is allowed to thrive, you get more human ingenuity and you get more abundance: superabundance. In areas that are over-regulated, that have too much government intervention, the price goes up and we get scarcity of things such as, perhaps, in the housing market. Have you used this insight in the USA to make that point; to drive a different way to perhaps frame the productivity debate, or how to set public policy. Or, if you haven't, can you see that as a potential way to drive your analysis?

Marian: Sure, we do it all the time and we see excellent results. Different states are adopting new policies in the United States to increase the amount of housing. Colorado has just changed its regulations, so where you normally needed two staircases per five storeys, now you only need one, for example. That example is just a tiny little fraction of the kinds of reforms going on in the United States, and that's because there's a tremendous amount of competition between the American states.

States where housing is over-regulated and very expensive are losing people to states that have less regulation. And when the housing is cheaper, those states are hugely benefitted. For example, Texas as opposed to California. But the point is that you need competition. It would be lovely if there was one state in the federation here that just opted for libertarian policies and showed what could happen.

Why don't you build more cities? Build a new city somewhere on the coast and build a desalination plant and people can live there. Create a new city like Prospera in Honduras. Wouldn't it be great if they passed legislation that 100 square kilometres of, let's say the Northern Territory, becomes an autonomous zone where businessmen can go and be completely free from any federal regulation. And let's see what happens.

I think that competition globally is just going to become so cut-throat and too dangerous to sleepy governments, that governments will have to innovate much more.

Address to the Australian Bureau of Statistics

Q: There's work the Productivity Commission's done recently that you might find interesting, where for about a third of the health care spend, they were looking at whether it has generated productivity improvement, and the way they measure the productivity improvements, in terms of extending life, those sort of things. And their estimate is that the part of the health care sector they can measure has seen 3% per annum Total Factor Productivity over the last 15 or 20 years.

Marian: It's interesting. So what, in your view, is the reason for increasing healthcare costs?

Q (in response): We haven't taken any of it on price. We've taken it on very substantial improvements in life expectancy from, in particular, things like cancer treatments.

Marian: I will make one point on the American health care system — and, no, do not take advice from Americans on how to organise health care systems — already 90% of all the money spent in American health care is third party payments. So, in other words, there is very little incentive for anybody to shop around to find better deals. There is no price competition.

Q: I would like to ask your thoughts about doing these comparisons over a longer term? I think we start the issue where you're fundamentally comparing the incomparable.

Marian: Given the kind of argument we are making, and given the opposition we assumed we would have, we focused on things which don't change over time. So, a tonne of nickel, a tonne of coal, a pound of shrimp, things like that, which don't really change over time ... resources, commodities, that sort of stuff. The only exception was in services where we talked about surgery and variation. But this heavily underestimates the increase in abundance. I had laser surgery 20 years ago when they still had to peel my eye open and then blast it with laser, whereas now we can do it through the socket and all sorts of ways. But you're absolutely right. We've always had this problem.

Q: For the context you place this very squarely in terms of our higher population, that's very well considered. Falling population rather rising population. Do you have any views on what that means for this whole general argument?

Marian: Of course, the anti-growth crowd has a way of dealing with this argument, which is that it doesn't really matter what the population was in the old days, it mattered where the population was increasing. But now they are saying population may plateau, it may even decrease, but because we are all becoming wealthier, we are going to be over-consuming resources, thereby leading to destruction of the planet.

None of these things are credible. This business that we are consuming 1.7 Earths, or 2.3 Earths, or whatever else. For the first 30 or 40 years, it was all about 'the increasing numbers.' But now they have transitioned into 'if we are going to become wealthier, we are going to over-consume and therefore the result is always the same.' I'm opposing the degrowth crowd who want to force Western societies, basically, not only to plateau but actually reduce our economy to become poorer, then that is the ammunition that I'm using. Their argument is that population doesn't matter because over-consumption will result. We are saying no, it won't.

Q: One of the interesting differences between Australia and the US since Covid, or even longer, is that the US has seen very strong productivity

growth relative to us. We've had very little productivity growth, and in fact, we've had periods of declining local productivity growth, but the US has seen a decline in employment to population ratios, and we've seen a substantial increase. And I'm wondering, in a world where something you want to make yourself immune from is a critique that says 'that's all very well for people who are working, but in the US, the proportion of people who are working has declined 10% — quite a bit.

Marian: Yes, it's down to about 62%.

Q (in response): *It was quite a bit higher. And the other thing is, with the arrival of AI and what that might do to entry-level work, that's a potential critique that it may not have turned up yet. But you want to think about how to respond to an argument that says: 'well, it's all very well for you to tell us that the people who've got jobs are doing fine. They've got abundance.' But all these young men who are not in the labour force, what's happening with them?*

Marian: Yeah, that's where the 10%, by the way, comes.

Q: *There is now some tentative evidence in the US, at least according to a recent article in the Financial Times, of losing entry-level workers because of AI. It's a coming argument.*

Marian: It is. Work is important, not just in terms of getting the money to get by, also as a source of meaning. Of course, the levels at which these people are being subsidised to stay at home are just extraordinary. We're talking \$US70,000 on average per family.

Q: *In Australia, even with the average person, real wages are a concept that's talked about. Is that talked about less in the US in the everyday political debate.*

Marian: People perceive real wages two different ways. One is just inflation adjustment, and then the other is the purchasing power. The way I understand that statisticians and economists think about real wages is

how much of a basket of commodities it can buy. But human beings usually think about real wages as inflation adjustment, so it misses out on the productivity increases. It misses out on the increase in wages. Basically, people think about 'okay, the price of milk has increased by 2 or 3% last year'. So they know you have to account for inflation to get a sense whether the milk is more or less expensive. But the increase in wages doesn't factor into it. It's just milk on its own.

Q: People think inflation is robbing them of what is rightly theirs, but the wage increases they have generated are a consequence of their own cleverness and industry. That's a very widely-held perspective. We take a whole bunch of assumptions here with the negative implication. The assumption is that the blue-collar worker, whether they are right or wrong in regard to their real wage, has this idea that their life is getting worse. There is an issue less economic and more like a psychological discussion about whether they fear they've got enough to be able to do things.

Marian: I genuinely believe that what's happening in the West today, not always, but in many countries that should be doing better in terms of how people feel about the world — how they feel about essentially having gratitude for how far you have come — is completely out of whack with the data. Eighty per cent of Americans think the US is going to hell. Yet GDP per capita is around \$76,000. Wages have never been higher.

Q (in response): *They might be thinking they don't know the dimensions.*

Marian: Yes, I do think that what is going on is primarily psychological, some sort of a loss of confidence. Because no matter how much you accumulated, the fear of loss may be just overpowering people. That could be connected to the rise of non-Western countries and how they feel relevant to them — the fear that China or AI will consume our jobs. But fundamentally, we don't know. This is a new thing, so more people are trying to research right now what is happening behind the generalised lower consumer sentiment in the United States and in other countries.

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