

## Ray Petridis, HETSA and the Revival of the History of Economic Thought

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As a consequence of the formalist revolution, the historical sub-discipline of the economics profession appeared to have been ‘permanently declining in professional esteem’ and, at least in the United States, had become ‘a nearly moribund subject’ (Stigler 1988, 28; 1982 [1972], 85). But as the fruits of formalism have proven to be disappointing, so this trend has been reversed. The History of Economic Thought Society of Australia (HETSA), founded twenty years ago, has made a major contribution to this intellectual rehabilitation. Ray Petridis (born 13 April 1938) played an important part in establishing and nourishing HETSA and the *HETSA Bulletin*, as the *History of Economics Review (HER)* was then called. HETSA took a collection of individual scholars and created a thriving community. The essays that follow are in appreciation of Ray’s role.

HETSA’s origins can be traced to the sabbaticals Ray spent in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s (centred, as always, in Cambridge). During a sabbatical in 1980, Ray attended a British History of Economic Thought Conference and determined that, on his return to Perth, he would flag the possibility of establishing an Australian society with other historians of economic thought in Australia. He met with John Wood in Perth (en route to a position at the University of New England) and together they sent off letters to potential members advising of plans to establish an Australian society. These letters received an enthusiastic response and a decision was made to hold a conference at Armidale in 1981 and form a society there. John Wood and John Pullen took on many of the organising responsibilities for the conference; Pullen was elected as Secretary and Wood editor of the *HETSA Bulletin*. Ray was chair of the business sessions of the inaugural conference and held the post of HETSA Secretary/Treasurer between 1980 and 1991.

Ray has some ‘vivid’ memories of that inaugural conference: ‘Some of the sessions were extremely boisterous and the discussion was often cutting, if not cruel’. But since the participants remain friends two decades later, the intellectual intensity was obviously productive. Indeed, perhaps the dynamics of that early group are worth exploring. Brutal criticism, combined with encouragement, can fertilise an intellectual cohort. The absence of a stifling institutional hierarchy is, of course, an important component of the Australian intellectual climate.

As Ray was planning the inaugural conference he was also writing a paper on the role of economists in government (1981d). The paper reflected his long-standing interest and periodic practical involvement in the economic policy advisory role. Two decades earlier Ray had been awarded the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics honours year free place. The following year (1963) he moved to Canberra and worked in the forerunner to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and in the Treasury as a senior research officer. He did not, however, stay long, taking up his first academic post in 1963 as one of the youngest ever appointments as lecturer in the Economics Department at the University of Western Australia. In the 1960s and 1970s he was a frequent commentator on the Western Australian and Australian economies in *Economic Activity*, the *Economic Record*,

and *Die Weltwirtschaft*. In 1988 he moved to Murdoch University which - judged by his publications - he obviously found to be a productive environment. In 1997 he took early retirement but remained at Murdoch as an Honorary Research Fellow.

Ray's HETSA conference paper (1981d) was subsequently published in the *History of Political Economy (HOPE)* as 'Economists in a Federal System: Australia' and was reprinted in Bob Coats's edited classic *Economists in Government: an International Comparative Study*. A companion piece (1981c) on 'Economics Degrees and the Australian Public Service' was also published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. The essays in this issue by Bob Coats ('The Role of Economists in Governments and International Agencies: A Fresh Look at the Field') and John Lodewijks ('Training Professional Economists: The Australian Experience') revisit these themes.

An important interest of Ray's has been in the area of industrial relations and labour economics. He was instrumental in the formation of the Industrial Relations Society of Western Australia in 1964, and through the next two decades provided support for various unions preparing wage cases and acting as an expert witness for the unions or the Trades and Labor Council in wage cases. He was commissioned to write three papers on wage determination and the Australian labour market in the *Journal of Industrial Relations* (1988b, 1987a, 1986b), and in the early 1980s he initiated discussions with the head of the Commonwealth Bureau of Labour Market Research with a view to funding research in labour economics. Charles Mulvey and his good friend Ron Peters joined Ray in negotiating an agreement for a grant, which subsequently served as part of the seed funding for the Western Australian Labour Market Research Centre (which subsequently became the Centre for Labour Market Research). He was also an important figure in developing full employment policies in the period of the 1982 recession, arguing strongly for such policies in the Labor Party's 1982 *Strategies for Full Employment*, and the 1983 Western Australian *State Employment Summit*. He was briefly the Economic Adviser to Peter Dowding, Western Australian Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations in the mid-1980s.

Perhaps his most important work in the labour market was his joint research with Ron Peters on the macroeconomics of unemployment in 'The Relation of Actual to Potential (Full Employment) Output for the Australian Economy, 1954-1975' (1977) and his 'Employment, the Labour Force and Unemployment in Australia: A Disaggregated Approach' (1985b). Tony Aspromourgos's paper in this issue ('Is Labour Cheapening a Means to Reducing Involuntary (Labour) Unemployment?') is in the Petridis tradition of seeking Keynesian labour market solutions to macroeconomic problems.

Ray, of course, is best known to readers of *HER* for his work in the history of economic thought. Ray (who obtained BEc First Class Honours at UWA and the J.A. Wood Prize for the outstanding graduand in a group of university faculties) was awarded both the James B. Duke Fellowship and a Fulbright Scholarship (1969-71) to complete his PhD at Duke University under Craufurd Goodwin. His thesis title was 'The Economic Analysis of Trade Unions By British Economists, 1870-1930'. The first publication to come out of his PhD was 'Alfred Marshall's Attitudes to and Economic Analysis of Trade Unions: A Case of Anomalies in a Comparative System' (1973). This paper was followed by a number of contributions in *HOPE* and other history of economic thought journals on Marshall, Langford Lovell Price and Thomas Brassey, among others. In recent years, Ray has been a frequent reviewer particularly on Marshall, including his important review

of Peter Groenewegen's *A Soaring Eagle: Alfred Marshall 1942-1924* (1997b). The essays by Craufurd Goodwin, Peter Groenewegen, Paul Flatau, Michael Schneider, John Pullen and Rob Knowles in this issue reflect the historical component of Ray's intellectual interests.

One of Australia's best-known economists and good friend of Ray's is Geoff Harcourt. Ray (1997a) published the first piece in the fine three-volume Festschrift for Geoff ('A Cambridge Economist but an Australian Patriot'). The essay by Geoff Harcourt in this issue ('Forty Years Teaching Post Keynesian Themes in Adelaide and Cambridge') reflects another important component of Ray's career: the contribution he has made to the training of economists through his teaching.

Three other aspects of Ray's contribution deserve a mention. First, Ray has always been a diligent, fair-minded and perceptive referee. Without such people our sub-discipline would not be as healthy as it is. Secondly, Ray has an irrepressible sense of humour, and Robert Leeson's essay has been in part stimulated by Ray's determination to puncture pomposity and status-bound behaviour whenever possible. Thirdly, Ray has always been a *political* economist. Economic analysis has an historical and political context and can only be properly understood when viewed in that context. The essay by John King and Mike Howard in this issue ('State Capitalism in Soviet Russia') is in that tradition.

In this special issue of *HER* we express gratitude to Ray for his contributions to HETSA, the history of economic thought, Australian labour and macroeconomics, and Western Australian economic policy development. Ray will be remembered generally for his high academic standards but also specifically for his contribution to the revival of the history of political economy.

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