
Tim Harcourt, *The Airport Economist*,
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In this book, we travel with Tim Harcourt around the globe as he gives us his impressions of what is happening in various countries, and specifically what is the involvement of Australian firms in their economies. We get a whistle-stop tour of Asia, the Middle East and Africa, Europe and the Americas. Harcourt has been the chief economist for the Australian Trade Commission (Austrade) for a decade and ‘travels the world sniffing out Australian success stories’. He has visited 40 countries in the last four years and this book chronicles those journeys. The writing is lively, and breezy and often amusing. The academic reader may find more meat in the travelogues of John Pilger and other investigative journalists but *The Airport Economist* is a light read and perfectly suitable for those on business travel with time to spare.

The book is unapologetically jingoistic. It is a testament to the enterprise and ingenuity of Australian firms in cracking foreign markets. The focus is always on trade and commercial opportunities available to *Australian* firms. In each country, the volume and composition of Australia’s trade is commented on, but Australian ‘joint-ventures, strategic alliances, licensing and franchise arrangements, international aid procurement and foreign direct investment’ are also examined. One noticeable feature is the trade links forged by immigration. Over ‘fifty percent of our export businesses are run by owners or managers born outside Australia.’

The tone of the book is very upbeat and positive, and Harcourt laments those that ‘see a black cloud on every silver lining’ (p. 135). One can surmise that the author has a very ‘sunny’ disposition, but brushing over the negatives and always trying to put a positive spin on things can be alarming. Let us take some examples. The ‘helpful’ role of IMF in Indonesia during the Asian Financial Crisis (p. 18) is at best disingenuous. In the Korean chapter, the AFC is termed the ‘IMF crisis’ which is more apt. The glossing over of the corruption issues in Indonesian extractive sectors (p. 19) is also disturbing. There is more positive spin on the role of Australian mining companies operating overseas — ‘This is great news for Australia’ — but the impact of resource booms on a nation’s development (let alone the resource depletion and environmental effects) has been quite a mixed blessing and sometimes more of a curse. The bitterest irony relates to Vietnam. Given the tragic history of US-Vietnam relations, it is quite paradoxical to hear a high level US official saying ‘we want to be able to see Vietnam develop’. The author notes that Vietnam has ‘become more open to trade and foreign investment than ever before’ (p. 27), apparently oblivious to the US trade embargo that for so many years prohibited countries from trading with Vietnam and even prevented humanitarian aid from reaching that country in times of natural catastrophes. Needless to say, there is little or no mention of terrorism, human rights violations, gender inequalities or the global financial crisis in this first class business travel itinerary.

You do get the impression that Harcourt is clearly aware of the broader context but chooses not to focus on the negatives — perhaps it was not in his Austrade brief. For example, he appears very pro-bilateral free trade agreements, even though these agreements may be one-sided and mutually inconsistent with multilateral trade reform. He acknowledges that this may be the case (it is hidden in an Appendix p. 191) but certainly not emphasised in the text that focuses on Australian success stories. While the book is very Australia-centric and superficial in places, the author often employs a wicked turn of phrase to amuse and entertain the reader and all that read this will gain something useful from it.

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