

## How to Argue with an Economist: Reopening Political Debate in Australia

Edwards, L., 2002.

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

ISBN 0 521 81903 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52532 2 paperback

Pp. 172, includes bibliography and index.

RRP: paperback AUD \$27.95; hardback AUD \$79.95

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**O**BSTRUCTIONISM and controversy reign in conservation management. Many business-people and bureaucrats see conservation as financially crippling. In particular, arguments have proliferated that concern for the environment has spawned regulations and controls that interfere with economic growth (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1996). The anti-regulatory sentiment of economic rationalism is driven by a desire to protect short-term economic interests, but it fails to consider the long-term benefits of conservation or consider the costs of environmental externalities. Arguing against economists is problematic because they invariably hide behind economic jargon and the superficiality of the simple quick-economic-fix. The ability to argue with an economist is therefore a valuable asset for all professionals. I approached reviewing this book with that in mind and hoping to gain that skill.

Lindy Edwards has first class honours degrees in both economics and politics from Monash University (BA/BEC) and is finishing her PhD in public policy at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. She has been an economic adviser for the Dept of the Prime Minister and Cabinet under the Howard Government, a press gallery journalist for the Sydney Morning Herald, and the economic adviser to recent Democrat leaders Meg Lees and Natasha Stott Despoja. She is well credentialed to write this book and her reputation has significantly escalated with the publication of it; as well it should!

This book is about the malaise caused by economic rationalism's mismatch of values and priorities, and its ignorance of social and cultural identities. In addition, it reflects on how fundamental economics have become in our daily lives. Its purpose is to expose in detail the malevolent character of economic rationalism's impact on Australian (and world) culture and individual self-identity, then positions us to engage in the battle against it.

Lindy's argument is divided logically into five sections beginning with some historical background

and finishing with comments for the future. However, the three inner parts are the most compelling. Parts two and three, "Getting a Handle on Economics" and "Revealing Economic Rationalism's Worldview" engage us with numerous social theories, which are woven into a convincing argument about how the world works and defines economic rationalism in more than enough detail. She draws on numerous and familiar examples that are easy to comprehend, such as, the debate over university fees and the GST. In developing a dichotomous argument she has constructed "the punters" worldview, a left of centre social position, which she believes is widely held in Australia. Then in section four "Arguing with an Economic Rationalist," Lindy presents her thesis of integrating the opposed worldviews of the rationalists and the "punters", to find a new way forward.

The book is largely set in the scene of Australian politics and society, drawing on the changes over the last 20 years, which examine "the rise and rise" of economic rationalism. It highlights the blow-out in the rich-poor divide and how economic rationalism and globalization are replacing governments. The economic view is contrasted with views of human nature and society. However, it is more than another exposé of insensitive economics; it is a serious attempt to bridge two opposing worldviews and provide a way forward.

Detailing the nature of economic rationalism and illustrating the divide between economists and the punters along with contrasting their viewpoints are the book's greatest strengths. Lindy has also gone a long way to bringing together the opposed views, which is needed if they are to be successfully integrated, as she proposes. Too much re-capping has made the book somewhat repetitive, but this may be a trade-off to make it an easier read for a general audience. Nevertheless, Lindy's writing style is direct and engaging. At the very least, her book delivers to us the ability to attend meetings and express our concerns in the language of the economic rationalist. Moreover, it challenges us to do so. I recommend this book as more than a good read; it is undoubtedly going to ignite debate and perhaps make the best-seller list.

### REFERENCE

- Ehrlich, P. R. and Ehrlich, A. H. 1996. Betrayal of science and reason. How anti-environmental rhetoric threatens our future. Island Press, Washington D.C.

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