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Marr does the heavy lifting - and others shouldn't take it lightly

Enterprise and innovation are the hallmarks of the Australian crane company building the world's longest suspension bridge in Turkey.

Andrew Clark *Senior Writer*



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A couple of weeks before Anzac Day this year, an Australian-British-Turkish team arrived in Turkey's Gallipoli region and began assembling the world's biggest cranes to work on the construction of the world's biggest suspension bridge.

The bridge across the Canakkale Strait will connect Gallipoli on the European side to Lapseki in Asian Turkey and its proximity to the site of epic World War One battles involving Anzac and Turkish troops carries plenty of historic symbolism.



Marr luffer cranes site at the 1915 Canakkale Bridge in Turkey. supplied

Writing his account of that bloody campaign, the late Les Carlyon speculated that "because it was fought so close to him on home ground", Homer – author of the ancient texts the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – might have seen Gallipoli as another "epic" struggle.



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Conflating Gallipoli with the current bridge project, the legendary Homer could also have been inspired by the monumental presence of Australian cranes, designed by Australians, built using Australian-developed technology, and helping to innovate new construction techniques.

<https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/marr-does-the-heavy-lifting-and-others-shouldn-t-take-it-lightly-20190829-p52m7p>

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Indeed, at an industrial level, the Marr 2480D "luffer" has truly mythic qualities. It can lift loads three times heavier than any other existing crane, carrying up to 330 tonnes – about the same weight as 33 buses – in one load. It can also reach up to 318 metres, or more than 100 floors.

These gee-whiz figures result in a much faster, simpler bridge build and have also simplified and sped up major construction projects in Australia, the Middle East, south-east Asia and the UK.

The two Marr 2480D luffers currently working on the 1915 Canakkale Bridge – named in honour of the World War One battles between Turks and the Anzacs – can shift whole sections of the bridge into place. This is instead of the more traditional method of lifting smaller components one by one and then welding them on-site.

Homeric rhetoric can also be applied to the 1915 Canakkale Bridge. It has a central span of 2023 metres and a total length of 4608 metres, and its highest vertical point is 318 metres. Assuming it is completed according to schedule in 2023, it will overtake the Akashi Kaikyo Bridge in Japan, which has a central span measuring 1991 metres, to become the world's longest suspension bridge.

There'll never be enough work for two cranes in Sydney.

– Simon Marr's great-grandfather

At the Sydney-headquartered Marr company – which has cranes operating in Dubai, Bahrain, Qata and the Philippines, at the British nuclear reactor project at Hinkley Point in the UK, as well as in Australia's major cities and mining projects, including the North West Shelf – the internal culture is one of pushing the boundaries.

"It's a battle I'm constantly waging – trying to get people to change the way they think," says managing director Simon Marr. In this sense the Gallipoli project is ideal because of its added historical significance.

"The thing I love about this job is that it goes from Gallipoli across to Asian Turkey. The historical significance and emotion in the job is quite incredible. It's as important or more important for the Turkish people as it is for us."

Not long after the Gallipoli campaign, Marr's grandfather worked in the family foundry in Sydney. However, he suffered from poor lungs and saw a need for a crane to make the workload less arduous. He built his own crane, and then he built another, only to be told by his own father: "There'll never be enough work for two cranes in Sydney."

"You've got to look at how you can be different, stand out from the crowd and how you can add value," grandson Simon Marr says now.

"We like to take on a challenge," he says, adding that the construction industry remains "adverse to new technology".

His last point can be applied more generally to Australia. Homeric epithets such as "epic" assume an ironic tinge when looking at our national innovation effort. This comes at a critical time when the US-China trade war is generating a sense of foreboding, particularly for so-called First World countries with a poor record in innovation and economic diversity, making them sluggish and less adaptable in volatile times.

Regarding economic diversity, we're down there with Kazakhstan – you know, Borat and all that.



A Marr crane at work at Sydney's Martin Place in 1952, ahead of celebrations marking Queen Elizabeth's coronation. supplied

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Meanwhile, [fears of recession are roiling markets](#), triggering alarm bells about the global economy taking on some of the symptoms of "Japanification". This is a term some economists use to describe Japan's generation-long battle against deflation and feeble growth, with largely ineffective attempts at reflation through monetary stimulus.



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There is concern that Europe may be succumbing to a Japanification syndrome, and even the more robust US economy could fall victim to the same malaise, as the Trump bump fades and the US Fed resorts to cutting interest rates. Throw in the corrosive influence of trade tensions and there is "some fear that Japanification could go global", as the *Financial Times* recently noted.

At the same time, the head of the Australian Productivity Commission, Michael Brennan, has warned weaker corporate investment is undermining Australia's living standards. He has urged business to [embrace Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's call](#) to place the objective of improving Australia's productivity record "firmly on the agenda".

"In the long term to drive growth you will need investment in new business models, new plant and equipment and new products, and ultimately that is a key driver to improvements in living standards," Brennan says.

He wouldn't disagree with [Australia's veteran innovation tsar, Bill Ferris](#). In an address last week to the Sydney Salon discussion and networking group at the Sydney Union Club, Ferris said that while Australia is "not a basket case", it invests just 1.8 per cent of its GDP in innovation and research. By contrast, Israel spends 4.5 per cent, Japan 3.5 per cent, and Germany and the United States spend 2.8 per cent.



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"Most of our more successful international competitors have a zero or minimum dependence on any tax incentives for business investment," Ferris said. In Australia, however, 85 per cent of that investment comes from special tax incentives, noted the former chairman of Innovation and Science Australia, and the founder of Australia's venture capital industry nearly 50 years ago.

"We could be a top 10 country," Ferris told the attentive group of scientists, corporate lawyers, venture capitalists and accountants. But instead Australia comes in at No. 22 in an OECD ranking of 46 countries.

The three current failings identified by Ferris are in education, particularly our relative decline in science and maths; lack of investment in R&D by corporate Australia; and the absence of a collaborative culture between business, universities and other research bodies such as the CSIRO. The Turnbull government was an enthusiastic promoter of innovation, but "went missing in action" after its near loss in the July 2016 election.

"Innovation became code for loss of jobs," Ferris said. However, more jobs are in fact generated through innovation. "You've got to get on with it, be up-front about job losses in some areas and prepared to provide re-skilling and the transition period support for workers to benefit from new but changed jobs."

In an earlier address to the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce in Sydney, [CSIRO chairman David Thodey](#) pointed out that while Australians are good early adapters of new technology, "we don't score high in our use of technology to drive productivity". Australia needed to "invest in new growth industries like advanced manufacturing", he said, and develop a stronger education base

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“We need to keep looking at where the future of Australia is going to be,” said Thodey, referring to the CSIRO’s *Future Directions* report, and added that “science and research play a critical role in our livelihood”.

Australia has had 28 consecutive years of economic growth. Melbourne and Sydney still rank among the world’s 10 most liveable cities, and local university rankings have risen. However, we’re just not that adaptable or diverse in our economy, he pointed out, and “there needs to be an energy shift – we need to move towards renewables”.

Whatever the precise elements, the task has taken on a certain urgency. Australia comes in at No. 87 on the global economic complexity index, sharing this bottom-feeding slot with Kazakhstan and Cuba, and this reflects “our reliance on resources and fossil fuels”, Thodey said.

Of course, the current reality is more complex than these figures suggest. Following the Hawke Labor government’s economic reforms in the ‘80s, Australia’s economy became more exposed to international competition, and while manufacturing shrank, tourism, construction and the effective export industry of high-fee-paying foreign students all boomed.

It’s therefore not so much new thinking that’s required as shrugging off the opioid-style addiction to short-term thinking.



David Thodey: Australians love technology but we are not very good at using it to boost productivity. Photo: Rob Homer

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