

Modelling Australian corporate tax reforms

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Abstract

As a small open economy, Australia can expect that foreign investors will add our corporate tax burden to the minimum rate of return that they require to invest here, rather than absorb it. This discourages foreign investment and leaves local labour to bear the final burden of local corporate tax, discouraging labour supply. This double disincentive effect led Gordon to recommend against applying corporate tax in a small open economy. More recently, Auerbach et al have argued that international profit shifting has added to the case against corporate tax in its current form. Australia further undermines the efficiency of corporate tax as a revenue raiser by returning a substantial portion of the revenue through a dividend imputation system that Fuest and Huber show is undesirable for small open economies. At the same time, Boadway and Bruce show that corporate tax can be efficiently applied to the returns from immobile assets such as land, minerals and local market power, leading to calls to narrow the corporate tax base to only capture such economic rents. Using economy-wide modelling, this article quantifies the substantial consumer benefits from tax reforms that reduce the corporate tax rate, narrow the base to economic rents, or replace imputation with less generous dividend tax concessions. The already substantial benefits of these business tax reforms have increased as a result of the US business tax changes under the recently passed 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

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The author worked with David Ingles and Miranda Stewart of the TTPI, ANU, to develop jointly a set of corporate tax policy reform options covering tax bases ranging from the ACC or ACE to the CBIT, the removal of imputation and the choice of tax rate, so as to investigate their different efficiency and revenue effects in the Australian context. The economic modelling and detailed results are presented here, while Ingles and Stewart focus on the policy principles and options in a companion article in this volume.

Keywords: Australia; business taxes; computable general equilibrium models; efficiency; optimal taxation.

1. Introduction

This article models potential reforms to the Australian corporate tax system. It considers the corporate tax rate, the corporate tax base and options for funding corporate tax reductions.

In the most recent development in the Australian corporate tax system, in the 2016-17 Budget, the Australian Government proposed a phased cut in the corporate tax rate from 30 to 25%. This was supported by economy-wide modelling, including modelling commissioned by the Treasury from this author¹ and modelling the Treasury undertook in-house.²

To date, the federal parliament has passed the proposed tax cut into law for smaller companies but not for larger companies. In particular, a tax cut has been introduced for companies with an annual turnover of under \$50m, known as base rate entities. For such entities, the corporate tax rate will fall from 30% in 2014-15 to 25% in 2026-27. For larger companies, the tax rate remains at 30%.

The federal government continues to press for the tax cut to be extended from base rate entities to larger companies. This is in line with the original Budget proposal and would avoid the less-than-ideal outcome of a permanent two-tier rate system.

Ingles and Stewart³ step back from the current impasse in fully implementing a 25% rate to consider the broader issues of corporate tax policy. They focus on a series of policy options for improving the corporate tax system, covering the tax rate, the tax base and the funding of rate cuts. This companion article models some of those options.

The literature provides useful guidance on the optimal approach to corporate tax in a small open economy such as the Australian economy. The basic result due to Gordon⁴ is that “a small open economy should ... not attempt to tax capital, regardless of the tax policies in other countries”. This is because in an open economy, corporate income tax has similar economic impacts to a labour income tax, but also reduces corporate investment. However, there are two important qualifications to the basic

1 C Murphy, *The effects on consumer welfare of a corporate tax cut*, ANU working papers in trade and development, 2016/10, 2016.

2 M Kouparitsas, D Prihardini and A Beames, *Analysis of the long-term effects of a company tax cut*, Treasury working paper, 2016-02, 2016.

3 D Ingles and M Stewart, “Australia’s company tax: options for fiscally sustainable reform”, (2018) 33(1) *Australian Tax Forum*.

4 R Gordon, “Taxation of investment and savings in a world economy”, (1986) 76(5) *The American Economic Review* 1086-1102.

result that corporate tax should not be imposed, as pointed out by Bruce⁵, McKeehan and Zodrow,⁶ and others.

First, it is optimal to impose a local corporate income tax to the extent that multinational firms are able to claim a tax credit in their home country for that local corporate tax, the so-called “Treasury transfer” effect. However, this effect has been virtually eliminated because all major industrialised countries now tax the territorial income, rather than the world income, of their resident companies, and consequently do not provide tax credits for corporate tax paid in other jurisdictions.⁷ The USA was the last major industrialised country to fall into line when it recently switched to territorial taxation as part of the corporate tax changes under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

Second, it is optimal to tax location-specific economic rents, whereas Gordon⁸ only considered corporate income taking the form of a normal return to capital. This has led to calls to narrow the base of corporate tax so that it no longer taxes normal returns to capital, but does tax economic rents.⁹ This would remove the investment disincentive effect of corporate tax. Without such an economic rent tax, some positive rate of corporate income tax may be justified as a blunt way of taxing rents.¹⁰

Two other design issues with corporate tax are often discussed.

First, because corporate tax is usually source-based, tax avoidance is possible by shifting corporate income from higher-taxed to lower-taxed jurisdictions. This may be achieved via transfer pricing, debt re-allocation or re-location of corporate headquarters and the associated income from firm-specific capital. To reduce profit shifting, it has been proposed that corporate tax be applied on a destination basis, like a value-added tax, rather than on a source basis.¹¹

Second, the traditional corporate income tax allows a deduction for the cost of debt but not for the cost of equity. This differential tax treatment creates a bias favouring debt over equity finance. An economic rent tax removes this tax bias because it

5 N Bruce, “A note on the taxation of international capital flows”, (1992) 68(202) *The Economic Record* 217-221.

6 M McKeehan and G Zodrow, “Balancing act: weighing the factors affecting the taxation of capital income in a small open economy”, (2017) 24 *International Tax and Public Finance* 1–35.

7 McKeehan and Zodrow, op cit.

8 Gordon, op cit.

9 R Boadway and N Bruce, “A general proposition on the design of a neutral business tax”, (1984) 24 *Journal of Public Economics* 231-239.

10 Bruce, op cit.

11 A Auerbach, M Devereux, M Keen and J Vella, *Destination-based cash flow taxation*, Said Business School research papers, 2017-2019, 2017.

provides investment-related deductions with a present value equal to investment costs, irrespective of the method of financing.

An alternative way of removing the financing bias is to vary the standard corporate income tax by denying a deduction for interest expenses.¹² Under this comprehensive business income tax (CBIT), the tax bias is removed because there is no deduction available for either debt or equity financing costs.

Aside from the financing bias issue, de Mooij and Devereux¹³ find that the CBIT has both an advantage and a disadvantage compared to the standard corporate tax. The advantage is that the broader base of the CBIT can fund a lower tax rate, reducing profit shifting. The disadvantage is that CBIT increases tax on normal returns to capital relative to tax on economic rents, increasing investment disincentives.

For a more complete policy assessment, this article also considers the tax treatment of corporate income at the shareholder level. Australia, unlike most countries, provides relief from corporate income tax to the extent that profits are distributed to resident shareholders as dividends. However, Fuest and Huber¹⁴ demonstrate that such dividend imputation systems are “not desirable” in an open economy where the marginal investors are foreign shareholders. Because foreign shareholders do not benefit from imputation credits, dividend imputation fails to achieve its objective of increasing investment, while imputation credits for resident shareholders are costly to the government budget.

Section 2 provides a fuller account of the guidance provided by the literature on the optimal approach to corporate tax policy in an open economy. That guidance is placed in the Australian context using a series of tables that display data on the local corporate tax system. The remaining sections of this article are organised as follows.

Section 3 covers the modelling approach used in this article. It explains the main features of CGETAX (a computable general equilibrium model of the Australian economy) that are pertinent to the modelling of corporate tax policy. Full details on the modelling of the corporate tax system and the cost of capital are set out in Appendix A of the working paper version of this article.¹⁵

12 R de Mooij, “Tax biases to debt finance: assessing the problem, finding solutions”, (2012) 33(4) *Fiscal Studies* 489-512.

13 R de Mooij de and M Devereux, “An applied analysis of ACE and CBIT reforms in the EU”, (2011) 18 *International Tax and Public Finance* 93-120.

14 C Fuest and B Huber, *The optimal taxation of dividends in a small open economy*, CESifo working paper, no. 348, 2000.

15 C Murphy, *Modelling corporate tax reforms: updated for the recent US corporate tax changes*, ANU Tax and Transfer Policy Institute working paper, 4/2018, 2018.

Section 4 provides background on the costs to consumers of the economic disincentive effects from the more significant taxes. Of particular interest is the consumer cost of the three major taxes — personal income tax, corporate income tax and GST — relative to the amount of revenue that they raise. This analysis provides support for the aim of reducing the reliance placed on corporate income tax.

Section 5 uses modelling to investigate the extent to which the corporate tax rate should be cut. Economic outcomes are compared under rates of 30, 25, 20 and 15%. The modelling abstracts from the recent introduction of a two-tier rate system. The impact on the results of the recent virtual elimination of the Treasury transfer effect as a result of the US corporate tax changes under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act¹⁶ is investigated.

Section 6 models potential changes to the base of corporate tax and the taxation of dividends. The first two options have been modelled previously by de Mooij and Devereux¹⁷ in an European Union (EU) study:

- option one narrows the tax base so that only economic rents are taxed to remove the investment disincentive effect of corporate tax. There has been recent interest in this option in the US;
- option two broadens the tax base by making interest non-deductible under a CBIT. This reduces profit shifting but increases the investment disincentive of corporate tax; and
- option three replaces the dividend imputation system with concessional taxation of dividends. This recognises the ineffectiveness of imputation in encouraging investment in an open economy.

Section 7 models the proposed cut in the corporate tax rate to 25% under alternative funding options. Both business tax and non-business tax funding options are modelled.

2. Optimal corporate tax policy

This section provides an account of the guidance provided by the literature on the optimal approach to corporate tax policy in a small open economy. That guidance is placed in the Australian context using a series of tables that display data on the local corporate tax system.

16 US House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act: Section-by-Section Summary*, December, 2017.

17 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit*.

2.1 Corporate tax rate

As noted in the introduction, Gordon¹⁸ obtained the basic result that it is not optimal to tax capital in a small open economy that is a price taker in world capital markets. If labour and capital are the only factors of production and competition is perfect, Gordon reasoned as follows:

“Since the supply of capital from abroad is infinitely elastic, labor bears the entire burden of either a labor income tax or a corporate income tax, so both lead to a change in labour supply decisions. A corporate tax, however, simultaneously creates an additional distortion which reduces capital investment in the economy. It is therefore dominated by a labor income tax ... A small country should therefore not attempt to tax capital, regardless of the tax policies in other countries.”

The finding that corporate income should not be taxed continues to hold if corporate income includes not only normal returns to capital, but also firm-specific rents.¹⁹ This is because firm-specific rents, which can arise from managerial skill or intangible assets, share the same property with capital of being globally mobile, and hence are not taxed under an efficient tax system. Rents that are location-specific, rather than firm-specific, have different implications for an optimal corporate tax system, as discussed later.

Despite Gordon’s finding, one reason for imposing a corporate income tax in a small open economy is the “Treasury transfer” effect. This arises when multinational (MNC) firms are able to claim a tax credit in their home country for corporate tax that is imposed by the host country. This means that the host country is able to use corporate tax to transfer revenue to it from the home country. McKeehan and Zodrow²⁰ elaborate on this argument for a host country, such as Australia, to impose corporate tax:

“The ‘treasury transfer’ argument suggests that a host country that imports capital primarily from countries that use residence-based corporate income tax systems and grant foreign tax credits (FTCs) should raise its tax rate approximately to the rate utilized by those countries, since such a rate increase will essentially transfer revenues from the treasury of the home countries to the treasury of the host country without having any deleterious effects on FDI (since the combined host and home countries tax burden borne by the MNC is always determined solely by the statutory tax rate of the home country).”

18 Gordon, *op cit.*

19 McKeehan and Zodrow, *op cit.*

20 *Ibid.*

At the same time, McKeehan and Zodrow acknowledge that the “Treasury transfer” effect has become of “limited relevance”. This is because countries have been switching from residence-based to territorial-based corporate tax systems. By the time Japan and the UK switched to “territorial” tax systems in 2009, the US was “the only major industrialized country” that continued to provide tax credits for company tax paid in other jurisdictions. The USA became the last major industrialised country to fall into line when it switched to territorial taxation under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. This virtually eliminated the “Treasury transfer” effect.

Table 1 shows the extent to which, in the past, credits were claimed in the US for Australian company tax. On average, such credits covered about 5% of Australian company tax revenue. This proportion was relatively low, even though US foreign investment in Australia is substantial. This is because credits were only paid on direct investment, not portfolio investment, and the US only taxed the foreign earnings of its MNCs that were remitted as dividends.

Table 1: US tax credits for Australian company tax

Year	US credits (\$m, USD) (a)	USD/AUD exchange rate (b)	US credits (\$m, AUD)	Company tax revenue (accrual) (d)	US credits (% of company tax revenue)
2007	2,546	0.845	3,014	58,297	5.2%
2008	2,825	0.863	3,272	64,687	5.1%
2009	2,121	0.810	2,619	60,593	4.3%
2010	3,151	0.947	3,329	53,092	6.3%
2011	3,142	1.062	2,957	57,302	5.2%
2012	2,968	1.067	2,783	66,541	4.2%
2013	2,618	0.999	2,621	68,054	3.9%
Average					4.9%

Sources:

(a) US Internal Revenue Service²¹

(b) Australian Taxation Office²²

(d) Australian Government²³

In any case, as noted above, the Treasury transfer effect has been virtually eliminated by the corporate tax changes under the recently passed 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act,²⁴ (“the Act”). Either of two separate measures in the Act are sufficient to have this effect.

21 US Internal Revenue Service, *Corporate foreign tax credit statistics*, table 2, 2017.

22 Australian Taxation Office, *Taxation statistics 2014-15*, 2017.

23 Australian Government, *2017-18 Budget paper no. 1*, statement no. 5, 2017.

24 US House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, op cit.

First, under section 4001 of the Act, the USA switches, from 2018, to a so-called “dividend-exemption” that brings about territorial-based taxation. In particular, the Australian earnings of US multinationals that are remitted as dividends will become exempt from US taxation and tax credits will no longer be allowed in the US for the Australian company tax already paid on such dividends. This switch to territorial taxation eliminates the Treasury transfer effect between Australia and the USA.²⁵

Second, even if the US had retained residence-based taxation, the Treasury transfer effect would in any case have been largely eliminated by the Act’s cut to the corporate tax rate. Under section 3001 of the Act, the US federal corporate tax rate drops from 35 to 21 per cent from 2018. This moves the US federal rate below the Australian rate of 30 per cent, thus eliminating US residual tax. This would have eliminated the Treasury transfer effect, even if there had not been a shift to a territorial-based system.

The standard modelling in this article allows for the elimination of the Treasury transfer effect. However, alternative modelling shows how some key results vary if the old Treasury transfer effect is factored back in. This approach provides some insight into how the recent US corporate tax changes affect the Australian policy environment. The alternative modelling also facilitates comparisons with previous modelling that included the old Treasury transfer effect.

While the Treasury transfer effect has now largely disappeared, Bruce²⁶ shows that there is another potential reason for applying corporate tax in a small open economy. He extends Gordon’s work by allowing for corporate income from location-specific economic rents (“economic profits”), in addition to corporate income from normal returns to capital. Location-specific economic rents can include land rents, mineral resource rents and local oligopoly rents. Bruce found that, under a first-best tax policy, the corporate income from location-specific economic rents would be taxed away, while at the same time confirming Gordon’s results that corporate income from normal returns to capital should not be taxed.

Bruce believed that it was realistic to assume that the first-best tax policy of fully taxing location-specific economic rents would not be implemented. Consequently, he favoured imposing a corporate income tax as a second-best tax on location-specific economic rents.

These sharply different prescriptions of taxing away location-specific rents on the one hand, and not taxing normal returns to capital and firm-specific rents on the other hand, raise the question of their relative contributions to corporate income tax revenue in Australia. Using the CGETAX model and its database, it is estimated in Table 2 that 41% of company income tax is collected from the efficient tax base of location-specific economic rents. CGETAX does not attempt to split firm-specific

25 I would like to thank Dhammika Dharmapala for this point.

26 Bruce, *op cit*.

economic rents from normal returns to capital, but in any case, both are inefficient tax bases and together they generate the remaining 59% of corporate tax revenue.

Clearly, Bruce's second-best policy of using corporate income tax as a blunt way of taxing location-specific economic rents is far from the first-best policy, given our estimate that such rents generate less than one-half of corporate tax revenue.

Table 2: Company income tax by economic base (2016-17, est)

	\$bn	%
Normal returns to capital	41.6	59%
Oligopoly rents: financial services	16.9	24%
Oligopoly rents: other industries	2.4	3%
Land and mineral rents	10.2	14%
Total	71.1	100%

Source: CGETAX database for 2012-13 updated to 2016-17 in a model simulation.

2.2 Corporate tax base

A potentially superior approach to that suggested by Bruce is to narrow the tax base to only tax economic rents. This improves the efficiency of the tax base by removing normal returns to capital. However, it still leaves some inefficiency because mobile, firm-specific rents would be taxed alongside location-specific rents.

Versions of source-based economic rent taxes include the allowance for corporate equity (ACE) tax, the allowance for corporate capital (ACC) tax and the source-based cash flow tax (CFT). These taxes have the common feature that they remove normal returns to capital from the tax base by allowing deductions that have a present value equal to the cost of investment. The CFT does this in the simplest way by making new investment immediately deductible, and therefore does not provide any further investment-related deductions such as those for depreciation or interest expenses.

The ACC, which was first proposed by Boadway and Bruce²⁷, provides the usual deduction for depreciation, plus a deduction based on an allowance rate applied to the book value of depreciable assets. This allowance aims to compensate investors for the funding cost of having to wait for depreciation deductions after they make an investment. Because the ACC compensates investors for this waiting cost, Boadway and Bruce were able to show that the ACC achieves investment neutrality even if tax depreciation rates are set arbitrarily.

27 Boadway and Bruce, op cit.

Concern about applying a source-based tax (either corporate tax or a rent tax) to firm-specific economic rents arises from the relative ease of avoidance. Such avoidance requires moving the generators of firm-specific rents — management and intangible assets — to a lower-tax jurisdiction. This may be achieved by simply moving the location of the MNC's headquarters.

Partly to address this problem, some authors have supported using a destination-based economic rent tax, specifically the destination-based cash flow tax (DBCFT), in preference to a source-based economic rent tax such as the CFT²⁸. Instead of taxing economic rents in the country in which they are generated, the DBCFT, in effect, taxes MNC rents when they are used to fund the household consumption of the MNC's shareholders. On the assumption that an MNC's shareholders are less internationally mobile than an MNC's headquarters, the DBCFT will tax firm-specific economic rents more efficiently than a CFT.

At the same time, there is a significant difference between the CFT and DBCFT in how the revenue they raise would be distributed between countries. The CFT taxes rents in the country in which they are generated, so an Australian CFT would tax rents generated from Australian-based oligopolies, land and minerals. Thus, the tax generated from these Australian-based assets would stay in Australia.

In contrast, the DBCFT taxes rents in the country where they are used to fund shareholder consumption. This means that rents received by foreign shareholders from Australian-based assets would not be taxed in Australia. On the other hand, rents received by Australian shareholders from foreign-based assets would be taxed in Australia.

This suggests that from a revenue-raising perspective, Australia may prefer a source-based economic rent tax such as the CFT, rather than a DBCFT. The source-based tax has the advantage of taxing in Australia the substantial foreign share of the considerable rents generated by both the Australian financial services oligopoly and Australian mineral resources; those rents are estimated in Table 2. More generally, from a revenue-raising perspective, countries such as Australia, where inbound investment dominates, may prefer a source-based economic rent tax such as a CFT. By the same token, countries where outbound investment dominates, such as the US, may prefer a DBCFT. For that reason, this article models a source-based economic rent tax for Australia.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that, besides taxing firm-specific rents more efficiently, a DBCFT has a range of other advantages over a source-based economic

28 Auerbach et al, *op cit*.

rent tax.²⁹ These advantages are especially in relation to reducing profit shifting. Hence, a DBCFT may be modelled in future work.

In modelling a source-based economic rent tax, this article uses an ACC rather than an ACE or CFT. This choice is partly for modelling convenience. It is also partly because this research considers a tax system that is a hybrid of a rent tax and a CBIT. Conveniently, one can move along the spectrum from an ACC towards a CBIT simply by scaling down the ACC allowance rate.³⁰

To date, the limited international experience with general economic rent taxes has mainly involved the ACE. However, recently there have been signs of interest in the USA in cash flow-based economic rent taxes. The Trump administration recently spent some time considering a DBCFT. While this option was ultimately rejected, the corporate tax changes in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act³¹ partially implement the two central elements of a CFT as follows. First, a CFT allows immediate write-off of new investments, while section 3101 of the Act introduces immediate write-off for some, but not all new investments. This immediate write-off sunsets after five years, but presumably could be extended under future legislation. Second, a CFT abolishes the deduction for interest expenses, while section 3301 follows the German thin capitalisation rule approach of capping the interest deduction at 30 per cent of EBITDA. Thus, it is possible that these two measures will turn out to be the first steps towards the USA implementing a cash flow based economic rent tax in the future.

At an unchanged company tax rate of 30%, the estimates in Table 2 appear to suggest that excluding normal returns to capital from the tax base would involve a 59% loss of revenue. In practice, the revenue loss would be less than this, even before allowing for favourable behavioural responses. One reason for this is that the ACC allowance rate can be set at a risk-free rate, rather than at the higher risky rate associated with the normal rate of return on investments.³² This is because the allowance rate is used to compensate businesses for the funding cost of having to wait for depreciation deductions from government after they make an investment. That is, the allowance rate represents the notional nominal interest rate on a loan from the business to the government, who can be viewed as a riskless borrower. The modelling presented later in this report does not allow for this point, and hence overstates the budget cost of shifting to the ACC.

In any case, the budget cost of shifting to an ACC could be addressed by applying a higher tax rate. In fact, as noted above, Bruce³³ points out that, in theory, it is efficient to fully tax location-specific economic rents, ie to apply a tax rate of 100%. However,

29 Ibid.

30 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit*.

31 US House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, *op cit*.

32 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit*.

33 Bruce, *op cit*.

in practice, there are four practical problems with this full taxation approach. First, a higher tax rate than at present would exacerbate profit shifting to jurisdictions with lower tax rates. Second, economic rents include firm-specific rents, which are inefficient to tax. Third, when an asset generating an economic rent such as oligopoly profits is sold, the capitalised value of the rent is received by the seller³⁴ and appears on the balance sheet of the buyer as goodwill. Assuming that the ACC deduction does not cover goodwill, the financial capacity of the buyer to pay an ACC tax may be constrained. Fourth, excluding the normal returns to capital is an uncertain exercise, particularly when a cash flow tax is not used, so a pure tax on economic rents is difficult to achieve. These practical considerations considerably moderate the extent to which the tax rate should be increased in narrowing the corporate tax base to economic rents.

Switching to an ACC has another advantage beyond removing the investment disincentive effect of the traditional corporate income tax. It removes the anomaly of allowing a deduction for the cost of debt but not for the cost of equity. This differential tax treatment under the traditional income tax creates a tax bias favouring debt finance over equity finance of investment. An ACC removes this tax bias because it provides a deduction with a present equal to investment costs, irrespective of whether investment is financed by debt or equity or some combination.

An alternative way of overcoming the financing tax bias is to vary the standard corporate income tax by denying a deduction for interest expenses.³⁵ Under this comprehensive business income tax (CBIT), the tax bias is removed because there is no deduction available for either debt or equity financing costs. On the other hand, Sørensen³⁶ finds that thin capitalisation rules, such as those now in place in Germany and the USA, are preferable to a CBIT as a way of countering the tax bias favouring debt finance.

In any case, addressing the tax bias through a CBIT, rather than through an economic rent tax, has the drawback of increasing tax on normal returns to capital relative to tax on economic rents, thus increasing the investment disincentive effect of corporate tax. On the other hand, a CBIT has the advantage of raising more revenue at a given tax rate. If this advantage is used to reduce the tax rate, a CBIT has the advantage of reducing profit shifting, a topic which is discussed later.

Table 3 can be used to estimate in a simple way the extent of the broadening in the Australian company tax base from switching to a CBIT. Aside from financial services, other industries have a net interest expense of \$27.5b. Under a CBIT, this net interest

34 J Freebairn, "Design alternatives for an Australian allowance for corporate equity", (2016) 31 *Australian Tax Forum* 555-575.

35 de Mooij and Devereux, op cit.

36 P Sørensen, "Taxation and the optimal constraint on corporate debt finance: why a comprehensive business income tax is suboptimal", (2017) 24 *International Tax and Public Finance* 731-753.

expense would no longer be deductible, adding \$8.2b to company tax revenue at a tax rate of 30%. Adding this to baseline revenue of \$68.1b, revenue is higher by a factor of 1.12. This funds a reduction in the tax rate by the same factor, taking it from 30% to 26.8%.

Table 3: Company interest income and expenses (\$m)

	Interest income	Interest expense	Net interest expense	Net tax
Financial & insurance services	161,046	97,664	-63,382	24,598
Other industries	15,436	42,896	27,460	43,523
Total	176,482	140,560	-35,922	68,121

Source: Australian Taxation Office³⁷

Financial services complicate a CBIT. This industry receives income in the form of an interest margin and fees from intermediating between borrowers and lenders. A naïve application of CBIT to financial services would mean that the interest margin was no longer taxed, leading to a narrowing rather than a broadening of the tax base, as can be discerned from Table 3. Further, this would likely induce a tax avoiding shift away from charging for financial intermediation in the form of fees to charging in the form of interest margin.

Instead, a more sophisticated CBIT is implicitly assumed under which all income derived from financial intermediation is taxable. The model used, CGETAX, is based on national accounts data that imputes interest margin income using the national accounts concept of financial intermediation services indirectly measured (FISIM). This approach treats financial services in a consistent way to other sectors. It also further broadens the CBIT tax base, such that the overall CBIT base broadening funds a reduction in the tax rate to around 25%.

An alternative, simpler approach to this problem with a CBIT would be to tax the net interest income of all firms, while not allowing a deduction for firms with a net interest expense. There would be a risk of avoidance by financial institutions merging with non-financial institutions so that the latter could claim its interest expense against the net interest income of the former. An anti-avoidance provision would be needed stopping financial service businesses consolidating with non-financial service businesses for tax purposes.

Like the standard CBIT, the standard ACC does not include a deduction for interest expenses (because investment costs are already fully deductible through the ACC allowance). Hence, the same issues arise in dealing with financial services and a similar solution could be adopted.

³⁷ Australian Taxation Office, op cit, Companies tables 4 and 5.

2.3 Profit shifting

Profit shifting is a phenomenon that has implications for the choice of the tax rate and the tax base. McKeehan and Zodrow³⁸ explain profit shifting as follows:

“The application of a relatively high corporate tax rate to the income of MNCs encourages them to engage in profit shifting, that is, to use various financial manipulations, including transfer pricing, the relocation of the ownership of intangibles, and the use of loan reallocations that facilitate interest stripping, to shift revenues to relatively low tax countries and deductions to relatively high-tax countries.”

A desire to reduce profit shifting has been one factor leading to lower corporate tax rates around the globe.

Furthermore, McKeehan and Zodrow point out that “it is the statutory tax rate that determines the value to the firm of shifted revenues and deductions”. Consequently, profit shifting can be reduced by using a broadening of the tax base to fund a reduction in the tax rate. Therefore, profit shifting is a factor that favours a broadening of the tax base, as in a CBIT, rather than a narrowing of the tax base, as in an economic rent tax such as the ACC.³⁹

The importance of profit shifting for the choice of both the rate and base of corporate tax depends on its extent. In CGETAX the proportion of profits shifted abroad, θ , is determined by the following formula:

$$\theta = A \cdot (t - t_h)$$

Thus, the proportion of profits shifted depends on the gap between the statutory tax rate, t , and the tax haven tax rate, t_h . The sensitivity parameter, A , can be selected by using evidence from the literature on either the proportion of the profits that are shifted, θ (as in McKeehan and Zodrow⁴⁰), or the absolute value of the semi-elasticity of the tax base to the tax rate, k (as in de Mooij and Devereux⁴¹). A is linked to this semi-elasticity as follows:

$$A = k / [1 + k \cdot (t - t_h)]$$

In CGETAX, the value selected for k is 0.73, as discussed in section 3. When this value is used in the above formula (setting $t = 30\%$, $t_h = 5\%$), the value obtained for A is 0.62. Using this value for A , Table 4 shows how the proportion of profits shifted varies

38 McKeehan and Zodrow, *op cit*.

39 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit*.

40 McKeehan and Zodrow, *op cit*.

41 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit*.

with the statutory tax rate. The remaining proportion of profits is taxed, leading to the effective tax rates for revenue raising shown in the table.

Table 4: Profit shifting under alternative company tax rates

Statutory tax rate	30.0%	25.0%	20.0%	15.0%
Effective tax rates:				
revenue	25.4%	21.9%	18.1%	14.1%
cost of capital	28.1%	23.8%	19.3%	14.7%
Proportion of profit shifted	15.4%	12.3%	9.3%	6.2%

Source: CGETAX model

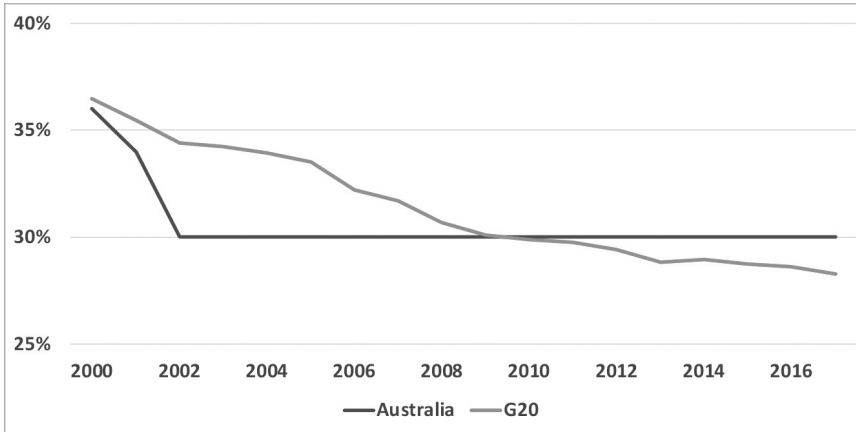
For example, at the existing statutory tax rate for large companies of 30%, an estimated 15.4% of profits are shifted, reducing the effective tax rate for revenue raising from 30% to 25.4%. However, the effective tax rate driving the investment decisions of MNCs, t_c , falls by considerably less to 28.1%, and is given by the following formula, which is derived in Murphy.⁴² This formula takes into account tax paid in the tax haven as well as tax avoidance costs:

$$t_c = t - (0.5).\theta.(t - t_h)$$

These estimates indicate that profit shifting results in a substantial loss of revenue for a relatively small reduction in the cost of capital for investment. Thus, profit shifting adds to the inefficiency of corporate income tax. This can be addressed through a combination of an anti-avoidance strategy and an internationally competitive tax rate. In addition, as noted above, profit shifting can also be addressed by choosing a broader, rather than a narrower, tax base, as this helps fund a lower tax rate.

One way of considering Australia's potential exposure to profit shifting is to compare our statutory tax rate with rates in other countries. Figure 1 makes the comparison with the average tax rate for the G20 countries. In Australia, the tax rate was cut from 36% in 1999/00 to 34% in 2000/01 and 30% in 2001/02, taking it well below the average G20 rate of 34.4%. However, in subsequent years, the Australian large company tax rate has remained unchanged, while tax cuts in other countries have reduced the average G20 rate to 28.3%.

42 Murphy, op cit.

Figure 1: Australian statutory tax rate compared to average for G20

Source: Oxford University Centre for Business Taxation database and own calculations.

Looking ahead, corporate tax rates are continuing to fall across the G20, reflecting concerns about the inefficiency of corporate tax as a way of raising revenue in a world of mobile capital and profit shifting. For example, based on further future tax cuts already announced by 2016, the data in Devereux et al⁴³ implies that the average G20 rate will fall further from 28.3% in 2016 to 27.0% in 2020. Further, subsequent to that Devereux et al. study, more corporate tax cuts have been announced by G20 countries, effective from 2018. In the USA, the federal corporate tax rate has been cut from 35 to 21 per cent. In Japan, the effective company tax rate is being cut from around 30 to 20 per cent for companies that meet hurdles for increases in wages and domestic investment. Hence, on existing trends, the proposal to reduce the Australian large company tax rate to 25% by 2026-27 may not even bring the Australian rate back down to the average G20 rate.

As explained above, CGETAX bases its modelling of profit shifting on a comparison of the Australian tax rate with an indicative tax haven rate of 5%. Thus, falling tax rates in other G20 countries do not have an effect on profit shifting in CGETAX. In reality, some effect can be expected, as some profit shifting by MNCs takes the form of transfer pricing and debt shifting within the G20.

2.4 Dividends

Gordon's basic result that it is not optimal to apply a corporate tax in a small open economy arises because investment is discouraged when the marginal investors, who are foreign investors, are taxed. By the same logic, investment is not discouraged if

43 M Devereux, K Habu, S Lepoev and G Maffini, *G20 corporation tax ranking*, Oxford University Centre for Business Taxation policy paper series, March 2016.

a tax only applies to the capital income of resident investors. This is the case under both the personal income tax and superannuation income tax systems, as they are residence based.

Taxing resident investors gives rise to a different disincentive effect, namely that domestic saving is discouraged. However, given that all of the major taxes have some disincentive effects, some positive rate of tax on the capital income of residents will be optimal. At the same time, the optimal tax rate on capital income is likely to be lower than for labour income, giving rise to dual income tax systems that incorporate that feature. Consistent with this, the *Australia's future tax system* review,⁴⁴ better known as the Henry review, recommended that a discount be applied to certain non-labour income.

In taxing the capital income of residents, Bruce⁴⁵ points out that in a small open economy, the same rate of tax should be applied irrespective of whether that income is locally or foreign sourced.

“A small open capital-exporting economy should tax the capital income of its residents at the same rate whether the capital is invested at home or abroad. In other words, Gordon’s argument implies that capital income should be taxed on a residence basis only.”

In the case of dividend income, Australia, unlike most advanced economies, does not follow this optimal principle of taxing local and foreign-sourced capital income at the same rate. Rather, Australia provides a concessional tax treatment for locally sourced dividends, but not for foreign-sourced dividends. Specifically, under the dividend imputation system, resident shareholders receive a tax credit for the Australian company tax that has already been deducted before the dividends are paid. This tax credit is based on the premise that the incidence of Australian company tax falls on shareholders, so that dividend imputation is needed to avoid double taxation. However, Gordon’s argument implies that the final incidence of company tax, as it applies to normal returns to capital, falls on labour, so imputation credits are not justified.

Fuest and Huber⁴⁶ specifically address this issue of using a dividend imputation system in a small open economy. Consistent with Gordon⁴⁷ and Bruce,⁴⁸ they find that dividend imputation is “not desirable” when the marginal investors are foreign shareholders.

“In an open economy, it is not desirable to offer double taxation relief for dividends paid by domestic firms to domestic households ... The reason is that the marginal shareholder in domestic firms is a foreign investor. This implies that

44 *Australia's future tax system, report to the Treasurer*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009 (AFTS).

45 Bruce, op cit.

46 Fuest and Huber, op cit.

47 Gordon, op cit.

48 Bruce, op cit.

the level of real investment is not affected by the taxation of domestic dividend income at the household level. A reduction of the tax burden on dividends is therefore merely an undesirable subsidy on domestic asset holdings.”

This “subsidy on domestic asset holdings” under dividend imputation introduces another disincentive effect. Subsidising locally sourced dividends, but not foreign-sourced dividends, exacerbates home country bias in the share portfolios held by residents either directly or indirectly via managed funds and superannuation funds. Looked at from a national perspective (as distinct from a private perspective), this lack of diversification is at the expense of lower returns and/or higher risk.

Bond et al⁴⁹ provide some evidence that removal of dividend imputation has the effects predicted above. The 1997 UK dividend tax reform removed the dividend tax credit for UK pension funds for their holdings of UK equities. There was little evidence that this led to lower share prices and hence lower business investment. Rather, it led the UK pension funds to reduce their holdings of UK equities and increase their holdings of foreign equities. Thus, it has the positive impact of reducing home country bias in the portfolios of UK pension funds, reducing risk through greater diversification into foreign equities.

Table 5 shows that imputation credits are claimed on an average of 30% of company income tax revenue.

Table 5: Usage of franking credits (\$b)

	APRA funds	SMS funds	Individuals	Trusts	Total franking credits	CIT revenue	Credits/CIT revenue
2005-06	2.8	1.4	6.6	2.2	12.9	48.7	27%
2006-07	3.3	1.8	8.1	2.9	16.1	58.3	28%
2007-08	2.8	1.9	8.5	3.2	16.4	64.7	25%
2008-09	2.7	2.0	8.7	3.4	16.8	60.6	28%
2009-10	2.4	1.9	7.9	3.5	15.7	53.1	30%
2010-11	4.2	3.1	8.9	4.0	20.1	57.3	35%
2011-12	3.3	2.5	8.8	4.2	18.7	66.5	28%
2012-13	3.6	2.7	9.2	4.5	20.0	68.1	29%
2013-14	4.0	3.1	10.0	4.9	22.0	69.1	32%
2014-15	4.4	3.6	9.5	4.8	22.2	65.5	34%
Average							30%

Source: Australian Taxation Office⁵⁰

49 S Bond, A Klemm and M Devereux, *Dividend taxes and share prices: a view from a small open economy*, IMF working papers, 2007/204, 2007.

50 Australian Taxation Office, op cit, Individuals Table 1 and Super Funds Tables 1 and 2.

The main reasons that credits are not claimed on 100% of revenue is that credits cannot be utilised by foreign investors or on earnings that are retained rather than distributed as dividends. While these credits are taxable, they nonetheless cause a large leakage of company income tax revenue, without ameliorating the investment disincentive effect of company tax. Thus, the imputation system makes company income tax an even more inefficient way of raising revenue.

2.5 Dynamics

The discussion so far has taken a long-run perspective, as does the CGETAX modelling presented later in this article. However, the stimulus to the capital stock from a corporate tax cut may develop gradually over a five- to ten-year period. So does the protracted nature of the capital stock adjustment process affect the proposition that it is desirable to reduce the corporate tax rate?⁵¹

This question has been addressed in the optimal tax literature. In surveying that literature, Mankiw et al⁵² comment that, “perhaps the most prominent result from dynamic models of optimal taxation is that the taxation of capital income ought to be avoided”. They summarise the well known studies by Chamley and Judd in the following terms: “In the short run, a positive capital tax may be desirable because it is a tax on old capital and, therefore, is not distortionary. In the long run, however, a zero tax on capital is optimal”.

That is, introducing model dynamics does not affect insights from static models about the desirable target for the corporate tax rate. Rather, the added insight is that because it is harmless to tax old capital, the targeted rate reduction should be phased in, to reduce the benefit to old capital, rather than implemented in one step.

Besides allowing a distinction between old and new capital, dynamic models can also take into account the cost of adjusting capital stocks. These adjustment costs are widely accepted and assumed to be quadratic in the rate of adjustment, and so can be reduced through a more protracted adjustment process. This leads to the same implication as before that a rate target based on static modelling is valid but should be achieved in phased reductions, rather than in one step.

Thus, long-run static models can be used in setting a target for the corporate tax rate, as can dynamic models, while dynamic models can also assist in deciding the time profile for phasing in the desired rate cut.

51 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for posing this question.

52 N Mankiw, M Weinzierl and D Yagan, “Optimal taxation in theory and practice”, (2009) 23(4) *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 147-174.

2.6 Other issues

Many smaller businesses are unincorporated (as are some larger businesses, such as real estate investment trusts) and so are not subject to corporate income tax. Rather than modelling unincorporated enterprises, CGETAX allows for the partial coverage of corporate tax by calibrating the model corporate tax rate to actual corporate tax collections, so that the overall burden of corporate tax on investment is correctly represented.

A low corporate tax rate may encourage tax avoidance whereby owner-workers in smaller corporations disguise part of their labour income as corporate income. McKeehan and Zodrow⁵³ consider the case where income disguised in this way is only taxed once, at the corporate level. This is consistent with the owner-worker being able to access the disguised income by borrowing from the company in a sham loan that is never repaid.

Australian tax law aims to prevent such sham loans, and in practice, disguised income is generally accessed by distributing it as a dividend, leading to further taxation. Under the imputation system, this results in a tax deferral benefit between the year in which the disguised income was taxed in the company and the year in which it was distributed as a dividend. This makes the tax benefit both smaller and more complex than that considered by McKeehan and Zodrow and it has not been modelled in CGETAX.

3. Modelling approach

This section covers the modelling approach used in this article. The model used is CGETAX, a computable general equilibrium model of the Australian economy focusing on tax policy. CGETAX is a large model designed to analyse the economic impacts of many different taxes, but its modelling of corporate tax is the main focus here. Full details on the modelling of the corporate tax system and the cost of capital are set out in Appendix A of the working paper version of this article.⁵⁴

Computable general equilibrium (CGE) models such as CGETAX model the interaction of the household, business, government and foreign sectors in economic markets. The household and business sectors aim to maximise their utility and profit respectively. Prices adjust in each market until supply is balanced with demand.

When an economic activity is taxed heavily, economic returns are reduced, which can lead to a tax-driven, economically inefficient shift away from that activity and towards

53 McKeehan and Zodrow, *op cit.*

54 Murphy, 2018, *op cit.*

other less-heavily taxed activities. The extent of such shifts and associated economic losses depends on the substitutability between activities, as measured by various elasticities. CGE models provide a means of quantifying these shifts and losses.

CGETAX is a long run model, meaning that their results refer to the ongoing effects on the economy after it has fully adjusted to economic shocks. This is appropriate because government policy options should be assessed primarily on the basis of their lasting impacts.

3.1 Previous CGE modelling of tax policy

Computable general equilibrium models have been used to analyse the economic efficiency of tax systems since the seminal work for the US by Ballard et al.⁵⁵ They estimated marginal excess burdens (MEBs) for the major US taxes.

The MEB shows the consumer loss per dollar of improvement in the government budget from a small tax rise. This loss is measured over and above the amount of the revenue that is raised.⁵⁶ Thus, the MEB provides a pure measure of the costs to consumers of the disincentive effects from a tax. These disincentive effects may reduce work, saving or investment, and may distort patterns of saving and consumption. Tax efficiency and consumer welfare are improved by relying more on taxes with low MEBs and less on taxes with high MEBs, until the point is reached where MEBs are equated across taxes.

The author has led three CGE modelling projects focused on the efficiency of various aspects of the Australian tax system.

- The MM900 model was used in work commissioned by the Treasury for the Henry review. That modelling⁵⁷ focused mainly on work disincentives and the inefficiencies from narrowly based taxes and its estimates of MEBs were included in the Henry review report.⁵⁸
- The IE CGE model was used in work commissioned by The Treasury for the Business Tax Working Group (BTWG).⁵⁹ That model focused on detailed modelling of the economic impacts of changes to the corporate tax rate and base,

55 C Ballard, J Shoven and J Whalley, "General equilibrium computations of the marginal welfare costs of taxes in the United States", (1985) 75(1) *The American Economic Review* 128-138.

56 The income effect on consumers from raising revenue from them is neutralised by assuming the revenue is returned as a lump sum transfer, leaving only the disincentive effects.

57 KPMG Econtech, *CGE analysis of the current Australian tax system*, report to the Australian Treasury, 2010.

58 AFTS, op cit.

59 Australian Government, *Business Tax Working Group: final report*, Appendix B, 2012.

leading to improved estimates of the MEB for corporate tax. The Treasury used the IE CGE to model the proposed cut in the corporate tax rate from 30% to 25% (Kouparitsas et al⁶⁰).

- Since 2014, the IE CGE model has been developed further to more comprehensively model tax policies, and has been renamed the CGETAX model. Like the MM900 model, CGETAX covers work disincentives from labour-based taxes and inefficiencies from narrowly based taxes, and like the IE CGE model, it models in detail the investment disincentive and profit shifting effects of corporate tax. In addition, CGETAX includes saving disincentive effects. Further, it extends the treatment of economic rents beyond land and mineral rents to also represent oligopoly rents in certain sectors. These new developments strengthen the modelling of corporate tax and dividend imputation.

Because CGETAX is designed to model many taxes and some of those taxes have narrow bases, the model possesses considerable detail. There are 278 industries employing eight types of labour and nine types of capital. Some industries generate economic rents from oligopoly power or access to minerals or land.

3.2 Corporate tax and industry behaviour

In each industry in CGETAX, a representative firm operating under constant returns to scale maximises profits. Highly profitable industries are modelled as oligopolies practising mark-up pricing, while other industries operate under perfect competition with a mark-up factor of unity. The main oligopolies are within finance, telecommunications, and food and beverage processing.

Profit maximisation gives rise to demands for four broad categories of primary inputs, some of which are further subdivided into different types:

- labour;
- equipment;
- structure services; and
- minerals.

Corporate income takes the form of both location-specific economic rents and normal returns to capital.

Location-specific economic rents are generated by land, which contributes to structure services, by minerals, and by oligopoly price mark-ups. As explained in section 2, it is efficient to apply corporate tax to location-specific rents.

60 Kouparitsas et al, op cit.

Normal returns are generated from nine types of business capital, which are substitutable within the broader categories of equipment and structure services. As also explained in section 2, in a small open economy, it is inefficient to apply corporate tax to the normal returns to capital.

CGETAX makes the small open economy assumption invoked in section 2 that the required rate of return on capital, post-corporate tax, is determined on world capital markets. Hence, a cut in the Australian corporate tax rate, as applied to normal returns to capital, only temporarily increases post-tax returns to foreign investors, who are the marginal investor. Over time, a lower corporate tax rate stimulates higher foreign investment pushing pre-tax returns down and real wages up. This continues until the post-tax rate of return to foreign investors is restored to that prevailing on world capital markets.

Thus, cuts in corporate tax on normal returns to capital ultimately are passed on from capital to labour. On the other hand, cuts in corporate tax on location-specific economic rents are retained by shareholders, both domestic and foreign. As a long run model, CGETAX captures the final outcome, not the adjustment process described above.

With the incidence of corporate tax on normal returns to capital eventually passed on from capital to labour, there are two textbook inefficiencies:

- corporate tax adds to the labour market tax wedge, adding to work disincentives. The size of this effect depends on the compensated elasticity of the labour supply with respect to the post-tax wage; and
- corporate tax raises the cost of capital, lowering the capital-labour ratio. This investment disincentive effect reduces productivity. The strength of this productivity effect depends on the elasticity of substitution between capital and labour.

CGETAX also allows for profit shifting. Similar to de Mooij and Devereux⁶¹ and McKeehan and Zodrow,⁶² businesses are assumed to maximise post-tax profits, after allowing for the local tax saving from profit shifting, the tax avoidance costs of profit shifting, and the tax applied in the tax haven to which the profits are shifted. Such a model can be calibrated using evidence from the literature on semi-elasticity of the national tax base with respect to the difference between the national tax rate and the tax haven tax rate. A lower national tax rate reduces the extent of profit shifting to the tax haven, as explained in section 2.

61 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit.*

62 McKeehan and Zodrow, *op cit.*

CGETAX also allows for various factors that mitigate the disincentive effects of corporate tax. As explained in section 2, these mitigating effects include the Treasury transfer effect, while it was still in operation, and the fact that corporate tax applies not only to the inefficient tax base of normal returns to capital, but also the efficient tax base of location-specific economic rents.

CGETAX also allows for another mitigating feature of the company tax system that was not discussed in section 2. In particular, there is immediate write-off of investment in mineral exploration and (with a loading) research and development. Mineral exploration and research and development are distinguished as part of detailed modelling of different types of capital in CGETAX.

With the foreign investor as the marginal investor, taxation of domestic investors does not affect post-company tax returns or investment, as explained in section 2.1. However, it does affect saving, as discussed in section 2.4. In particular, a cut in the corporate tax rate reduces the value of franking credits, increasing the effective tax rate on domestic asset incomes and thereby discouraging saving. The strength of this effect depends on the elasticity of intertemporal substitution (EIS).

3.3 *Key elasticities*

The preceding discussion identified four key elasticities, the values of which are important in determining the effects of corporate tax reform in CGETAX. The evidence used in selecting the values for these elasticities is now discussed. These four elasticity values, together with other elasticity values that are important in modelling other major tax reforms, are presented in Table 6. The four elasticity values are now discussed in turn.

First, as explained above, in CGETAX a cut in the corporate tax rate stimulates higher real wages, and the strength of the resulting labour supply response depends on the elasticity of the labour supply with respect to the post-tax wage. In CGETAX, this is set as 0.4 as a compensated elasticity and 0.2 as an uncompensated elasticity. The compensated elasticity is based on the widely cited study of Gruber and Saez,⁶³ who find an “elasticity of taxable income” of 0.4.

Second, as also noted above, in CGETAX, a cut in corporate tax automatically reduces the value of franking credits for personal income tax and superannuation tax, discouraging private saving, and the strength of this effect depends on the EIS.

63 J Gruber and E Saez, “The elasticity of taxable income: evidence and implications”, (2002) 84(1) *Journal of Public Economics*.

Gunning et al⁶⁴ point out that the EIS values used in CGE models typically range from 0.25 to 0.50. Australia's system of compulsory superannuation is likely to make voluntary saving less important, and so CGETAX uses the value for the EIS at the bottom of this range of 0.25.

Third, a cut in corporate tax raises the incentive to invest, and the strength of this effect is determined by the elasticity of substitution between labour and capital. For this elasticity, the Gunning et al⁶⁵ literature survey reports values ranging from 0.4 to the Cobb-Douglas case of 1.0. Similarly, Devereux and de Mooij⁶⁶ assume an elasticity of substitution of 0.7 in the CORTAX model of the EU countries. Consistent with these studies, CGETAX uses values ranging from 0.7 to 0.9, depending on the type of capital.

Fourth, a cut in the corporate tax rate reduces the incentive to shift profits out of Australia. After allowing for both profit shifting to tax havens and transfer pricing, de Mooij and Devereux⁶⁷ estimate a semi-elasticity of the corporate tax base with respect to the tax rate of -0.73 . Similarly, Dharmapala⁶⁸ states that "the consensus of the recent literature is a semi-elasticity of reported income with respect to the tax rate differential across countries of (minus) 0.8". CGETAX uses the de Mooij and Devereux estimate of -0.73 , leading to the profit shifting estimates already reported in Table 4.

Another factor influencing the modelling results is that CGETAX utilises the small open economy assumption that post-company tax rates of return on capital in Australia are determined globally through the free movement of funds. However, capital may be only highly mobile rather than perfectly mobile. KPMG Econtech⁶⁹ finds that assuming capital is highly mobile rather than perfectly mobile leads to only a small reduction in estimates of the gains in consumer welfare from corporate tax cuts.

64 T Gunning, J Diamond and G Zodrow, "Selecting parameter values for general equilibrium model simulations", *Proceedings of the One Hundredth Annual Conference on Taxation*, 43–49, National Tax Association, Washington, DC, 2008.

65 Ibid.

66 de Mooij and Devereux, op cit.

67 Ibid.

68 D Dharmapala, *The economics of corporate and business tax reform*, Oxford University Centre for Business Taxation working paper, 16/04, 2016.

69 KPMG Econtech, op cit.

Table 6: Key elasticities in CGETAX

<i>Households:</i>	
Elasticity of intertemporal substitution (tier 1)	0.25
Labour supply elasticity (compensated) (tier 2)	0.4
Elasticity of substitution between broad consumption categories (tier 3)	0.6
Elasticity of substitution within broad consumption categories (tier 4)	0.6–2.4
<i>Businesses:</i>	
Elasticity of substitution between capital and labour	0.7-0.9
Elasticity of substitution between types of capital	0.3
Elasticity of substitution between taxed and untaxed labour	3
Elasticity of substitution between eight occupational types of labour	3
Elasticity of substitution between land and structures	0.5
Elasticity of substitution between structures-land and mobility	0.3
Elasticity of substitution between value added and intermediates	0.2
Semi-elasticity of corporate income tax base to the rate	-0.73

3.4 Timing

CGETAX is a model of long run equilibrium. This raises the issue of the likely timing of the long run effects that are presented in this report. Other studies are available that provide a guide. The UK Treasury⁷⁰ modelling of a phased cut in the UK corporate tax rate from 28 to 20% was undertaken using a dynamic CGE model. It found that the gains accrued reasonably quickly. In particular, more than one-half of the long-run gains had already accrued by the time the corporate tax cut was fully phased in. Similarly, a study from the US Federal Reserve⁷¹ finds that the investment/capital stock response to a change in the cost of capital (eg due to a cut in corporate tax) is fully complete in around nine years. Further, the adjustment is front-end loaded, with half of the long run effects realised after three to four years.

3.5 Marginal excess burdens

As noted above, the MEB measures the consumer loss per dollar of improvement in the government budget from a small tax rise. Importantly, the gain to the government budget is returned to the consumer as a lump sum transfer (transfer), so the consumer loss that is measured only reflects the disincentive or substitution effects from the

70 UK Treasury & Revenue and Customs, *Analysis of the dynamic effects of corporation tax reductions*, 2013.

71 J Roberts, *Modeling aggregate investment: a fundamentalist approach*, mimeo, 2003.

tax rise. In CGETAX, this consumer loss is measured by the equivalent variation (EV), the maximum amount consumers would be prepared to pay to stop the tax rise occurring.

Popular discussion of economic policies often focuses on GDP impacts. EV improves in four important ways on GDP as a measure of gain in living standards:

- EV takes into account that some income from domestic production goes to foreigners;
- EV values consumption smoothing over time;
- EV values leisure time; and
- EV correctly values consumer preferences over the consumption mix.

4. Consumer costs of the tax system

This section provides background on the costs to consumers of the economic disincentive effects from many of the taxes collected by federal, state and local governments. Of particular interest is the consumer cost of the three major taxes — personal income tax, corporate income tax and GST — relative to the amount of revenue that they raise. This analysis provides support for the aim of reducing the reliance placed on corporate tax relative to most other taxes.

4.1 *Consumer costs in CGETAX*

Table 7 presents the results from simulating the consumer costs of various taxes in CGETAX. The average excess burden (AEB) shows the consumer cost of a tax relative to its contribution to the government budget. The MEB makes the same comparison, but for the last dollar of revenue that is raised from the tax. Consumer welfare is increased by reducing rates of taxes with high MEBs and funding this by increasing rates of taxes with low MEBs. In that way, the economic drag of the tax system on the economy is reduced.

According to the OECD,⁷² “corporate taxes are the most harmful type of tax for economic growth, followed by personal income taxes and then consumption taxes”. This is supported by the CGETAX MEBs. In particular, corporate income tax has the highest MEB of 132%, followed by personal income tax with 29% (in the case of a tax increase through an income levy) and GST with 24%. The textbook argument for this ranking is as follows.

- In an open economy, corporate income tax, like personal income tax, acts as a disincentive to supply labour (see section 2). However, corporate income tax also

72 OECD, *Tax policy reform and economic growth*, OECD Tax Policy Studies, no. 20, 2010.

acts as a disincentive to demand capital. Thus, corporate income tax has a higher MEB cost than personal income tax.

- GST partly taxes consumption funded out of labour income, and in that regard, is similar to labour income tax, with both taxes acting as a disincentive to supply labour. However, GST also taxes consumption funded out of economic rent, which is an efficient tax base. Hence, GST has a lower economic cost per dollar of revenue raised than personal income tax.

Table 7: MEBs and AEBs in CGETAX

Major taxes		
	MEB	AEB
Personal income tax		21%
Budget repair levy	63%	
tax surcharge	42%	
medicare levy	42%	
income levy	29%	
bracket creep	25%	
labour income levy	31%	
reduce franking credits	13%	
Corporate income tax		
new policy environment:	132%	38%
25% to 30%	104%	
20% to 25%	68%	
15% to 20%	45%	
with old Treasury transfer effect:		
25% to 30%	77%	
20% to 25%	48%	
15% to 20%	29%	
GST		21%
raise rate	24%	
broaden base to fresh food	11%	
remove financial services concession	14%	
Other taxes		
	MEB	AEB
Payroll tax		28%

Table 7: (continued...)

Major taxes		
raise rate	34%	
abolish threshold	20%	
Property taxes:		
municipal rates	0%	-1%
land tax	46%	30%
conveyancing duty: residential	65%	49%
conveyancing duty: commercial	153%	107%
Insurance taxes	61%	40%
Mining taxes:		
PRRT	-9%	-10%
royalties	63%	42%
Financial service taxes:		
major bank levy		78%
rent tax (hypothetical)		-10%

Associated textbook MEB formulas for each of the three taxes, under simple assumptions, are presented in Figure 2. All three formulas incorporate the same labour supply disincentive effect. However, comparison of the consumption tax MEB formula with the labour income tax MEB formula confirms that the MEB for consumption tax is lower to the extent that consumption is funded from rents, rather than labour income (ie *slab* is less than unity). Further, comparison of the corporate income tax formula with the labour income tax formula shows that the MEB for corporate income tax is higher to the extent that this is a demand for capital effect operating through capital-labour substitution.

The modelling with CGETAX allows for other factors not captured in the formulas, as discussed below.

Figure 2: Textbook MEB formulas for the three major taxes*Labour income tax:*

$$\text{MEB} = x/(1-x), \text{ where } x = \eta^* \text{tlab}$$

where:

η = compensated labour supply elasticity with respect to the after-tax wage
 tlab = “tax revenue from labour” relative to after-tax labour income
 tax revenue from labour = labour taxes + corporate tax to the extent it is collected from normal returns to capital + consumption tax (eg GST) to the extent that consumption is funded from labour incomes

Consumption tax:

$$\text{MEB} = x/(1-x), \text{ where } x = \eta^* \text{tlab} * \text{slab}$$

where:

η = compensated labour supply elasticity with respect to the after-tax wage
 slab = share of consumption funded from labour income

Corporate income tax:

$$\text{MEB} = x/(1-x), \text{ where } x = \eta^* \text{tlab} + (\sigma/\alpha) \cdot \text{tke}$$

where:

σ = elasticity of substitution between capital and labour
 α = labour share of (non-rent) factor income
 tke = effective capital tax rate (taking into account that depreciation is deductible)

Source: Murphy⁷³**Corporate tax**

As discussed in sections 2 and 3, corporate income tax has other inefficiencies, besides acting as a disincentive to supply labour and demand capital. These other effects are represented in CGETAX.

- A higher statutory rate leads to a shifting of accounting profits offshore, eroding the effectiveness of corporate tax in raising revenue and diverting scarce economic resources to wasteful tax avoidance activity.

73 C Murphy, *Efficiency of the tax system: a marginal excess burden analysis*, ANU Tax and Transfer Policy Institute working paper, 4/2016, 2016.

- A higher corporate rate increases franking credits, leading to a revenue leakage without encouraging investment.

At the same time, these adverse effects of corporate tax can be partly mitigated by two other effects.

- While corporate tax applied to normal returns to capital is highly inefficient, corporate tax applied to location-specific economic rents is efficient. CGETAX recognises location-specific economic rents from oligopoly mark-up pricing, mineral resources and land.
- Formerly, US direct investment in Australia received full tax credits in the US for corporate tax paid in Australia on remitted earnings, dampening the overall impact of Australian corporate tax. However, as explained in section 2, the Treasury transfer effect has been virtually eliminated as a result of corporate tax changes under the US 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

Table 7 shows that the MEB for corporate income tax declines with the rate of tax. This result, which is consistent with textbook analysis for taxes in general, means that there is a limit to the extent to which it is optimal to reduce the rate of corporate tax. That limit is explored further in section 5.

Table 7 also shows the sensitivity of the MEB for corporate income tax to the recent US corporate tax changes. The removal of the old Treasury transfer effect has raised the MEB from having a company tax rate of 30 per cent rather than 25 per cent from an already high 77 per cent to a very high 104 per cent. Thus, the recent corporate tax reform in the USA have substantially added to reform pressures in Australia.

Personal tax

The estimate of an MEB of 29% for personal income tax refers to a tax increase that is not redistributive: an income levy calculated as a fixed percentage of income is added to tax liabilities. Redistributive changes in the tax scale have higher MEBs because, by definition, they lift marginal tax rates, which reduce work incentives, relative to average tax rates, which lift revenue. The Budget repair levy, which added 2 percentage points to the top marginal tax rate, was highly redistributive and hence had a very high MEB of 63%. At the other extreme, bracket creep is a regressive means of raising additional revenue and has a relatively low MEB of 25%.⁷⁴

In Australia, taxes on asset income are very low. This mainly reflects the tax treatments of owner-occupied housing, rented housing and superannuation, as well as the system of franking credits. In CGETAX, it is optimal for taxes on asset income to be lower

74 Patricia Apps has pointed out that the MEBs reported here assume that the compensated labour supply elasticity is the same for both low and high wage earners, as is generally the case in economy-wide models.

than taxes on labour income, but this is currently overdone. As a result, the MEB for increasing the rate of tax on asset income, through reducing franking credits, is low at 13%.

GST

As would be expected, raising the GST rate has a higher MEB (24%) than broadening the base, so base broadening is to be preferred. One base broadening option is to change the treatment of banking, life insurance and superannuation from input-taxed to taxable (14%). The issues in implementing such a change are addressed in Murphy.⁷⁵ Another base broadening option is to change the treatment of fresh food from GST-free to taxable (11%).

Economic rent taxes

In CGETAX, mining company shareholders receive economic rents from access to mineral resources. The existing mining royalties based on the value of production act as a disincentive to production. However, in principle, a well-designed rent tax does not distort production. Thus, the AEB for a minerals rent tax, such as the existing petroleum resources rent tax (PRRT), is considerably lower (−10%) than for royalties (42%). Therefore, consumers would benefit from the replacement of royalties with a resource rent tax.

This issue in taxation of mining has parallels in financial services. The oligopoly power of the big four banks leads to oligopoly rents. The new major bank levy is based on bank size (as measured by selected liabilities) and hence, like mining royalties, acts as a disincentive to production. This disincentive is exacerbated by the pricing power of the major banks. In principle, a well-designed rent tax would not distort production. Thus, the AEB for a financial services rent tax (−10%) is considerably lower than for the major bank levy (78%).

One limitation of the major bank levy, compared to the IMF recommendations for a financial services charge, is that it is a flat 6 basis points of selected liabilities, and so does not vary with the risks taken by banks. Another limitation is that it applies to uninsured deposits, rather than the deposits insured for free by government under the financial services claims scheme. These limitations undermine the user pays argument for the levy. The taxation of financial services is analysed in detail using CGETAX in Murphy.⁷⁶

For a fuller analysis of an earlier version of the MEBs in CGETAX, see Murphy.⁷⁷

75 C Murphy, “GST and how to tax Australian banking”, (2017) *Australian GST Journal*, vol. 17, pp 84-105, 2017.

76 Ibid.

77 Murphy, 2016, op cit.

4.2 *Previous studies*

The estimated MEBs for the three major taxes presented in this article are compared, in Figure 3, with estimates from four earlier Australian studies. The results from all five studies are consistent with the OECD ranking⁷⁸ in which corporate tax is the most inefficient tax and GST the least inefficient.

While the five studies are in fairly close agreement, they are not entirely unconnected, because four of the studies use models developed by the same person, the author of this article. However, Tran and Wende⁷⁹ is an entirely separate study.

Tran and Wende differ from the other studies in using an overlapping generations model, which features different types of households and is dynamic. The cost of this additional detail is that the treatment of the three major taxes is much simplified compared to the other four studies. Notably, Tran and Wende do not allow for profit shifting, leading to understatement of the MEB for corporate income tax. After allowing for that understatement, the Tran and Wende estimates for the three MEBs are broadly comparable to those presented in this article.

This seems to suggest that the finding that corporate tax is highly inefficient is not particularly sensitive to whether the model used in the assessment is dynamic or refers to a long run equilibrium. This is consistent with the optimal tax literature, as discussed in section 2.

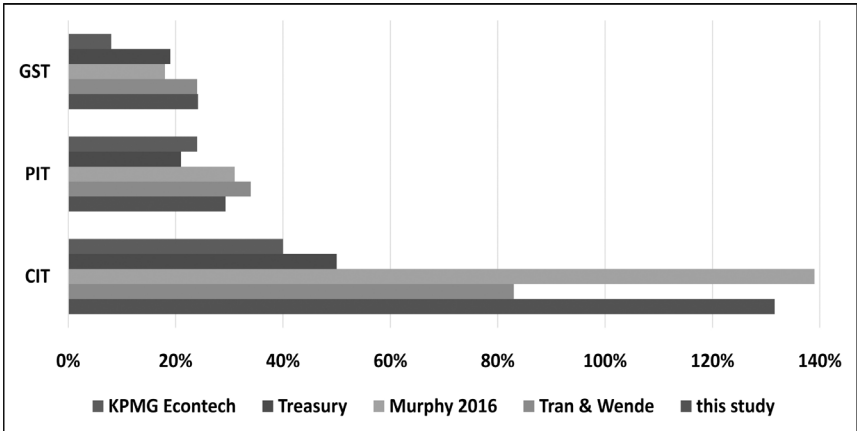
The MEB estimates in this study for the three major taxes are broadly similar to the earlier estimates from the CGETAX model in Murphy⁸⁰, as can be seen in Figure 3. For the corporate tax MEB, recent improvements to the method for modelling profit shifting have reduced the estimate but this has been broadly offset by allowing for the recent virtual elimination of the Treasury transfer effect.

78 OECD, *op cit.*

79 *Ibid.*

80 Murphy, 2016, *op cit.*

Figure 3: Comparison of major MEBs with previous studies



Sources: KPMG Econtech,⁸¹ Treasury,⁸² Murphy,⁸³ and Tran & Wende.⁸⁴

5. Alternative rates of corporate tax

Taking the corporate tax base as given, this section models alternative corporate tax rates to help judge the appropriate rate. The following section models alternative tax bases. Alternative options for funding corporate tax rate cuts are considered in section 7.

At the existing larger company rate of 30%, corporate income tax has a high MEB of 132%, as seen in Table 7. That is, the economic costs of the last dollar of revenue that is raised, even after it has been returned to consumers in a lump sum form, results in a loss in consumer welfare of 132 cents. This is a high MEB relative to other sources of taxation revenue, making company income tax a highly inefficient way of raising revenue at the rate of 30%. For example, as noted in section 4, the GST has an estimated MEB of 24%.

81 KPMG Econtech, op cit.

82 L Cao, A Hosking, M Kouparitsas, D Mullaly, X Rimmer, Q Shi, W Stark and S Wende, *Understanding the economy-wide efficiency and incidence of major Australian taxes*, Treasury working paper, 2015-01, 2015.

83 Murphy, 2016, op cit.

84 C Tran and S Wende, *On the excess burden of taxation in an overlapping generations model*, mimeo, 14 February 2017.

The factors making corporate tax inefficient were covered in preceding sections and in summary are:

- its investment disincentive effect;
- its labour supply disincentive effect (via a lower real wage);
- profit shifting to lower taxed jurisdictions; and
- the franking credits system, which adds further to the concessional tax treatment of saving at a substantial cost to revenue.

Factors that can ameliorate the inefficiency of corporate tax were:

- to the extent that corporate tax applies to location-specific economic rents, the investment and labour supply disincentive effects are avoided; and
- the old Treasury transfer effect that enabled some US investors to receive a US tax credit for Australian corporate tax, but this credit has disappeared under recent US corporate tax changes.

Like other taxes, corporate income tax imposes lower marginal costs on the economy as its rate is reduced. Modelling of reducing the rate in five percentage point steps indicates that there is a strong case for reducing the rate to as low as 20%. As shown in Tables 7 and 8, the MEB from having a corporate tax rate of 30%, rather than 25%, is an extremely high 104%. The MEB from having a corporate tax rate of 25%, rather than 20%, is still very high at 68%. There is some case for reducing the corporate rate further, from 20 to 15%. This is because the MEB from having a corporate rate of 20%, rather than 15%, is still a somewhat high 45%.

Table 8: Effects of reducing the corporate tax rate

Bus tax scenario:	30 to 25	25 to 20	20 to 15
<i>New policy environment:</i>			
Consumer welfare (2016/17, \$bn)	4.9	3.9	2.9
Budget gain (2016/17, \$bn)	-4.7	-5.7	-6.5
Marginal Excess Burden (%)	104%	68%	45%
Household Consumption (%)	0.71%	0.59%	0.48%
GDP (%)	0.93%	0.86%	0.80%
Business investment (%)	2.74%	2.57%	2.41%
Employment (%)	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%
Real after-tax wage (%)	0.96%	0.88%	0.80%
<i>With old Treasury transfer effect:</i>			
Consumer welfare (2016/17, \$bn)	3.8	2.9	1.9
Budget gain (2016/17, \$bn)	-5.0	-5.9	-6.7

Table 8: (continued...)

Bus tax scenario:	30 to 25	25 to 20	20 to 15
Marginal Excess Burden (%)	77%	48%	29%
Household Consumption (%)	0.60%	0.48%	0.38%
GDP (%)	0.89%	0.82%	0.76%
Business investment (%)	2.60%	2.44%	2.28%
Employment (%)	0.21%	0.21%	0.21%
Real after-tax wage (%)	0.90%	0.82%	0.74%
<i>Less profit shifting:</i>			
Consumer welfare (2016/17, \$bn)	4.4		
Budget gain (2016/17, \$bn)	-5.9		
Marginal excess burden (%)	75%		
Household consumption (%)	0.67%		
GDP (%)	0.99%		
Business investment (%)	2.90%		
Employment (%)	0.23%		
Real after-tax wage (%)	1.00%		

These results are influenced by the virtual removal of the “Treasury transfer” effect under the 2017 US Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Under the old Treasury transfer effect, the tax credits available in the USA for some Australian corporate tax made our corporate tax a less inefficient way of raising revenue. Hence, now that the Treasury transfer effect has been removed, our corporate tax has become more inefficient. For example, the MEB from having a corporate tax rate of 20%, rather than 15%, moves from moderate to high, rising from 29% to 45%.

From these results, the optimal Australian company tax rate is clearly well below the existing large company rate of 30%. Prior to the recent US tax changes, the optimal Australian rate was certainly no higher than the proposed rate of 25%. Following the recent US tax changes, the optimal Australian rate is no higher than 20 per cent.

One uncertainty is the strength of the profit shifting effect. As explained in section 3, based on the evidence in the literature, CGETAX assumes a semi-elasticity of the corporate tax base with respect to the corporate tax rate of -0.73 . The final panel shows the effect of reducing this semi-elasticity to a rather conservative -0.5 . With company tax less inefficient, the annual consumer welfare gain from the proposed cut in the corporate tax rate from 30 to 25% eases back from \$4.9b to \$4.4b.

The modelling reported in Table 8 assumes that corporate tax cuts are funded through a lump sum tax. In reality, any funding method is likely to involve economic costs of its own. Alternative methods of funding cuts in the corporate tax rate are considered in section 7.

6. Alternative bases for corporate tax

While the previous section considered options for reducing the corporate tax rate, this section holds the tax rate unchanged at 30% and considers potential changes to the base of corporate tax and the taxation of dividends.

The first two options refer to the base of corporate tax and have been modelled previously by de Mooij and Devereux⁸⁵ in an EU study. The reasons for considering these two options were explained in section 2 and so are only summarised briefly here:

- the first option is to narrow the tax base by making investment costs fully deductible in present value terms. This removes the investment disincentive effect of corporate tax by making it a pure tax on economic rents. For the reasons explained in section 2, the economic rent tax modelled is the ACC rather than the ACE or CFT; and
- the second option is to broaden the tax base by making interest non-deductible, leading to a CBIT. This broadening of the tax base raises more revenue without increasing profit shifting. At the same time, a CBIT increases the investment disincentive effect of corporate tax, because it increases inefficient taxation of normal returns to capital relative to efficient taxation of location-specific economic rents.

As explained in section 2, the CBIT and a rent tax are also alternative ways of removing the existing tax bias in favour of debt over equity that arises from the deductibility of interest costs under the traditional corporate tax. However, CGETAX holds the debt-equity ratio fixed and therefore does not allow for the bias to debt funding under the traditional corporate income tax. Therefore, the modelling understates the benefits from removing the existing tax bias by moving to either an ACC or CBIT.

In de Mooij and Devereux,⁸⁶ the rent tax that is modelled is an ACE. Here an ACC is used. In practice, a CFT is likely to be the most reliable way of taxing economic rents because it avoids the inevitable errors involved in the authorities estimating appropriate nominal allowance rates for equity or capital under an ACE or ACC respectively. The modelling does not allow for such errors.

85 de Mooij and Devereux, *op cit.*

86 *Ibid.*

The third option concerns Australia's internationally unusual dividend imputation system. It was introduced in 1987 to integrate the corporate and personal tax systems in a way that avoided double taxation of investment. However, as explained in more detail in section 2, this argument does not hold in a small open economy such as Australia. As shown by Fuest and Huber,⁸⁷ in that case, corporate tax on normal returns to capital is borne by labour, not shareholders, and investment is driven by the tax treatment of foreign investors, rather than of domestic investors.

Hence, the third option is to remove the dividend imputation system and replace it with concessional taxation of dividends, irrespective of their source, bringing Australia into line with other advanced economies. The logic of Fuest and Huber holds in the CGETAX model. That is, removing dividend imputation does not lead to lower business investment, but it does provide a substantial gain to the government budget.

At the same time, CGETAX does not currently capture a further benefit from removing dividend imputation. As explained in section 2, removing this subsidy on locally sourced dividend income compared to foreign-sourced dividend income reduces home country bias in portfolios. Hence, the CGETAX modelling results presented below are likely to understate the benefits from removing dividend imputation.

The results from modelling the three tax base options are presented in Table 9. In each case, the corporate tax rate is maintained at its baseline rate of 30%. Impacts of the base changes on the government budget are offset through lump sum transfers to households.

Table 9: Effects of changing the corporate tax base at a tax rate of 30%

Bus tax scenario:	CBIT	ACC with franking	no franking	ACC w/out fr	CBIT w/out fr
Consumer welfare (2016/17, \$bn)	-3.3	18.1	-1.5	16.6	-4.7
Budget gain (2016/17, \$bn)	6.1	-26.1	11.6	-14.9	17.5
Marginal excess burden (%)	53%	69%	13%	111%	27%
Household consumption (%)	-0.45%	2.82%	0.02%	2.84%	-0.43%
GDP (%)	-0.71%	5.19%	-0.00%	5.19%	-0.71%
Business investment (%)	-2.12%	16.57%	-0.00%	16.57%	-2.13%
Employment (%)	-0.17%	1.33%	-0.00%	1.33%	-0.18%
Real after-tax wage (%)	-0.70%	5.09%	0.00%	5.09%	-0.70%

87 Fuest and Huber, *op cit*.

The first option involves using a CBIT to broaden the corporate tax base. Raising additional revenue in this way has a high MEB of 53%. On the one hand, this broadening of the tax base has the benefit of raising additional revenue without increasing the rate of profit shifting, as discussed in section 2. On the other hand, this base broadening also has the cost of imposing higher inefficient taxation on normal returns to capital, while leaving efficient taxation of economic rents unchanged, so business investment is lower.

Interestingly, Sørensen⁸⁸ finds that, even in the absence of economic rents, it is optimal to stop short of moving to a CBIT by imposing thin capitalisation rules instead. Thus, future work may consider modelling of thin capitalisation rules, such as those in place in Germany and, now, the USA.

The second option involves narrowing the tax base through an economic rent tax in the form of the ACC. This generates a high welfare gain relative to the budget cost. With normal returns to capital removed from the tax base, there is a large gain in business investment of over 16%. At the same time, the annual budget cost of around \$26b is large in current budget circumstances. However, the modelling overstates this budget cost. As explained in section 2, in practice, the ACC allowance rate used in calculating the ACE deduction can be based on a risk-free interest rate, rather than the higher normal rate of return on capital that has been used in the modelling.

As cautioned above, the modelling is likely to understate the benefits of moving to either a CBIT or an ACC. This is because CGETAX does not account for the benefit of removing the existing tax bias favouring debt finance over equity finance.

The third option is to abolish franking credits. This has a low MEB of 13%, making this an attractive option for raising additional revenue. The cost to consumer welfare from this measure, while modest, arises from the reduced incentive to save. In fact, as explained in section 2, the MEB from abolishing franking credits is likely to be even lower than suggested by the modelling, because of the benefit, which is not modelled, of reducing home country bias in portfolios.

As noted above, it is sometimes argued that the franking credit system supports investment, but this is not true under the small open economy assumption made here. In any case, even in a closed economy, introduction of a rent tax such as an ACC means that normal returns to capital are no longer taxed. This removes any argument that the franking credit system may be justified as a method of offsetting an investment disincentive effect from tax applied at the corporate level.

Consequently, the rent tax was re-simulated in combination with removing the franking credit system. Removing franking credits helps reduce the modelled annual

88 Sørensen, *op cit*.

budget cost from introducing a rent tax from \$26b to \$15b. However, as noted above, the modelled budget costs are overstated because of the use of a high ACC allowance rate. The MEB burden from maintaining the current business tax system, rather than an alternative system based on an ACC without franking credits, is extremely high at 111%, as seen in Table 9, pointing to the strong case for reform.

For completeness, the CBIT was also re-simulated in combination with removing the franking credit system. The small open economy argument for removing franking credits also applies under a CBIT, although this is no longer the case under a closed economy assumption because, unlike the ACC, the CBIT taxes normal returns to investment.

Raising additional revenue by simultaneously broadening the tax base to a CBIT and removing the franking credit system has a moderate MEB of 27%, as seen in the final column of Table 10. However, comparing this scenario with the separate scenarios for the two policy measures, it can be seen that this favourable outcome arises from removing the franking credit system rather than from introducing the CBIT.

Comparing the results presented in this section with those presented in section 5, the modelling provides support for reducing the corporate tax rate, removing dividend imputation and narrowing the tax base to an ACC. As one moves down this list of three reform options, the changes to the business tax system become more radical, and therefore perhaps less likely.

It has sometimes been suggested that introducing an investment allowance is to be preferred to reducing the corporate tax rate. However, an investment allowance is really a poor cousin to a rent tax in the form of a CFT. Both a CFT and an investment allowance make new investment immediately deductible. The main difference is that an investment allowance maintains interest deductibility, making debt-funded investment doubly deductible. Thus, in considering alternatives to reducing the corporate tax rate, it makes more sense to focus on a rent tax such as an ACC or CFT than on an investment allowance.

7. Options for funding a 25% corporate tax rate

Section 5 modelled a sequence of corporate tax rate cuts using the conventional, but unrealistic, assumption that they are funded by a lump sum tax. Using the proposed cut in the corporate rate from 30 to 25% as an illustration, this section models a corporate tax cut under five more realistic funding options. All five funding options are calibrated to provide broadly budget-neutral outcomes.

Section 5 estimated the annual budget cost of cutting the corporate tax rate from 30 to 25% at \$4.7b on a 2016/17 basis. This is substantially lower than implied by the official Budget estimates.

This difference arises because the modelling allows for the budget gains from the favourable behavioural responses to the corporate tax cut. Higher investment drives higher wages and GDP, lifting tax revenue widely. A lower corporate tax rate also reduces profit shifting. These responses approximately halve the budget cost of the tax cut, in line with other studies (for a survey, see UK Treasury⁸⁹). However, the Budget estimates do not allow for this fiscal dividend.

As all scenarios achieve broad budget-neutrality, it is valid to directly compare their outcomes for annual consumer welfare. Under the lump sum funding assumption of section 5, the gain in annual consumer welfare from this corporate tax cut was \$4.9b. The modelling results for all scenarios, covering consumer welfare and other economic impacts, are compared in Table 10.

Table 10: Effects of corporate tax cut to 25% under alternative funding scenarios

Funding scenario	lump sum	br creep	CBIT25	half fr	fin rent 8%	GST
Consumer welfare (2016/17, \$bn)	4.9	3.8	2.6	4.1	5.4	3.8
Budget gain (2016/17, \$bn)	0.0	-0.2	0.7	0.8	-0.4	-0.2
Household consumption (%)	0.71%	0.46%	0.37%	0.71%	0.75%	0.47%
GDP (%)	0.93%	0.72%	0.35%	0.93%	0.93%	0.70%
Business investment (%)	2.74%	2.53%	0.96%	2.74%	2.73%	2.41%
Employment (%)	0.20%	-0.02%	0.05%	0.20%	0.19%	0.00%
Real after-tax wage (%)	0.96%	0.29%	0.40%	0.96%	0.97%	0.37%
Real after-tax labour income (%)	1.17%	0.27%	0.45%	1.17%	1.16%	0.38%
Real after-tax asset income (%)	0.65%	0.31%	-0.31%	-1.20%	-0.54%	0.25%
Real social transfer income (%)	0.96%	1.02%	0.40%	0.96%	0.97%	0.37%
Real after-tax resident incomes (%)	1.00%	0.37%	0.23%	0.49%	0.67%	0.34%

It can be argued that under existing policy, the proposed corporate tax cut is to be funded by bracket creep. Bracket creep offsets the positive effect on labour supply from the corporate tax cut: a 0.2% gain in employment is eliminated. This, in turn, erodes the gain in consumer welfare from \$4.9b under lump sum funding to \$3.8b under bracket creep funding, as seen in Table 10.

The proposed cut in the corporate tax rate to 25% could be fully funded by broadening the corporate tax base by introducing a CBIT. However, this reduces the benefit to business investment from the corporate tax cut. The gain in business investment is

89 UK Treasury & Revenue and Customs, op cit.

eroded from 2.7% to 1.0%. This in turn erodes the gain in consumer welfare from \$4.9b under lump sum funding to \$2.6b, as seen in Table 10.

A halving of franking credits is another way of funding the proposed corporate tax cut. The effects on the general economy, as measured by GDP, investment, employment and real wages, are virtually unchanged from those seen under lump sum funding. However, lower franking credits increase the average effective tax rate on asset incomes, inhibiting consumption smoothing. This erodes the gain in consumer welfare from \$4.9b under lump sum funding to \$4.1b.

In practice, a preferable option to halving franking credits would be to fully remove the franking system and replace it with a concessional tax treatment for dividends, as found in the US and UK. However, this would not substantially change the modelling results.

An 8% financial services rent tax levied on the substantial oligopoly rents generated in this sector is an alternative means of funding the proposed cut in the corporate tax rate. Because this is a neutral tax, the effects on the generally economy are virtually the same as those seen under lump sum funding. In fact, the gain in consumer welfare from the proposed corporate tax cut of \$4.9b under lump sum funding is boosted to \$5.4b under funding from this financial services rent tax. This boost is generated by the gain in national income that arises to the extent that the financial services rent tax is borne by foreign shareholders. While such a rent tax would be highly efficient, the major bank levy introduced in July 2017 is highly inefficient as discussed in section 4 and in more detail in Murphy.⁹⁰

While the financial services rent tax has been set to 8% (and is non-deductible for corporate tax), this rate has been chosen to fully fund the proposed corporate rate cut. In practice, a more feasible rate may be 5%. This 5% rent tax rate would claw back most of the revenue cost of applying the proposed cut in the corporate tax rate of five percentage points to financial services, without eroding the improvement in the incentive to invest from the corporate tax cut.

It is assumed that there is no shifting of profits to other jurisdictions to avoid the financial services rent tax. Most of the financial services that are assumed to be subject to the tax are provided by organisations that are largely Australian-based and focused. Hence, they have little opportunity to shift profits offshore, and in any case, they may be reluctant to do so because of the loss of franking credits to distribute to shareholders. Profit shifting is mainly of concern with respect to the foreign-based multinational companies that operate in Australia.

The final funding option is to raise the rate of GST 10.0 to 10.9%. The gain in consumer welfare from the proposed corporate tax cut of \$4.9b under lump sum

90 Murphy, 2017, op cit.

funding is eroded to \$3.8b under funding from this GST rate increase. Increasing the GST burden has a disincentive effect on labour supply.

One striking feature of Table 10 is that reducing the corporate tax rate from 30% to 25% generates a substantial welfare gain, irrespective of the choice of funding method. This reflects the extremely inefficient nature of company tax at its existing rate of 30% and the strong nature of the case for reducing it to 25%.

At the same time, some funding methods are associated with larger gains in consumer welfare than other funding methods. Putting aside the unrealistic option of lump sum funding, the two funding methods associated with the largest gains in consumer welfare are the financial services rent tax, with an annual gain of \$5.4b, and moving away from full dividend imputation, with a gain of \$4.1b.

It is also important to consider the equity with which these aggregate gains in consumer welfare are distributed.⁹¹ A full analysis of this would require extending CGETAX to incorporate different types of households.⁹² However, some indication of equity impacts can be obtained by considering the effects on after-tax factor incomes. Again, putting aside the unrealistic option of lump sum funding, Table 10 shows that the largest gains in real after-tax labour incomes, of around 1.2%, are generated when the corporate tax cut is funded by either the financial services rent tax or moving away from full dividend imputation. Under the remaining funding options, the gain in real after-tax labour incomes is substantially smaller at under 0.5%.

The two funding options generating relatively large gains in labour incomes are also associated with losses in asset incomes. This is because the incidence of both funding options falls largely on shareholders. Both local and foreign shareholders are impacted by the financial services rent tax, while only local shareholders are impacted by moving away from full dividend imputation.

Given that labour incomes are distributed more equally than asset incomes, scenarios that favour labour incomes over asset incomes are likely to improve equity. Thus, the two options in which shareholders fund the proposed company tax cut not only generate the largest aggregate gains in consumer welfare, but also, in all likelihood, the most equitable distribution of those gains. This points to a strong case for funding the proposed company tax cut from either a financial services rent tax or a move away from dividend imputation.

91 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for emphasising this point.

92 CGETAX is an example of a Ramsey CGE model in which there is a single representative household. The UK HMRC CGE model, among others, extends this type of model to multiple households that are distinguished by household composition and income-earning capacity. See HM Revenue and Customs, *HMRC's CGE model documentation*, 2013. To also consider intergenerational equity, an overlapping generations model can be used, eg Tran and Wende, *op cit*.

Of course it is possible to combine some of the funding options, so making room for a deeper cut in the corporate tax rate to say 20%. For example, the corporate tax rate could be lowered to 20% by a combination of introducing a financial services rent tax and replacing dividend imputation with a less costly dividend tax concession. Such a deeper cut to the company tax rate can be strongly justified based on the modelling results presented in section 5. The case for this deeper cut to 20 per cent rather than 25 per cent has become compelling following the recent US corporate tax changes that have virtually eliminated the “Treasury transfer” effect.