

The Forgotten Lessons of the Past: Housing, Security and Justice

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We are at a moment in our history, I think, when it is particularly important to bear witness. When the bad times come, and I fear for many ordinary Australians come they will, the people of the future will have many questions to ask of us. They will wonder about an understanding of obligation that privileges the lucky over the unlucky, and they will ask: who spoke and acted against this? They will ask how it was that some people ignored growing inequalities between classes and generations, or said, as our Prime Minister has said, that the gap between rich and poor, which is now among the largest in the developed world, should be kept “in perspective”. They might be puzzled by the leader of another party who talks about “ladders of opportunity” for all Australians but also talks about “no-hopers” and “bludgers”. They will remember concepts—social security, even social justice—and ask not only when but why powerful people stopped using them. They will ponder a zeal for competition in a world made for winners and ask: what happened to those who couldn't easily compete, to those who lost? They might ask why people in positions of influence chose to endorse and practice selfishness while loudly demanding self-sacrifice from others. Some will ask how the provision of housing and land—which previous generations had come to understand as vital to the security of all—withered so rapidly as a matter of public responsibility. In South Australia, those people of the future might well ask why the lessons of its past—lessons about the importance of well-managed public investment in small and vulnerable states—had been so easily forgotten. And many will ask, I think, how it was that so few, from the left or the right, continued to argue that the health of any society is best measured not by the fortunes and victories of its most advantaged but by the comforts and chances that are provided to its most disadvantaged.

I could be completely wrong, of course. Perhaps our current situation is sustainable. But at the very least, as an historian and as someone who feels the ladder of opportunity he himself ascended is being swept away, I think the past provides little to comfort and much to challenge those who believe we are best served by more inequality, more insecurity and a greater and greater reliance upon private resources. And it seems that a good many other Australians are manifestly unhappy about the world that is being made in their names. In a recent survey, for instance, more respondents (83 per cent) chose the gap between rich and poor as a major national challenge than either personal safety (64 per cent) or terrorism (58 per cent). In the same survey, 92 per cent of respondents thought Australia should become ‘more caring’, and 90 per cent ‘fairer’, compared to 75 per cent who wanted it to be ‘more able to defend itself’. You might not be surprised to discover that Melbourne's tabloid *Herald Sun* wasn't quite sure what to

do with this news story. Maybe I'm being harsh, but I think if those proportions had been different, a headline such as "Aussies Want Stronger Defence Against Terrorism" might have appeared. Instead, the table reporting the results was buried beneath two headlines, "New Age Becomes the Norm" and "Shopping Changes".

I'm an historian. Accordingly, I think the past is important, and I think the most accurate story you can tell about the past is important, because history is not fiction and history tells the truth. If this makes me a rather bad companion at 'historical movies', it also gives me very important responsibilities to the public of which I am a member. And part of that responsibility, in my view, is to listen for the voices that offer the most effective challenge to complacency, who tell that part of the truth few people want to hear, who remember what others want to forget. This is why new voices, unheard voices are so important; more often than not, because they undermine the smug assumption that injustice, inequality or suffering are safely contained back there in the past and don't merit the attentions of the present. Truthful history challenges the notion that the past is somehow over, that what's past is past. History is not 'was' but 'is'. Unlike nostalgia, history isn't comfortable. It doesn't make you relaxed. Good history is one of our strongest defences against resignation: the idea that things never change, that there's nothing you can do, that the world can't be altered. History shows worlds being made, and what is made can be unmade and remade.

Yet in all of this, we first need to listen. And I want to argue that the people in the present to whom we now need to listen are those who have already lost the most, the people who have paid a price—in blasted hopes and dreams—for the comforts of others. We need to listen not out of sympathy or compassion, but because they have much to tell us. 'Losers' know things about the world that winners don't. There are things that being privileged doesn't teach you. From the lowest rung, you see things that aren't visible from the top or the centre. If the shape of a society looks justified, natural and commonsensical to those born or elevated to its leadership, how much more important are the perspectives of those deemed suitable only to be led. The unlucky know more of the world and its vulnerabilities than the lucky; the weak have a far better sense of what matters than the strong. To comprehend the importance of housing or health or employment, listen to the unhoused, the unwell and the unemployed.

Perhaps I'm just drawn to the margins. I was born and grew up there, in Elizabeth. Born to publicly-sponsored British migrants in a public hospital and taken home to our public housing, in which we lived until my mother's father died and left her a few hundred pounds, which could buy you a three-bedroom house in Elizabeth Downs because the public housing authority was allowed to build houses and sell them to people who had no chance of affording anything private builders could manage to provide. We didn't know it then, but Elizabeth had been placed upon a path into the future that would come to haunt it, as its jobs disappeared and its public housing was turned first into welfare housing and then—in the picturesque language of new prejudices—into 'housing of last resort' for the people no one wanted. I left just before Elizabeth's good times turned into hard times. I was a member of a fortunate group, a working-class and migrant generation born in the 1950s and early 1960s. We benefited from all of the opportunities

our parents could afford and we were able—usually for the first time in our families’ histories—to attain what had eluded those who came before: not wealth, but safety and security. This is why Elizabeth, a place that outsiders then and now could see only as drab and plebeian, was so valued by the people who lived there. Not that anyone else really saw it. Elizabeth was a place to which most city people came unwillingly, if at all. A few who ventured in brought with them a sense of mission. However puzzled we were by teachers who said they’d come to help us overcome our backgrounds, we tried to give them a chance before becoming the delinquents they seemed to want us to be. A friend of mine, the daughter of a carpenter, was reassured by another teacher: “never mind, dear, remember that our Lord was only a carpenter”. We both had to think very hard about what might be wrong with being a carpenter, which was one of the best trades we could imagine. It was only later that I understood what it meant, or why people from Adelaide’s centre always congratulated you on “having come such a long way”.

I do seem drawn to the margins. I did my inner suburban student time in both Adelaide and Melbourne, but having moved straight from the periphery to the centre, I have since journeyed steadily outwards. Two months ago, my partner and I moved to our new AV Jennings home in a raw new housing estate in Berwick, one of Melbourne’s furthest-flung growth suburbs. You won’t know Berwick, but you might, courtesy of the ABC’s *Kath and Kim*, know of our local mall, Fountain Gate. It is far flung, though your impression that you are in some sense beyond the limits isn’t allayed by a very large sign on the major freeway, twenty miles further in towards the central business district, which proudly proclaims ‘welcome to Melbourne’. It’s not so much the welcome as the implication that the twenty miles of suburbs further out—and the million or so people who live in them—are not ‘Melbourne’ and are therefore something else. I guess we’re in the margins, a place that isn’t the real city but that, as we’ve been told by a couple of inner-urban people, is ‘destroying the bush’. We are the city’s razor edge, its racketing chain saw and its clumsy bulldozer; we are the guilty occupiers of cheap land, held accountable for “uncontrollable growth” in a way that was never true for people lucky enough to be born earlier or to richer parents. We’ve been more or less sneeringly imagined into “sprawling quarter acre blocks”, “aspirational wastelands” and “McMansions”. I guess we’ve been laughed at by people who don’t understand that the only people at whom *Kath and Kim* really sneers are those decidedly upper-class ladies Prue and Trude. I must admit, too, that we’ve grown a little tired of the questions, such as “why would you live all the way out there?”, especially when those asking them seem unaware of how the soaring value of their inner and middle suburban houses might bear some relationship to other people’s difficulty in affording any housing at all.

My point is that to understand what’s going wrong, and what might make it right, you have to listen, in the present and the past, to the people who could see, and who told the truth about the world, as well as to the people—the social workers, the advocates, the community nurses, sometimes the historians—who tried to understand that truth. I am currently working on a book about the stories contained in more than a thousand meticulous case files kept by one of Melbourne’s largest private welfare agencies. For now, I am focusing on the 1920s and 1930s, because if we are going to recreate the kinds of economic, social and welfare policies that produced the worst poverty of the last

century, we should at least have the stomach to confront their consequences. Those who speak loudly of welfare cheats and the need for welfare reform may not copy the exact terms of 70 or 80 years ago, but they seem to share the sentiments. “Necessary gratitude” has become “mutual obligation”; “mendacity” has turned into “welfare dependence”, and the “undeserving” have become the “non-compliant”. People are still said to be “truly in need” and there remain more or less clumsy ways of trying to differentiate the worthy from the unworthy poor.

In 1931, with perhaps a quarter of Melbourne’s people living in hardship, one charity official wrote about “beggar armies”, a city “riddled” with “cadgers of all types and ages” and streets “infested” with begging children. Seventy years later, perhaps 15 per cent of Australians lack sufficient income to avert persistent insecurity. Social security, once a chief responsibility of governments, has disappeared, along with social justice. Governments are obsessed by risk and compliance, and plan their services accordingly, while those responsible for public welfare have mounted an enthusiastic war against welfare cheats that should forever shame its advocates and its strategists.

These case files provide an intimate portrait of hardship. Its wellsprings are familiar: unemployment and low wages, illness, old age, redundancy, disability and, especially, bad luck. Equally familiar are the tell-tale ailments of insecurity and inadequate protection. People’s teeth are so bad that they can no longer chew solid food. They are diabetic, but can’t afford to replace the bread and cakes that fill them up with the nourishing food they need. They have chronic bronchitis and asthma from damp, cold houses. They are going deaf, but hearing aids cost too much money. Their newborns struggle to thrive, and their children fall asleep at school. Routine medical help is a luxury, and most services provide a bare minimum for those who can’t pay. There’s no free medicine, so old people and invalids live in chronic pain. Some drink the pain away; others, unable to cope any longer, ask for charity. If they can be proved deserving, they wait a year—perhaps three or four years when demand is high—for free treatment at the Dental Hospital. If thorough investigations ascertain that there are no children, grandchildren or friends who can contribute, they join the long queue for cheap spectacles from the Eye and Ear Hospital.

This was a past in which all but the very comfortable suffered for their frailties. It is a past, I think, largely absent from today’s public realm. And in its absence, it is so much easier to believe that investing in the health and fortunes of strangers is an expensive waste of time. And these records contain another true story, this time about poverty’s solutions, which stands in stark contrast to dominant ideas about whether and how poverty can be ended. In the 1940s, wartime mobilisation and a relatively buoyant post-war economy washed away much of the unemployment of the 1930s. Few of the previously poor lingered to enjoy the pleasures of “mendicancy” when there were jobs and decent public benefits. These were often people of whom charity investigators had despaired; “unemployables” and “chronic loafers”, one had called them, while another wrote of “socially and industrially maladjusted units” ruined by the “character-destroying doles of indiscriminate givers”. Frequent visitors for assistance in the 1930s, they disappeared during the war. Investigators sometimes came upon them, but found that they

didn't need help any more, especially from a private charity. They had decent, secure work. Their husbands were earning regular wages on the trams or in the Public Works Department. They'd moved into public housing and their rent was controlled. With more money, they no longer suffered so much from the ailments of insecurity. If there was one conclusion an increasing number of social workers drew from these experiences, it was about the importance of large-scale public investment in employment, housing, training and decent welfare. If there was one thing that turned the tide of poverty, it wasn't terrifying the poor or exhorting them to remember their obligations. It was public employment, the tens of thousands of jobs created in the 1940s and 1950s, the tens of thousands of jobs destroyed in the interests of efficiency and streamlining in the 1980s and 1990s.

Some members of the generation who endured the Depression learned a truth about poverty's origins in insecurity. They were moved to find remedies; those remedies were public and entitlements to them were universal. They were based on commitments such as social security and full employment. They took seriously the fundamental importance of decent housing, affordable health care and better education. For a time, they realised that the imperfections belonged not to the poor but to a society that stood by as they faltered and failed. They also realised that the mistakes of the past stemmed from a conviction that poverty's remedies lay in changing poor people, rather than changing the situations that produced and reproduced their poverty. For a time in this country, poverty became an injustice, a matter of shame. It seems strange to have to say this again, to have to insist once more that poor people don't cause poverty, that poverty's origins lie in unemployment, insecurity and low wages, that poverty strikes those who are rendered vulnerable by events and decisions beyond their control, and that its best remedies lie in work and money rather than exhortations about making an effort. We must find ways of sharing that history, of bringing that past to bear upon the present. Current discussions of poverty offer one of the best examples of why history is an essential component of the vigilance upon which justice relies. Without broad-based historical knowledge, it has proved far too easy to renew the harsh language of blame, denial and disdain. In this history are powerful stories, true stories, stories that can move hearts and change minds.

Those stories are still being spoken, too, in places where social and physical fringes combine, places such as the impoverished public housing estates along what were the edges of Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane in the 1950s and 1960s. Some eight or nine years ago now, I spoke to more than 300 people living and working in Inala, south-west of Brisbane, Broadmeadows in Melbourne and Mount Druitt in western Sydney. At that time, these were the suburbs in the east coast cities that bore the reputation of being the 'most disadvantaged'. They bore it bravely, too. For all the stigma they'd experienced, for all of the social work students exploring textbook cases of compound disadvantage, for all of the consultants who'd rolled up with their clipboards and for all of the well-intentioned but misguided missionaries who had come to 'save' them, the people of these suburbs were remarkably willing to share their wisdom.

As I did these interviews, the recession of the early 1990s had not yet lifted: unemployment hovered around fifteen or twenty per cent, and local services were

struggling to cope with dramatic increases in need. In some estates, fewer than one in ten families contained anyone earning a wage. Many people felt left behind, and felt that those who lived outside had stopped caring. Those who had kept their jobs still had unemployed sons and grandsons, daughters bringing up children on their own, friends and kin who were scared and didn't know what the future held.

I often heard about a world being destroyed, the world they had created in the 1960s and 1970s. I heard about the return of insecurity and poverty that many people thought had gone forever. Many people felt betrayed by the political party for which they had voted all their lives. They were tired of the stigma, and unsure if the struggle was really leading anywhere. Among young people, I heard of the pain of adulthood delayed by unemployment, and parenting distorted by poverty. Among older people, I heard fading hopes of a better world, for which they often blamed themselves.

I heard the tragedies of youth suicide, and forty-year old unemployed men who spoke quietly of how they had failed their families. A woman living on twenty spare dollars a week, and eating every other day so her children could have enough milk. A woman heating her house every second night of a Melbourne winter because she couldn't afford the bill and the newly privatised electricity company wouldn't cut her any more slack. The worker in an emergency relief service that lost half its funding who had to decide who waited two weeks for their emergency food parcel and who was so desperate they had to get food on the spot. It is what some people want to call 'relative poverty', or will want to say has disappeared with economic prosperity. It is what some people want to say doesn't exist in Australia. It shouldn't, but it does.

To listen means listening to the pain that twenty years of recession have brought to our straggletowns. One woman from Inala insisted on telling me about her greatest failure: she hadn't taught her daughter how to be poor. She hadn't thought it would ever be needed. But, she said, Australia was changing. She shouldn't have trusted the good times, and she should have known the hard times would come again. The clock was turning back. Two other Inala people, activists and community stalwarts their whole lives, told me through tears about their eighteen grandchildren, none of whom had ever had a real job. "We thought that once we'd got our kids educated, it would be all right", one said. "Our kids did better than us, by and large, but there's no future for our grandkids."

After decades of hard work, these parents and grandparents were bewildered. Theirs were histories of particular places, but they were also a working-class chronology of Australia that will, to some, look wrong. They kept insisting that the Depression was coming back, that the world was turning full-circle and that history had reversed. They looked back to hard childhoods, to the 1940s as a time of fear and promise, and to an uncertain 1950s, when it was hard to find decent housing, and when illness and bad luck could still bring terrible consequences. For them, prosperity came only in the 1960s or 1970s, with secure jobs for the men and, often for the first time, full-time mothering for the women. For many, prosperity was fleeting. Some seized their chances, and built a better world for the next generation. Yet many could see only a dark conclusion. Their

life stories, like those of 'normal' Australians, were meant to come to fruition in a changed world. But the conclusion they came to, nervously and uncertainly, was that the world had not changed. The story they wanted to tell—of success and a permanent change in the fortunes of people like them—was starting to unravel. There was a fear that the hard times were back for good, that the time of full employment and better prospects for the poorest Australians had been a false dawn. They looked at their grandchildren and saw young men who couldn't get jobs and young women bringing up children in hardship. They looked at the services and the community institutions they built in the 1960s and 1970s and saw them closing down for lack of funds. They looked at their schools and hospitals and talked about the renewal of disdain, dilapidation and neglect.

For them, too, this history was not traced in large events or conflicts. Their history of class wasn't really played out in factories or union meetings. It wasn't about political parties or communists or strikes. It was much more local and intimate. It was about the things that were said by nurses and social workers and teachers. It was about the feelings of hopelessness, the occasional victories and the frequent defeats. It was about self-sacrifice and self-denial, and the difficulty of sustaining both in the face of despair. It was about what happened to children, and the things that could be borne because at least your children wouldn't live your life. When they said the Depression was coming back, this was what they meant. Not the Depression of commonplace history, but the Depression of their histories. A world in which men don't work and can't provide for their families, and so become shut in at home with nothing to do. A world in which the aspirations and success of their young people count for little next to investing in the destinies of the children of the rich. A world in which being poor makes you the object of fearful suspicion and distrust. Most of all, they said, the Depression is a world in which people who aren't poor don't feel ashamed about the sufferings of those who are. It's a history they wanted to share, because, as they put it, they were living in the past and the future. It looked like the Depression, but it was also the kind of world in which more and more Australians were going to find themselves once their luck ran out. In one brilliant insight, a Sydney priest told me that to live in Mount Druitt was to live in a place of prophecy, where you could see the future.

Yet for all the talk about increasing inequality and the problems of disadvantage in Australia, we don't seem to get very far. The problem of poverty is now being turned into the problem of welfare dependency; it is about what's wrong with 'them', not what might be wrong about 'us'. Powerful people don't even talk about social justice or social security any more; instead, they talk about 'losers' and 'bludgers' and 'job snobs' and 'people who don't count'. And many others seem to not want to be moved by stories of injustice. They insist that people have brought it upon themselves. They say the poor refuse to better themselves, that they are lazy and won't pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They don't really want a job. They always have cigarettes and beer and a colour television, perhaps, these days, even a mobile phone. They get themselves pregnant so they can get the single parent pension. They aren't stupid, they're clever and fraudulent and they tell lies.

If it is unearned, unfair and unlucky, poverty seems very cruel. So we reassure ourselves that poor people are to blame. Everyone seems to know someone who knows someone else whose hairdresser has this friend who said that a guy down the street knows this person whose cousin is rorting the system. The evidence can be flimsy, third- or fourth-hand, even fabricated, but it will still be held as truthful. These things must be true, because the alternative is unpalatable. Perhaps poverty—and wealth—stem from a fundamentally unfair structure. Perhaps those who are privileged in terms of inheritance, opportunity and ability do very well, and are protected against the consequences of their failures, while those who are not must struggle harder to succeed and suffer dire consequences should they fail. In other words, the distance between a rich person and a poor person measures the weight of a whole range of advantages and good fortune. If you wish to be wealthy or even just comfortable in Australia, it is still good advice to choose your parents carefully.

And as a mounting obsession with fraud occupies government, alongside an ever more stern emphasis on what the poor must do to earn and maintain our help, it is only going to get worse. We are by now so close to the language of deserving poor and undeserving paupers that we may as well bring it back for good. Punishing the impoverished is not a particularly new idea, of course. Yet this is the future, not the past. It is a future being made in the name of all Australians, and it is a future of which I think we should be ashamed.

So in this book, from these prophets, there are stories of hardship, of great loss, of fear and insecurity. People shared a long history of being distrusted and disdained, and this before the full flourish of mutual obligation and of breaching penalties. They told of being the unwitting guinea pigs of countless experiments. Again and again, they had been told lies. In fact, people in these areas had every reason to ask why they were still being consulted about problems that hadn't changed and solutions they knew wouldn't work, and all for reports it seemed no one had ever read. They had every reason to be angry, about having to wait, about having to prove their need again and explain problems that anyone could see if they cared to look. It's not as if they wanted all that much. Someone to make and keep a promise. Something good to happen because it was justified, not because they had 'earned' it. To be respected and to retain their dignity, and not to be treated as incapacitated, stupid inferiors. What they also wanted was for the world to be really fair. For the words spoken about 'a fair go' to mean something. They wanted the rich to share, and the lucky to help the unlucky. They were angry about broken promises, big and small, just as they were angry about being treated like criminals or called losers and bludgers because they didn't have any money. We shouldn't be amazed by their grumbles. We should be amazed by their patience and their forbearance. We should be amazed at their good humour, and at their tenacity, not least their hope that the next community consultation, for instance, won't be a farcical attempt to justify what has already been decided.

But there is something even more important here, an even more important reason for listening. If we need to face up to what was and is going wrong, we need also to ask them how to put it right. There is a hidden history of creativity, imagination and activism

in our so-called ‘disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods. Yes, people living in hardship know something about unfairness and injustice. Yes, they know all about rocks and hard places. But they also tell us something very important about solutions and about hope. It is vital to insist upon the power of their people’s ideas, their record of concrete achievement, and all that they have achieved. To say, for instance, that if a multicultural Australia and if reconciliation between Aboriginal and Islander people and other Australians are more than figments of policymakers’ imaginations, it is because the people of places such as Inala and Mount Druitt have made them so. Outsiders have been waiting for the onset of race wars and ethnic ghettos. On the inside, people have been busy building some of our sturdiest bridges of practical tolerance and common cause. It is an achievement in which the people of some of our most impoverished places should take pride, an achievement for which everyone else should be grateful.

If, like Peter Costello, you want to see ‘social capital’ in Australia, go to Inala, or the supposed ‘wastelands’ of western Sydney. Go to Elizabeth and Davoren Park. Go and see how people there have confronted, tackled and often solved some of the most difficult challenges of recent times. Go and talk to the women, the activist mothers and the long-time local workers in private and public agencies who have spent hundreds of hours designing services to meet the particular needs of different cultural groups, dealing with the changes in men’s lives that have accompanied widespread unemployment, or tackling the isolation of some older residents, or running tenant participation groups, or handling, with incredible generosity and grace, the homeless, ‘deinstitutionalised’ men who end up in their streets. It’s complex, and it’s difficult. Here, the most extreme forms of isolation and anger live side by side with the most generous forms of inclusion and community. There are people who care selflessly, others who shout out their despair and their anger. There are blinds shut tight against the world next to doors that are never closed to anyone who needs a hand. There are those who hurt those they most desperately want to love, and those who look after people no-one else seems to notice.

It will seem a striking thing to say that the outlines of a better and fairer society can be discerned in our most ‘disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods, or that they tell us more about the best of our possibilities than the worst. After all, they’re meant to be deficient, and to learn from others. But I want to celebrate all that was and is there, in the hope that never again will it be possible for someone to say that the people who live there are hopeless and helpless. I want to say that people had forged remarkable creations out of what must have seemed like nothing. And to understand the version of social justice and decent welfare they had played such a large part in creating, we don’t need more studies of disadvantage. The problem is not that the people of Broadmeadows or Mount Druitt or Inala don’t speak, the problem is that they don’t get heard. Greater trust must be placed in their ideas, and in their ability to improvise and find solutions. There needs to be room for surprises—even mistakes—and some recognition that the most effective ways of achieving justice might not be obvious at the beginning or from the outside. And I think there needs to be an acknowledgment that they know where to begin. The people to whom I spoke judged justice in a defiantly simple way: by what happened to those who were least able and most despondent. They pictured a decent society as one in which their most unheroic, vulnerable and even insufferable neighbours could find a safe and decent

place. It was, to my mind, their greatest triumph. Against all the expectations that disadvantaged people need to be taught about abstract principles—justice, toleration, multiculturalism or obligation, for instance—perhaps there is something that they can teach others. It will mean a different approach, one based on working with people, not on them. It will mean not telling them what to do, but asking them what needs to be done, in the belief that they know best.

If people hear nothing else, they need to hear that nobody is invulnerable. For all but a very few, hardship is only ever a retrenchment or an accident or an illness away. And when we think about welfare, about a decent society, and about a fair go, we shouldn't just be thinking about what should happen to others, as if it would never happen to us. We should be reflecting on how well, how kindly, we would want to be treated if we fell, if we stumbled, if we suffered. We should reflect on the kindness we would want others to show to those for whom we feel love and responsibility, when we can't protect them. We can think ourselves invulnerable, and hope that we will always be able to pay the price of good health, decent housing, personal security and opportunities for our children. Or we can recognise all of the vulnerabilities we share, and think of our world as a place in which the good of the whole, the quality of our kindness to strangers, actually matters.

And it is to hope that we should turn our attention. It is time again for good people to imagine and to build a world in which poverty and the damage it does are no longer accepted as inevitable or intractable. Of course, some will remain convinced that poverty's origins and solutions lay mostly in the imperfections of the poor. For them, the lessons of the past have proved too forgettable. Those lessons bear repeating, especially when someone talks about the ailments of injustice as if they belong to another country or another time. They don't, for they have never left, and it seems that we will once again have to learn one of history's very persistent lessons: social division, generational injustice and misery are very, very cheap to create, and they are horrendously expensive to overcome.

Yet in the end I want to come back to hope, and to the challenge of bringing together an argument for justice based on history, truth and something other than short-term political advantage. I want to suggest that there is a constituency for social justice, and that the failures of recent times are largely failures of initiative and will at the highest, not the lowest, reaches of Australian society and among people who have mistaken a dislike of politicians for a dislike of government, and an impatience with self-importance for a dismissal of ideas. The grounds for the argument are there. A large number of Australians, for instance can look back to a time when they or people like them were assumed to be inevitably inferior, incapable of being equal, and unfitted for such privileges as voting, earning equal pay or entering this country. There have been victories for equality and for inclusion, victories won because those people refused to accept what was considered inevitable. Those victories have also come because those who were excluded have been heard. The discarded and the disdained have created change, in part, because people who weren't either of those things have accepted the truth of what they said. We can look back into the past and find empathy, imaginative

compassion and a belief in the possibility and necessity of change. We can find a regard for others and a desire to do justice.

People's power to make choices and to refuse the logic of an inevitable future is history's richest lesson. The refusal to accept one way forward is in many ways the greatest contribution the people of the past made to our own lives. They took up some of the possibilities embedded in the world as they found it, and so can we. And as we did to them, the people of the future—a future that without action looks likely to see more inequality, more insecurity and more despair—will hold us to account for the choices we make and don't make now. There is a crisis that surrounds our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but it's not a crisis of welfare dependency, or racial tensions, or even hope. And it doesn't actually happen in Inala, Broadmeadows or Mount Druitt. It's a crisis of compassion, among those with much for those with very little. It's a crisis of belief, based on arguments about poverty and undeserving people that are just as cruel and untrue as they were sixty or a hundred years ago. It's a crisis of obligation, from the lucky to the unlucky, the old to the young, the insider to the outsider, those rich in confidence and chances to those who despair of either. It's a crisis of empathy.

It's a crisis, too, that is solved only through respect. To show respect is to listen to people who know injustice and to insist on seeing things from their point of view. Doing them justice depends just as much upon listening; it begins not from telling people what they should do, but from listening to them and then asking "what do you think should be done?" Justice also means asking them what they can do and are already doing. Impoverished people don't need to be taught, and they don't need to be told. They need to be trusted, respected and heard. They want to begin the conversation about poverty and injustice, rather than always coming in at its end. In the end, we must listen to their prophecy, and bear witness to the truth they know.

"The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty" can be ordered through bookshops and on-line at <http://www.cambridge.org/aus/>

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