Foreword

This is a book about hope, the hope that we have ways to live together in a rapidly changing world which will enable us to ‘live a good life in the modern world’. It goes beyond hope and suggests how we may do this.

The how is a critical question at a time when rapid change is impacting on all societies. What will be the human outcomes of political turmoil in the Middle East and elsewhere? How will lives and societies be affected by the bewildering pace of economic change in places as disparate as China and the Pilbara region of Western Australia? How will we live together as the gap widens between those who rise in the new economies and those who through accident of birth, capacity or opportunities are unable to benefit? How will we manage the social impact of new media and invasive technologies that render privacy a distant memory? How do we live peacefully in a world where the race is to the swift and the appurtenances to modern life are so widely displayed and so unevenly available? How do we have a good society for all in the context of rising fundamentalism threatening violence and new despotisms? It is easy and even rational to be pessimistic when the race is to the swift, the strong overwhelm the weak, and unreason prevails.

The author draws her hope from her work as an anthropologist, staying true to her belief that ‘examining the content and context of people’s everyday lives’ is at the heart of that discipline. Across 30 years, she draws on the experiences of three widely different groups caught up in very different ways in ‘sweeping structural changes wrought by modernisation’, each of whom has been able to craft their own answers to the questions she poses: what does it mean to be good and do good? What does it mean to have a good life? What sort of society do I want in order to have a good life?

In examining the disparate lives and circumstances of Spanish nuns affected by the Second Vatican Council, Thai factory workers at a time of political upheaval, and Aboriginal people in the Pilbara at a time of astounding economic and hence physical change, and their respective responses to change, a pattern emerges. The past cannot continue as it was. Modernity intrudes and is imposed in ways incompatible with the past. At the same time, the past as it was can have a role in shaping the future and be present in it in ways that are respectful of the past. A new order can emerge that enables each potentially conflicting element to construct a new future, which accords with autochthonous notions of what is a good life and a good society. And the enabling factor for all this to happen is a respect for human rights.
It might be otherwise expressed by those who are averse to the elevation of rights over responsibilities: that human beings in any society have the capacity to negotiate change and achieve ultimate harmony about how lives will be lived, as long as the position of each element in that society is accorded respect. Just call on everyone to act responsibly. But, as any practitioner who has worked at the interface between the powerful and the powerless knows, the reality is that respect can never be guaranteed by goodwill alone. In each of the studies presented an element of goodwill is present and acknowledged but it is difficult to imagine that the Thai factory workers could have organised as they did without the political and legal reforms of the day. In the same way, the nuns were faced with change by the Vatican Council, which then provided a legal framework for negotiating the tensions between modernity and earlier traditions. In the Pilbara, vague goodwill was overtaken by the emergence of native title, which at a minimum ensured that Aboriginals had a negotiating, rather than the earlier supplicant position.

Early in the life of the National Native Title Tribunal a seminar was held at the University of Western Australia on agreement-making between Indigenous people and, inter alia, mining companies. One of the speakers was a distinguished academic from the United States experienced in negotiations between Native Americans and miners. He gave some splendid best-practice examples of beneficial agreements. A shiny-eyed Australian, moved by these examples, asked why it was that miners in the United States were so positive as against the then generally negative attitude of prominent companies in Australia. His reply was that he got his best results from miners in the States by hitting them over the head with a piece of four-by-two timber. The recognition of native title in Australia, which gave Aboriginal people a legally backed place at the negotiating table, was the metaphorical piece of timber that transformed the mining interest into a leader in pursuing agreed rather than imposed outcomes.

For all of us who are involved in working with those who are threatened or ill served by externally imposed change this book is an important reminder that reasoned and reasonable outcomes are most likely where the rights of all parties are real and respected. We are reminded that respect for human rights is not some abstract academic folly but rather the best guarantee that we can each have an opportunity to create a society that works for us and enables us, and those with whom we share our place, to enjoy a good life.

Hon. Fred Chaney AO

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