

Foreword

Twenty-five years ago, in 1984, the then Chairman of the Aboriginal Development Commission, Charles Perkins, referred to the tensions between mining interests and Aboriginal opinion. These, he said, '... date back to those times of notoriety, not so long ago, when certain Aboriginal groups resisting European pressures on their land were simply swept aside ... The deep and degrading cultural disruption, the assault of noise, dust and lost privacy, the loss of social integrity of Aboriginal groups, and the outrageously low return in the way of royalties, employment and other benefits, have all formed part of the picture of the Australian development "frontier"' (Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen 1984: xii–xiii).

Despite the great rise in mining's share of Gross Domestic Product from 1.7 per cent in 1960–61 to 6.1 per cent in 1980–81, a study in 1984 found that Aboriginals then played only a small part in the operations of major mining companies; occupied mainly unskilled or semi skilled blue collar jobs; and had available to them only limited training opportunities, almost all of which were restricted to narrow job classifications (Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen 1984: 12–13).

What has happened in the quarter of a century since those findings were made? In *Power, Culture, Economy: Indigenous Australians and Mining*, edited by Jon Altman and David Martin, an excellent set of chapters enriches and broadens our understanding of this issue. A specially pleasing aspect of the project has been that PhD scholars have been included, and guided not only to completion of their degrees but also to the attainment of a prestigious publication.

It is however disappointing to learn that, after yet another major mineral boom in Australia, when in the five years to 2006 mining export revenues rose by over \$100 billion (or around 70 per cent), Indigenous people still do not share equitably in the vast incomes which are generated from their lands in the remote regions of Australia. The words of Minister Jenny Macklin in 2008 that the potential of '... millions of dollars to be harnessed for economic and social advancement of native title holders, claimants and their communities ...' remained to be realised are also a sorry reflection on events in the last twenty-five years. In this comment, Minister Macklin was echoing former Minister Amanda Vanstone, who asked why land rich Indigenous people were 'dirt poor', and why the traditional owners of the land were the most disadvantaged living upon it.

If way to the better there is, it exacts a good look at the worst—after Thomas Hardy—and the authors provide a sobering set of analyses of difficulties and uncertainties in the path ahead. They also ponder the classic question of the development economics literature: does economic growth in poorer societies automatically require a new social and cultural order, or can transformation to prosperity co-exist with at least some traditional ways of living?

The answers to the questions are intractable, and a theme of the volume is the contestation of ideas and possible policy paths. Whereas a simple solution or proposal, if accepted, is presumably easier for communities and governments to act on, the scholarly review provided in this book is essential in canvassing the various options. This is the major contribution of the volume, coupled with the immense amount of new information and the broadening of the topics rightly considered relevant to the outcome.

It is a special pleasure to welcome the publication of this book, since plans for it were hatched by my former colleague at the University of Melbourne, Professor Jon Altman, in association with Rio Tinto, through the redoubtable Bruce Harvey, and the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) where I was employed at the time. With CEDA's enthusiastic support, Jon and Bruce succeeded in arranging a successful combined Linkage Grant application to the Australian Research Council (ARC), which was coupled with substantial, generous matching funding from Rio Tinto.

There can be no doubt that the ARC Linkage Grant system, which provides incentives for industry to back up research funds from the Commonwealth, is an excellent vehicle for furthering essential enquiry effort and output. This project, under the leadership of Professor Jon Altman and the prodigiously productive Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at The Australian National University, is a prime example of the importance of the ARC Linkage Grant scheme. It is also a very favourable reflection on the enlightened attitude to funding of research by Rio Tinto, which showed absolute respect for the independence of the scholars in designing and undertaking their work and in reaching conclusions.

I therefore warmly congratulate the editors and authors on their work. They have provided material and analysis which is essential to consider in improving the longstanding unsatisfactory relationship between mining activity and the plight of the Indigenous people from whose lands the mineral wealth is being extracted.

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