Social Work: From Detection to Advocacy

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We are at a moment in our history, I think, when it is 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 will remember concepts—social security, and social justice—and ask not only when but why powerful people stopped using them. They will ponder the 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 decent housing and welfare—which previous generations had come to understand as vital to the security of all—withered so rapidly as a matter of public responsibility. And many will ask, I think, how it was that so few 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.

You have come here to think about the future. You have come here with ideals, and with what we might call a redemptive mission. You have come with the view that the continuing existence of poverty and inequality is a choice. It is neither an inevitability nor a necessary evil. You know it is an injustice that wounds the poor and that its persistence in the midst of a rich country is a source of shame. If you have come to look forward, and to design a New South Wales that might be free from poverty, you have also come here to celebrate advocacy and activism, and a commitment to a simple and powerful idea: that poverty's solutions don't lie in emphasising the obligations of the poor to the rich, but in emphasising the obligations of the rich to the poor.

I want you to celebrate those visions for the future. Of course, your discussions today will be called utopian, idealistic, naïve. I'm sure some rambunctious right-winger will borrow the latest American terminology and call you bleeding hearts or something similar. But I think it's important for you to hold your nerve, and for all of us to think about the arguments we need to make to convince our fellow citizens that what we have now is not what has to be. One of the great problems of the last decade, in my view, has

been a lack of idealism. Our vision has been too often constrained by so-called hard realities and rational limits, which many people treat as inviolable and scriptural when they are themselves the product of ideas and decisions.

To find those convincing arguments about the future, I want to first take you back into the past. This might seem a bit strange, but then I am an historian. Some think being an historian would make me a pessimist. On the contrary, it makes me an optimist and an idealist. History shows the capacity for change, and the power of well-made arguments and powerful ideas. As an historian, I also 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. Truthful history also 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 to make convincing arguments, we first need to listen. And I want to argue that the people to whom we need to listen are those who have 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. So-called '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.

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 and lawyers, sometimes the historians—who tried to understand and then convey that truth to others. This is the struggle I want to describe for you today, by drawing you into the meticulous case files kept by one of Melbourne's largest private welfare agencies between about 1920 and 1950. 1920 may seem a long time ago, but it's not, especially when you are an historian of poverty and welfare. It's eerie. Many of those advocating welfare reform in the early twenty-first century may not copy the exact terms of 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 and more than one in five unable to find work, 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. And many, too many, even among those with good intentions, forget that if it is important to listen, it is also important to think more carefully about what we say.

It is also important, I think, to spend some time in the past of meanly measured doles and indignities that can be glimpsed in these case files, which were created by Melbourne’s Charity Organisation Society (COS). By the 1920s, the COS was one of the city’s largest welfare agencies. One of its main functions was to check the eligibility of applicants for free medical and dental treatment or charitable support, and it also worked closely with child welfare and other public departments. Enquiry officers—sometimes called case workers and investigation officers in the 1930s—sallied forth to check the accuracy of the twenty or thirty stories they collected each day. The officials of the COS, and especially its Secretary, promised that such methods would protect Melbourne from the “armies” of beggars, frauds and “simulators”. Because they assumed they were surrounded by liars, finding the truth was their most important and most difficult task. As charity tended toward what was called “scientific” social work, each case record became a meticulous profile of the claimant. The most detailed brought in new characters and scenarios, introduced unanticipated twists and revealed, triumphantly or forgivingly, the client’s lies and fabrications. A well-kept record was the proof that relief had been deserved, that the need was genuine, and that poverty’s temporary remedy had not stifled self-reliance.

These case files provide an intimate portrait of hardship. Its wellsprings are familiar: unemployment and low wages, illness, old age, 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 ill-fed 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. In the absence of adequate public investment in their care, poor people paid an especially high price for their weaknesses. There were lonely old men, broken by hard work at 40 or 50, in chronic pain from the labourer’s bad back and bad knees. There were jobless drifters of 19 or 20, hard-eyed and bitter before their time, along with drinkers who were too sober or too troublesome for the inebriates’ homes. Some had weak minds, like the

"Russian secret service count" who had survived a torpedoed troopship but then turned to alcohol. In the 1920s, the war still rumbled through Melbourne; fathers died of wounds that never healed, while other men still heard the guns and struck out at their families or at themselves. There were children dying in agony from tubercular spines and hips. There were men of 25 who were too weak from rheumatism or chronic asthma to earn a living, and women, worn out by hard work, too many pregnancies and a poor diet, whose bodies failed them before they reached middle age. Then came the crisis of the 1930s, picking off skilled workers, independent women and respectable clerks, lengthening unemployment into years, and drawing many families into a cycle of rural relief work, tramping, sustenance and slums that would be broken only by war in 1939.

These case files didn't just tell stories about particular people, They made judgements about poverty, inequality and need, and they described poverty and characterised the poor for a wider audience. Workers produced shortened versions of the most "telling" cases for Executive Committees and case conferences. They added flourishes and dramatic momentum, drawing some stories towards exemplified truths, especially in regards to poverty's origins and remedies. In the training, publicising and political work of the agency, those stories introduced appeals for donations, made up the evidence in submissions to public inquiries, and appeared in newspapers, next to staged photographs of 'the grateful recipient' and 'the sympathetic women of the Charity Organisation Society'. They turned their stories into exemplary tales, tableau in a theatre of class, with more or less stock characters playing out dramas of detection, redemption and salvation. They described the dilemmas of entitlement, and they wrote large—or more subtly implied—the lessons those dilemmas held for broader understandings of inequality. They held out the prospect of change, or they confirmed the comforts of certainty. They wrote of a world transformed by hope, or one endangered by the deficiencies of the poor. They explained the nature of social inferiority and superiority, sometimes in justification and sometimes in challenge.

In Melbourne, those exemplary stories had a particular slant before about 1935. The enquiry officers for the COS wrote themselves leading roles in tales of forensic investigation. They modelled themselves as lady detectives engaged in a search for truth and lies and in pursuit of the fraud and the 'simulator'. They explained inequalities in terms of character, including the ability to be truthful and to feel ashamed by your need for assistance. Clients had to express "real emotions", and tell recognisably true stories, without using the kinds of language or explanation associated with "dependent social types". It was important to identify, as one worker put it, "the type which does not ask for assistance, and therefore deserves it". Decisions could rest on shaky conclusions: "she did not impress me favourably, but I could not tell why".

The dictates of "scientific charity"—especially ensuring that help was given in the exactly right degree to an undeniably deserving person—set these women a difficult task. The Secretary and the Executive Committee may have believed that the deserving and the undeserving could always be distinguished. Yet some workers struggled to preserve those certainties in the face of actual poverty. Each encounter with an applicant involved difficult negotiations over the "true" predicament. Each demanded a careful choreography, an exchange of questions and claims in which workers struggled to reveal secrets, admissions and lies. The most difficult problem was proving entitlement beyond a doubt. Workers probed for details, asked local shopkeepers and interviewed neighbours.

Some wrote in their case notes of how they had trapped people in a lie, or helped a shameful applicant to admit the truth. Yet words could be deceptive, especially when they were spun into stories. If people could learn how to appear deserving, if they could mimic the truly needy, then they might receive something for nothing.

It was a terrible dilemma, and many workers found a solution in a kind of forensic investigation. Their case files resembled detective stories and the most elaborate used detective motifs: a mysteriously closed door, the trace of cigarette smoke in a just-emptied room, a lipstick-smudged glass on a table, a bed moved to block a doorway. Certainty came from knowing that however skilful the liar, their bodies would reveal the truth. In the same decades that enthusiasts promoted lie detectors as a universal solution to crime, some of the charity investigators were convinced they too could detect the physical signs of falsehood. They showed their skill in the interpretation of gestures, expressions, dress and physical surroundings. There were always clues: too much make-up, nicotine stains, or the faint smell of alcohol on the breath. Deceptions always left their traces: in bodies that were too strong and healthy, or in houses with a pianola or a gramophone, in rooms that reeked of perfume. The truth could be found hidden in cupboards and crannies, even in piles of rubbish from which the agency's greatest detective, Miss Cutler, on more than one occasion emerged triumphant with beer bottles and cigarette butts. Asking for help demanded an almost inhuman control over your body, and people attracted suspicion for their "vague, smirking manner", "furtive eyes", or "evasive and deceptive" faces. Others were denied help for "appearing simply too plausible" or because "her eyes flickered just a little".

In one case, help was refused because a daughter seen at the door was "too well-dressed" to support the applicant's story. One man was said to be "simulating simplicity" in order to cadge a meal. It was also important to show "true feelings", and in the right way. A mother in Carlton, evicted from her home, had "a plausible manner and knows how to make her case appear needy", while a father from Fitzroy, about to be evicted, "returned and sat on the [COS] steps nursing his head in his knees. He gave one the impression of deliberately working on his emotions for effect".

In late 1932, the COS's most indefatigable investigator, Miss Cutler, came across an unemployed man whose wife and children had returned to England. He "impressed me most unfavourably", she wrote in her notes, "owing to a very unreliable way with him". His eyes were also "extremely evasive". When challenged over part of his story, "he merely smiled in his unreliable way and did not deny this." He had several dealings with her, the last in 1936, when he needed dentures. The applicant still had his "peculiar and always unsatisfactory attitude" and Miss Cutler knew he was a liar, "for some vague reason that I can never define". He was denied assistance. So was a woman whose eldest child had died of meningitis in 1934; in debt from the funeral, she had approached the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for fifteen shillings to pay the rent. "Extremely plausible and smiling" was the investigator's opening summary; "I had no faith in the very deliberate lame way that she walked in my presence. She impressed me as a very dangerous, cunning woman."

Miss Cutler's most famous case is captured in the title of the book I am now writing: *Miss Cutler and the Case of the Reincarnated Horse*. It concerned an unemployed painter who arrived at the Office one day in 1931. Like most COS clients, he wanted to fix a specific problem. While he owed nearly £4 in rent and another £4 to a

grocer and a baker, his most pressing need was artificial teeth. The family was visited by Miss Cutler. Eager to identify a path that would take the painter, his wife and five children towards 'self-dependence', Cutler endorsed his idea of procuring a horse and resuming his wood carting business. In the middle of 1932, however, he was diagnosed as tubercular and could no longer do the relief work required by the sustenance authorities. With the family living on a sustenance allowance of nineteen shillings per week—which left them four shillings per week once they'd paid their rent—he was forced to apply for the invalid pension of seventeen shillings per week. Miss Cutler visited again. They urgently needed £4 with which to secure their house, but the COS was unable to help. The applicant's wife did report that the new horse had been destroyed after an accident, which had also made the wood cart useless.

Miss Cutler was suspicious of the lost horse. The 'general Depression' meant she was handling dozens of cases at once, but she never lost her ability to identify and track down those whom the Society's newsletter once termed 'the clever cadger and the plausible impostor'. In January 1934, Miss Cutler visited the family once more, to assess the wife's application for cheap spectacles from the Eye and Ear Hospital. Ever vigilant, she noticed that 'he is not even growing vegetables'. Then she saw it: a horse. A horse where there should be no horse, the horse that was supposedly destroyed and long gone; 'I told him [what] his wife said on 27 September 1932'. All he could do was 'look vague'. That gave no protection from Miss Cutler's ire; this time, though, she decided not to press her advantage. The painter's wife received her glasses and, as far as I can tell, Miss Cutler reserved the moral of her tale for the case record: 'he still impresses me as a decent man, but he and his wife appear to expect a great deal from the Government'.

There were, of course, frauds and liars. There were pathetic attempts to garner a few shillings or even a few pounds without telling the whole truth. There were women and men who needed money for a drink and said they needed it for medicine. There were people who hid their foibles and their follies and then suffered the shame of their revelation. Yet in the 1200 case files I have read, there are 15 in which the COS was the victim of some kind of deception. In every single case, fraud occurred because the very same science that examined poor people's bodies for signs of evasion encouraged investigators to trust more "superior types" whose bodies bore the marks of what one worker called "refined suffering". In 1924, for instance, "a superior type of man" was helped to take up a farming job; the COS was a little embarrassed when he immediately forged one of his employer's cheques and left for Sydney. Another "sensitive man", who so "felt his position" that he cried, was given £5. He disappeared and was also rumoured to be in Sydney (I think Melbourne people always assumed that Sydney was the natural destination for cheats and liars).

The supposition that "superior types" could be trusted left the COS exposed to more than financial embarrassment. In 1932, a young man was referred to the COS by a smaller relief agency. He was visited by the relentless Miss Cutler, who saw "photographs of all members of the family, and they seem to be of an exceptionally fine type". As "there is no doubt the case is a very genuine and pleasing one", the man received a daily pint of milk and a weekly ration of one dozen eggs. Returning two months later to request second-hand boots, he casually dropped into the conversation the fact that he was married, and expressed surprise that the COS visitor had not asked about such an obvious matter during the initial investigation. Miss Cutler was outraged at the

affront to her questioning skills; visiting again, she met his wife, with her “very good teeth” (always suspicious in “needy” people) and “very strange evasive eyes”.

For the next seven years, COS investigators tracked this man through churches and relief agencies, to all of which he offered the reassurance that he was “known by Miss Cutler”. Invariably, their warnings came too late. The exasperated Miss Cutler would locate his most recent address, there to find a “cabinet wireless” or “well-clothed children”, and the applicant, with his “very smiling, plausible way”. Charged with an assault in the Myer Emporium on Bourke Street, he then approached the Myer family for charity. He did odd jobs for a city firm that was sent tickets for a charity ball; “the morning after the ball, [the organisers] phoned to ask who was the dreadful person whom they had sent to represent the firm. It finally transpired that [he] had taken the tickets, hired or borrowed an evening suit, and gone to the ball.”

Clearly, investigation was inexact and unreliable, and the fact that fraud was only ever a problem among “superior types” seems not to have led to any changes in practice. Trained to doubt and mistrust people who were not like them, the COS workers struggled to find answers to questions that never became easier. How could those people be trusted? How could you tell if they were really “feeling their position” and hadn’t simply rehearsed the script beforehand? Whatever the lessons of their own experiences, investigators were always expected to focus first upon the problem of fraud and “undeserving” paupers. In giving, they feared creating dependency. In trusting, they feared liars and cheats. In refusing, they feared damning those who really needed their help. It was a terrible and very clumsy science, this scientific charity. It was terrible for what it does to people in need. It was terrible as well for what it forced welfare and social workers to do, for the care it prevented and the relationships it destroyed.

But there was, I think, an even greater insult in this fascination with detection and fraud, an insult that we hear again in terms like ‘mutual obligation’ or even in some forms of the language about ‘social capital’ and ‘capacity building’. It is the insult that those who endure poverty don’t understand or comprehend their situations. The determination to reveal lies helped establish that when impoverished people spoke, their accounts of the world were mostly incorrect. It helped ensure that outside interpreters, and not the poor themselves, knew best how need emerged and how it might be met. This was most evident when applicants—invariably men—were foolish enough to blame governments, mass unemployment, the system, the bosses or capitalism. With most, though, it was less direct. Impoverished people were often rather ‘stupid’ or ‘dull’. They struggled to realise the truth of their situations. They got their stories wrong and forgot the details. Most of all, they didn’t really understand the world. They talked about vulnerability, or said that luck and not character played the major part in their problems, or suggested that the rich were obliged to help the poor. It was at this point that they were reminded they were not “the best judge of what should be done for [them] and how it should be done”. It was at this point that applicants needed to make nodding agreement with the truth about character and reward. Few revelations were savage. Most of the applicants characterised as untruthful or ignorant were still regarded as decent and given help. Nor did revelation preclude sympathy and even friendliness. But assistance was always predicated upon a general truth: that whatever the impoverished and inferior sometimes said, poverty’s origins lay in deficiencies of character, not context.

Yet these very same records contain another true story, this time about poverty's real solutions and the hard lessons that these charity investigators courageously learned. Character and "scientific charity" proved a fragile defence against the assaults of the 1930s Depression. These women played an important role in the reassessment of inequality and privilege in mid-century Melbourne, in large part because they could listen to and learn from the poor. Perhaps their own vulnerabilities as female workers—symbolised in pay cuts and mounting caseloads—increased their sense that character and social position were no defence against disaster. In their case files, in the middle of the 1930s, some began to tell different kinds of stories about inequality and vulnerability, with applicants as the blameless victims of overwhelming economic forces or even potential collaborators in a struggle to achieve safety. They began writing about disaster, luck and the weight of prior disadvantage, ideas that people living in poverty had often tried to articulate. Some explored a kind of casework that took poor people more at their word and trusted that their stories, if not absolutely accurate, indicated real problems. More and more, charity investigation was supplanted by welfare and social work. In 1936, its occasional publication, *The Other Half*, praised "a growing sense of social justice" and dedicated social workers to "an earnest effort to ensure that the disasters which have happened to tens of thousands of citizens during the past six years will not continue to happen". Social justice and disaster: those are not terms that would ever have been used in the 1920s, and they were concepts—if not actual words—that the workers had learned at least partly from the poor.

And what they learned turned out to be true. In the 1940s, wartime mobilisation and a relatively buoyant postwar 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 an intrusive and judgemental 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 or 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 joining the poor in the arguments they had already been making about vulnerability, disaster and security, and joining them, as one charity official put it, "in a general push for social justice". Most of all, 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. What the people of the century's middle learned was the fundamental importance of work. Not any old work. Decent work. Secure work. Work for people who are talented and confident, and work for people who aren't. Work that you pay to create

and sustain if you have to, because it's better than paying the price of worklessness and enduring the waste of unemployment.

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. This is a past, I think, largely absent from today's public realm. 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. Indeed, 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.

The point of this book is to say that we need to find those true stories again. There are still people who work among those who suffer, people who can bear witness to what they see and what they hear, even if no one else seems to be listening. We, too, will need to be redeemed by the truths known best by those who endure injustice. Fortunately, those stories are still being spoken, and not too far away. Some dozen years ago now, I went to some of those places where they're being told. Having written about the good times and hard times of my own past in Elizabeth, Adelaide's public housing and 'Pommie' town, I went and listened to more than 300 people living and working in other supposedly 'disadvantaged' areas, Inala, south-west of Brisbane, Broadmeadows in Melbourne and Mount Druitt in western Sydney. 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 once again share their wisdom.

We haven't usually asked people for their wisdom. We haven't tended to listen out for ideas. Of course, there's pain, and the suffering that more than twenty years of recession have brought to our struggletowns. We've sometimes heard their dark conclusions, their stories of disdain, dilapidation and neglect, the feelings of hopelessness, the frequent defeats. There are always stories of hardship, of great loss, of fear and insecurity. People can tell us about being distrusted and disdained, of being the unwitting guinea pigs of countless experiments, of 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. 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. 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 ideas, their record of concrete achievement, and all that they have achieved.

If you want to see 'social capital' in Australia, go to the supposed 'wastelands' of our cities. 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 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. Go and talk to the people in the local agencies, who have their dark days, when there are just too many business plans and dot points, and their better days, when they know they can change the world. 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 and there are 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 is uplifting and terrifying all at the same time.

And thinking back to the past, to that time in the 1930s and 1940s when people had to listen, changes our sense of where to begin. The problem is not that people living under the burdens of injustice and poverty don't speak, the problem is that they don't get heard. The people of the 1930s and 1940s had to listen, because the other explanations failed them. I hope it won't come to that again. It won't if we gain support for a simple truth: people who suffer injustice know where you have to begin if you want to do justice. In fact, the people to whom I spoke described 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.

It is time again for good people to imagine, as you want to imagine, 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, but I fervently hope that we will not have to relearn 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. Perhaps it's the power of that kind of history that makes some of our leaders so anxious to control the historians.

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 and truth. 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 reaches of Australian society. 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.

We need powerful and respectful arguments, which begin from the knowledge that nobody is invulnerable. For all but a very few of us, hardship is only ever a retrenchment or an accident or an illness away. And that 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 disaster could 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. It may not be the first place to which ordinary people's politics turn. And I don't think we need a depression or a war. On current indications, and taking ordinary citizens' ideas about climate change, recycling, the drought and caring for the land, all we need is a shared sense of the need for change. The context is shifting, I think; it may well become harder and more shameful to be selfish and greedy, to be hypocritical, to deny what you have to those who happen to be younger, or poorer, or less lucky. I hope, and I think, that good arguments, and true stories, will be enough. Crucially, it is in the recognition of interdependence, as well as the celebration of independence, that the arguments for justice and security and decency lie. It is in the work that you know best, in the truths you hear perhaps more often than most, in the truths to which we must all find our own way of bearing witness.