

**Creating Unequal Futures:
Rethinking Poverty,
Inequality and
Disadvantage**

Edited by Ruth Fincher
and Peter Saunders
Allen & Unwin, 2001, 251pp,
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One Saturday in May I found myself nodding in agreement as I read Adele Horin's *Sydney Morning Herald* column. I don't normally do this. Horin is the *SMH's* resident 1970s leftist. That week, however, Horin's complaint was about how badly Australian academics write, and for once I could agree.

Parts of *Creating Unequal Futures?*, an edited collection, are a case in point. While I've read worse—we are spared French theorists' jargon—some of the authors make their readers work too hard. Take this sentence, on a randomly selected page: 'Since private rental is associated with high rates of residential turnover, this has led to the examination of the impact of private renting on low-income families.' Or in other words: 'Since low-income families renting privately move often, researchers examine how moving affects them.' The new version is no work of art either, but clearly says who is doing what in half the number of words.

Since the overall writing quality is not high enough, I can't recommend this book for lay readers. Welfare specialists, however, may get something from it. Two chapters, of seven in the book, are particularly worth noting.

Peter Travers' chapter on child poverty reports that with real incomes rising among the poor, child poverty fell between the early 1980s and mid-1990s in absolute terms, though it remains higher than many other countries.

While day to day needs are being met more effectively, the greater concern is about long-term social mobility. Historically, Australia has enjoyed high rates of social mobility. People moved up (and down) the occupational and income ladder through their working lives, and between generations. Where you started did not predetermine where you would finish.

For many, this mobility will continue. The proportion of young people from low-income backgrounds going to university increased significantly over the last two decades (the data Travers presents in this area is out-of-date and misleading). Strong growth in jobs requiring university degrees creates a path from education to affluence.

These young people will do well. Those without post-secondary skills are not nearly as well-positioned. Travers' statistics show that by the mid-1990s significant numbers of young with low academic abilities were engaged in what he calls 'marginalising activity', but which might better be called 'marginalising inactivity', since it means consistent absence from either education or the labour force. For those with high maths ability at age 14, only 2.3% were consistently in marginal activity by age 19. For those with very low maths ability the number was 21%.

This is not the only problem hitting some academically underachieving young people. Family structures are also under strain. Even in the short comparative period Travers uses, 1992-1996, the proportion of 10-14 year olds living with one parent went from 15.9% to 18.2%. The combination of family breakdown and fewer job opportunities for the unskilled meant that the proportion of children under 15 living without a working parent in the home increased between 1979 and 1997 from around 11% to nearly 18%. With disadvantages accumulating prospects diminish.

Of the problems, education is most easily open to public policy. The figures Travers cites on maths, and others available elsewhere on maths and literacy ability, show the strong connection between low ability and unemployment. If the Howard government's insistence on testing and improving maths and literacy levels among young people enjoys long-term success it will be a very important welfare reform.

The consequences of inadequate education are even more starkly presented in Boyd Hunter's chapter on poverty among indigenous people. Among the poorest 60% of indigenous people, 89% have no qualification, not even a Year 10 leaving certificate. Even in the mid-range quintile, in 1994 only 16% of indigenous people had a real job, with

another 9% in the Community Development Employment Projects, politely described by Hunter as 'driven primarily by policy decisions rather than labour market conditions'. Unsurprisingly, the incidence of serious poverty among indigenous Australians is much higher than it is among Australians generally.

Indigenous people are arrested at a staggering rate. Among the poorest indigenous people, 18.4% reported being arrested in the last five years. In the poorest areas elsewhere the figure is 1.7%. Even among the wealthiest indigenous people, 10.9% reported being arrested. In the wealthiest areas elsewhere the figure is 0.5%.

Indigenous health is also poor across all income groups, with around a third saying they have long-term health problems. In the rest of the population low income people have a similar health record, but the rest of the population is much less likely to have serious long-term illness.

As Hunter says, 'it is hard to talk about an entrenched problem such as indigenous poverty without getting depressed.' While acknowledging that even with bipartisan support it could take a hundred years to fix all the problems he suggests education as important to financial independence, and reconciliation so indigenous people feel they have an important place in Australian society.

The plight of indigenous people puts the rest of *Creating Unequal Futures?* in perspective. Improving schools and lowering unemployment are not necessarily easy tasks, but they are achievable. No non-indigenous family is likely to spend the next hundred years in poverty.

Reviewed by Andrew Norton

In Defence of Globalisation

by Keith Suter
UNSW Press, 2000, 60pp.
\$12.95, ISBN 0868404756

The 'Frontlines' series of books from UNSW Press attempt to explain significant topical issues that have captured media attention. Another prerequisite for representation in the