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0521830621 - The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty

Mark Peel

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THE LOWEST RUNG

Voices of Australian Poverty

The Lowest Rung is a fascinating and profoundly moving portrait of the people who are suffering the consequences of a more divided and less egalitarian Australian society. Based largely on the author's conversations with hundreds of people living and working in three areas commonly described as 'disadvantaged'—Inala in Queensland, Mount Druitt in New South Wales and Broadmeadows in Victoria—this is a book in which impoverished Australians, who are too often absent from debates about poverty, tell their own stories. Some are funny, others are sad. There are stories they can hardly bear to tell about loss, despair and an uncertain future. But there are also stories about hope, and the capacity of poorer people to imagine and create a fairer world. Rather than focusing on abstractions such as 'the underclass', this book provides an intimate account of real people's fears, hopes and dilemmas in the face of growing inequality, entrenched unemployment, and fading opportunities for the young.

This important book is essential reading for anyone concerned about the impact of social and economic change in contemporary Australia. It urges us to learn from rather than lecture those who experience first-hand the more unequal future we are now making, and it will change the way we think about poverty and its solutions.

Mark Peel is the author of *Good Times, Hard Times* and *A Little History of Australia*. He teaches history at Monash University.

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*To Patrick Troy, for the inspiration,
and to Scott, for showing me
the way forward*

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I am very grateful to the people who led me through their communities or provided me with particular contacts: Jeff Fiedler, Graham Francis, Carmel McMennemin, Maria Robles, Vivien Routley and Barbara Steen in Broadmeadows; Kylie Battams, Jenny Chaves, Connie and Ray Dailey, Jon Eastgate, Iris Moir and Bet Peters in Inala; and Mark Aggar, Val Franzen, Paul Hanna, Trish Martin, Coral McLean, Joe and Wendy Munoz and Yvonne Shipp in Mount Druitt.

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I devised and wrote this book within two remarkable scholarly communities. The first was the Urban Research Program at the Australian National University. Tim Bonyhady, Nicholas Brown, Steve Bourassa, Alastair Greig and Max Neutze pushed me to see the possibilities of a project that always seemed a little too large, while Heather Grant, Coralie Cullen, Rita Coles and Penny Hanley handled what they often thought were little things. For calculations and compilations of census material, I am grateful to Glenys Harding, and Virginia Rapson at Monash University. Further afield, Margaret Levi shared the fruits of her progressive wisdom. Through it all, Patrick Troy strove to smooth my path. A pioneer in tackling and solving many of the issues raised in this book, he will probably huff and gruff and say he didn't do all that much. All I can say is that if this book manages to make an argument for justice, it is largely due to his example.

From Canberra I moved to Monash University, where teaching, student welfare and administration duties probably delayed this book by several years. But it is better for the waiting, and for the ways in which my new colleagues helped me improve it. I enjoy working in a fine department; I need to acknowledge in particular Barbara Caine, David Garrioch and Andrew Markus for occasionally tugging at the reins, Graeme Davison for reading anything at a moment's notice, Bain Attwood and Esther Faye for the inspiration of their scholarship, and Jane Drakard and Peter Howard, who coincided with me and still help me keep my feet. To my other colleagues, too, my thanks for all the shared endeavours. My graduate students, too, have inspired and educated me, and special thanks go to Jeremy Sammut and Nick Fischer for their research assistance. I am

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Three people generously read an entire first draft. I benefited from Al Knight's publishing eye, and Janet McCalman's unstinting passion for good writing. From the time of our first ever meeting, some fifteen years ago, I have drawn frequently on Janet's kindness and intellectual rigour. The third reader was my mother, Jean Peel, who read hundreds of pages and then sent back almost as many covered in notes and thoughts. I think my father Roger Peel had a hand in it all, too. I hope they see their work and their values reflected in what they now read.

To Orlando and Doris, my thanks for reminding me about the important things, like dinner time. Finally, to my partner, Scott Evans: you brought this book to life because you made sure I knew there was something to say and that I would be able to say it.

A NOTE ON NAMES AND WORDS

Writing a book based on conversations creates a difficult decision about whether to use people's real names. To each person with whom I spoke, I promised a transcript for their amendment. I also guaranteed to let them see their words woven into mine before I used their names. I managed to keep the first promise but the second proved more difficult than I anticipated. As some people have not had the opportunity to approve my use of their words, all names in this book are pseudonyms, and, if necessary, small details of people's lives have been generalised so that they cannot be recognised. The real names of every person who participated are listed below.

When your conversations are with people living in poverty there is the added difficulty of finding the correct descriptive term. If those to whom I spoke were best characterised as disadvantaged, they mostly called themselves 'ordinary'. Some people preferred the word 'battlers', though they were growing suspicious of a term that had been twisted by conservatives to mean people with much more than they had. A few – normally those with strong union or Labor Party backgrounds – used terms such as 'working class'. In general, though, explicit class language was reserved for others: if they were called 'working people' or 'ordinary people' those outside their suburbs were called 'middle class' or 'the rich'. Their position was also indicated by where they lived: 'Inala people', 'Westies' and 'Broady folks', as opposed to 'Toorak types' in Melbourne and 'North Shore people' in Sydney. In Inala, the location of the rich seemed a bit less definite, or perhaps I never understood it as well, but there was usually a gesture in the

direction of the Brisbane River and suburbs like Indooroopilly, Jindalee and Toowong.

There is, as yet, no agreed term for Australia's poorest citizens. There are good and bad names but nothing like the relative consensus over respectful identification we now have for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The diversity among those to whom I spoke also made it difficult to decide upon a particular word, and I did not want to invent something that some might endorse but others would find inaccurate or offensive. Accordingly, I have used various terms, including impoverished, poor and disadvantaged, in the hope that a factual description of their situation best represents them.

Overall, this book is based upon the words of nearly 300 people who were living and working in Inala, Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt in 1994 and 1995. The full names of 249 people are listed below; the others were either momentary participants whose family names I did not know, or people who were involved in larger group discussions at neighbourhood houses, job centres or welfare agencies. While this is a larger group of people than appears in most Australian, British or American studies, a smaller group of around 150 people provided the bulk of the insights, ideas and interpretations. As I began the study with the intention of including a survey of housing, economic and social development policies, as well as local political representation, I spoke to numerous councillors, policy workers, strategic planners and housing department managers. While those conversations were very valuable, they played a much smaller role in the book that emerged.

There are 164 women and eighty-five men listed below. There are fewer men because they were less likely to be involved in community work or neighbourhood networks, and because most of the local social, community and welfare workers were female. Women do the talking in these suburbs. In terms of their relationships with Mount Druitt, Inala and Broadmeadows, these men and women can be divided into four groups. About one-third (eighty-one) were residents, and a further fifty-two were 'worker-residents' who both lived in the suburb and worked part-time or full-time in local agencies, neighbourhood houses and community centres. Of the rest, eighty-eight were social workers, youth workers and other welfare workers who did not live in or grow up in the area, and twenty-eight were people

working in local councils, regional bodies or government departments outside these suburbs.

The residents were more likely to be over the age of 30 than under it; accordingly, I have been circumspect in regard to the views of younger residents, from whom I heard relatively less. Of the 133 residents and worker-residents, seventeen were Aboriginal. Twelve were born in countries other than Australia, Britain and New Zealand, and I also interviewed fourteen community workers who were first- or second-generation migrants from Turkey, El Salvador, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Greece and the Philippines.

This was not a study in which I collected precise details of income or expenditure, used surveys or questionnaires, or carried out quantitative analysis of people's budgets and financial strategies. However, all of the residents and a majority of the worker-residents were, by my estimation and observations, doing it hard. Eighty-six were renting from the state housing departments, ten were living in housing cooperatives, and thirty-seven had bought or were buying low-cost homes built by the Housing Commissions in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. Of the eighty-one residents, fifty-nine were living on a pension – either aged, disability or supporting parent – or on unemployment benefits. More than half the worker-residents also received some welfare payment alongside their wages. The twenty-two residents who were in paid employment, apart from two clerks and one saleswoman, worked for public (or at that point public) authorities such as Telecom (now Telstra) and the railways, in public works departments, as factory hands, storemen, process workers or labourers, or as part-time shop assistants, cleaners, deliverers or couriers.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Broadmeadows

Daya Adelan	Cass Gryzorowicz	Carmel McMennemin
Fouad Alali	Wendy Hancock	Antoinette Mertins
Alan Aylward	Mari Hardstaff	Nick Michael
Melek Bagdas	Sue Herbst	Janey Muir-Smith
Robbie Barry	Jenny Holloway	Nancy Nankervis
Geoff Blair	Paul Hopkins	Joe Narbaluk
Norma Brooks	Reverend Jim	Lyn Nicholls
Joy Burness	Houston	Pam O'Reilly
Nick Button	Marjorie Houston	Michael Olijnyk
Ella Carruthers	Laurie Jackson	Margaret Pateman
Joanna Casey	Barbara Jones	Suzy Pinchen
Reverend Peter Clark	Kym Jones	Father Pat Purcell
Connie Dew	John Karageorge	Pam Quinton-Randall
Graham Eagles	Sharon Keppel	Carmen Raspor
Barry Edwards	Sue Lagreca	Maria Robles
Mary Elvey	Stephanie Langridge	Derek Robson
Jeff Fiedler	Jacqui Lavis	Jack Roper
Kate Fogale	Suzanne Lechte	Vivien Routley
Graham Francis	Joan Legg	Gaye Rowe
Pat Frawley	Sharyn Mains	John Rutherford
Frank Gallagher	Nicky Marshall	Sonja Rutherford

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Father Joe Ruys	Monica Sidhu	Keith Van Dome
Cheryl Sampson	Barbara Steen	Pam Vorbach
Philip Shanahan	Reverend Frank Tate	Jane Williamson
Irene Sharp	Yvonne Thompson	Ralph Willoughby
Jennifer Shore	Tony Triado	Christina Wright

Inala

Mirtha Barboza	Matthew Evans	Peta Robinson
Ellie Barney	Lil Fellows	Luisa Romano
Kylie Battams	Di Glynn	Sue Schmidt
Kevin Bell	Sister Rosemary	Shirley Schneider
Rosemary Bell	Grundy	Margaret Shepherd
Jean Brett	Paul Hauff	Beth Smith
Vanessa Brett	Jill Haug	Kay Smith
Ken Butler	Eric Jansink	Michelle Smith
Lynda Cawley	Margaret Joughin	Monty Smith
Shirley Cawley	Karen Krarup	Sue Smith
Kerry Charlton	Lyn Lindberg	Shirley Stark
Jenny Chaves	Chris Lucas	Connie Sully
Tony Churchill	Jim Lucey	Joie Sumby
Katherine Collins	Ashok Madan	Nola Townsend
Julie Conway	Elena Madan	Anh Tran
Audrey Cooper	Diane Marr	Lorna Tyson
Nettie Corbett	Iris Moir	Linda Velli
Penny Corbett	Father Frank	Judy Walker
Connie Dailey	Moynihan	Donna Warrie
Ray Dailey	Chuong Nguyen	Margaret Warrington
Dave Davidson	Chris O'Keefe	John Westwood
Lisa Dejong	Warren Oxman	Jule Wilkie
Sister Vivienne	Penny Penrose	Chris Williams
Desailly	Bet Peters	Julie Wright
Jon Eastgate	Olwen Redshaw	Fay Zarge
Aureole Edwards	Marianne Reid	

Mount Druitt

Kyla Aggar	Sonia Hinkley	Annette Rennie
Mark Aggar	Jim Hook	June Richards
Richard Amery, MP	Nancy Horner	Mel Roebuck
Arnold Bailey	Narelle Hosking	Aaron Romero
Cesar Bigornia	Naomi Houston	Coral Rosevear
Julie Bosley	Claire Hutton	Barry Ryan
Tony Bowen	Matthew Johnson	Dianne Ryan
Caron Brown	Christine Kal	Wayne Ryan
Lesley Brown	Lynette Knight	Karen Salisbury
Sue Butler	Konstanty Kudzielko	Greg Shaw
Brenda Chadwick	Terry Lett	Lily Shearer
Lay-Yin Chiew	Mark Letta	Kooryn Sheaves
Jean Cinis	Brett Louat	Dick Sheppard
Maxine Conaty	Charlie Lowles	Yvonne Shipp
Patricia Crane	Bob Lundie-Jenkins	Patricia Simms
Margaret Curtis	Sharyn Magennis	June Sinclair-Lawler
Paul Dengate	Sundar Mahtani	Pam Slade
Carol Donovan	Trish Martin	Lois Smith
Stephen Driscoll	Alison McIntyre	Matthew Smyth
Pat Eastman	Coral McLean	Lynn Tarrant
Brenda English	Janet Milligan	Penny Thomas
Vicky Eyles	Chris Mortimer	Ric Thomas
Robyn Fallick	Lin Mountstephen	Marie Turner
Mick Fell	Joseph Munoz	Bev Vincent
Glenn Finnie	Wendy Munoz	Dave Vincent
Simon Fox	Lachlan Murdoch	Harvey Volke
Val Franzen	Graham Murray	Maria Votano
Paul Gibson, MP	George Nicolaidis	Pat Wain
Alex Gooding	Marlene Palmi	Helen Wilson
Sylvia Gray	John Paszek	Tiane Wilson
David Hall	Wilma Pearce	Debbie Wong
Father Paul Hanna	Michelle Peisley	Brother Bill Wright
Rhonda Hills	Laraine Presgrave	