

Fingerprints of slavery in every Australian home

By Andrew Forrest

How many slaves do you have working for you? An uncomfortable question? Sure, but certainly not a ludicrous one and sadly, a question that every Australian must now consider.

The reality is that Australia is consuming the products of slavery.

Every day, many Australians have enslaved teams of 20 or more human beings working day and night, tricked and entrapped into dangerous and dehumanising conditions just to keep us in a comfortable lifestyle of technological and material consumption and – for some - blissful ignorance.

Our food, electrical goods, clothing, jewellery, cosmetics and even our pet food are, in too many cases, touched by slavery.

Let's be clear about what modern slavery is. There is a sweeping misconception that it is an unavoidable consequence of globalisation and a free market.

It isn't. We are not talking about people who live below the poverty line, and struggle to earn a liveable wage. That's economic hardship and is intolerable, but it is not slavery. Slavery is where a person is forced to work and has the same or fewer rights than a farm animal, and often suffer worse conditions (certainly, sex slavery is worse). Slaves can never leave on their own volition – and when they do leave it is because they are discarded as they now physically or emotionally impaired and can no longer do the work. Or they leave in a wooden box.

Most people understandably think that slavery - the kind that enslaved Africans and others for centuries - has already been abolished thanks to the efforts of Abraham Lincoln, William Wilberforce and others. However, the net effect of their efforts was to deregulate slavery, and off into the dark corners of industry and communities it scurried, where it has been increasing ever since.

Modern slavery translates into words we've all heard but can barely imagine. Words such as 'child marriage', 'people smuggling', 'human trafficking', 'sex trade', 'forced labour', 'debt bondage', 'domestic servitude', or 'child soldiers'.

And it's a huge problem. 45.8 million people, or twice the number of all Australians, are enslaved around the world. According to the most recent Global Slavery Index, there are now more slaves than at any other time in history. These people sit underneath the radar of humanity, trapped in standards even below the poorest of the poor, starved of their human rights and inextricably and dangerously bound in slavery to satisfy the wants of the modern world and the evil demands of slave lords – for no pay, no rights, no freedom.

We cannot continue to live with a clear conscience when we know that slavery has mutated from the barbaric slavery of our history books to a modern curse fuelled by rampant discrimination and inequality, globalisation and ignorance. Where the disposability of human life becomes equal to a plastic bag. Where our consumption in a global world allows us to consume without consciousness and at a speed and price that neglects the toil that brought it to us.

Modern slavery is the reality of women and girls lured from home and trapped in barns for troops of soldiers to continuously rape.

It is the grim existence of young children enslaved in garment factories, textile factories or quarries, where they move heavy slabs of rock on their backs.

It's the fact that slaves are being used to overfish our oceans and denude our protected rainforests.

Modern slavery is an issue for every single nation, including Australia, to address. Whatever you care for as a citizen in this world, and wherever your moral compass points, you should care about slavery. No one today can argue in its favour, although until recently, many did.

If you empathise with the plight of refugees, then understand that slavery is a common trap for our most vulnerable and disenfranchised people, as millionaire slave masters prey on these wretched highways of homelessness in our fractured world.

If you are a supporter of women's rights, slavery is relevant in your fight for equality. Women and girls are more likely to be enslaved and face greater difficulty in leaving slavery because of the pervasive discrimination against women.

If you are an environmentalist concerned about the future of our earth, you need to be aware that if slavery were a country, its combined actions would make it the third largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world (after China and USA).

If you are a passionate protector of childhood and children, then realise that child labour, child marriage and child sexual exploitation exists – indeed, flourishes – in the countries we trade with and holiday in.

If you eat seafood then know that slaves (often children) may have caught your fish. If you love camping and sport, then know that slaves may have laboured over your tents and tennis racquets.

I could go on. We are becoming increasingly blind to the effects of the inequalities in our world, and it has become all too common to identify more as consumers of an economy, rather than as citizens of a country or the world.

It is forgivable to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task in ending modern slavery.

But it is unforgivable to do nothing when every country in the world agrees that slavery is illegal. It is uncaring and irresponsible to ignore the fact that how we treat our most vulnerable citizens will define us as human beings.

The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 sets a fine example for the world to follow. It has introduced laws that require companies to report on the steps they are taking to ensure the 'cleanliness' of their supply chains. It encourages business to go looking for slavery, without fear of criminal or civil punitive action.

As a businessman, I urge Australia to put a legal framework around transparency in supply chains, and to do it without delay. I can assure our Government that legislation such as the UK Modern Slavery Act would not be an impost on business, but rather a welcomed protection for Directors. We need to encourage a culture where it is both safe and celebrated when companies go looking for slavery. And when they find it, we need to celebrate that too, because finding it is the first step in eradicating it.

A few years ago, the company of which I am Chair, Fortescue Metals Group, went looking for slavery in our supply chains. Through an initial affidavit process that uncovered several suppliers with issues, then an independent audit, we found cases of workers living in inhumane conditions, their passports withheld and with crushing debts due to excessive fees being paid to recruiters

Fortescue was able to quickly remedy these particular challenges, and has since worked hard to put in place business-wide systems that give effect to a zero tolerance policy for modern slavery in its supply chain.

While I don't believe in punishing companies who take the initiative to look and find supply chain slavery, I am a firm believer that Australia must build on the precedent set in the UK and introduce robust enforcement for those who fail to act once they find it.

Companies that operate ethically also operate profitably and sustainably. Many businesses are used to managing risks of all types – to ask them to mitigate risks of what UK Prime Minister Theresa May has rightly called the greatest human rights challenge of our era - modern slavery - is not such a big stretch.

As a nation we are exposed morally, politically and economically by modern slavery.

Australia has the opportunity to become the first country in the southern hemisphere to enact meaningful legislation that ensures companies are held to account, and to empower independent oversight.

Australians have the opportunity reject slavery from their lives through smarter consumerism.

Let's all work together to erase the fingerprints of slavery over our lives.

Andrew Forrest is the Australian Business Champion for the Bali Process, the Founder of the Walk Free Foundation, 2017 Australian of the Year (WA) and the Chairman of the Fortescue Metals Group. The Asia Pacific region accounts for about 30 million people in slavery – approximately two-thirds of all slaves, with many of the most slave-ridden countries being Australia's main supply chain partners.
Australian

December 2 is the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery.