

With our faces in the sun, we're missing the shadows

By Andrew Forrest

How can you care about something that you don't understand?
How can you worry about something that you can't see with your own eyes?

This is the challenge of fighting modern slavery in Australia, where it is not common, and where our daily lives don't intersect with the horrors that fellow human beings are experiencing in other countries.

We are blessed to live in a beautiful and safe country, but when our faces are always turned to the sun, we fail to see the shadows of modern slavery.

Around the world, 45.8 million people are trapped in some form of slavery. That's almost twice the population of Australia held against their will in child marriage, or domestic servitude, or enslaved in the sex industry. They might be smuggled, or trafficked, or used as child soldiers or unpaid labourers.

Many people regard slavery as the tragedy that befell Africans and others for centuries, and that is no longer relevant thanks to the efforts of people such as William Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln. Others think 'why should I care? It's not in my backyard'.

That's where they are wrong. Modern slavery is, sadly, not just in our backyard, but making dirty footprints throughout our homes.

We take for granted our comfortable Australian lifestyles without recognising that many of the products we consume – food, clothing, cosmetics, electrical goods and more – are touched by slavery. The majority of our supply chains in Australia come through the Asia Pacific region, home to more than two-thirds of the world's slaves – and right in our backyard.

Slavery occurs when 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 by their own choosing. They are often discarded when no longer fit to work, or they die on the job and leave in a cardboard box.

Around the world, women and girls are trapped in barns for troops of soldiers to continuously rape, young children toil in quarries carrying heavy slabs of rock on their backs, and men are illegally crowded onto unsafe vessels to overfish our oceans. These are just a few examples of what UK Prime Minister Theresa May has called 'the greatest human rights issue of our time'.

I have to admit that I, like many Australians, was blissfully ignorant of modern slavery until it cast its dark shadows over my own family.

I first became concerned about it when my daughter, who was volunteering overseas, uncovered what we suspect was an orphanage selling children. She was traumatised, as was my entire family. It spurred us to look deeper into the issue, and resulted in our founding of the Walk Free Foundation.

I began to appreciate the real risk of modern slavery within company supply chains, including my own company, Fortescue Metals Group. Fortescue is a global leader in the iron ore industry and operates some of the largest mines in the world, a port and the fastest heavy haul railway in the world. Our supply chain comprises more than 2,000 suppliers doing business in more than 20 countries.

In 2012, Fortescue made a commitment to deal with slavery in its supply chain and wrote to its suppliers, asking them to thoroughly review their first and second order supply chains and ensure there were no forced labour or slavery type practices. Importantly, Fortescue agreed to not penalise a business unless they did not cooperate.

Several companies indicated difficulty with their contract labour supply conditions. We then asked an independent auditor to investigate the working conditions of the employees of one of our suppliers, and a confronting fact emerged – there were people working in Fortescue's supply chain whose passports were being held. Due to excessive fees paid to recruiters, these workers had crushing debts to repay. They were unable to leave their employers and had no ability to report the completely inhumane conditions in which they worked.

Fortescue applied its leverage to ensure that all passports were returned, illegal recruitment fees were back-paid – including to workers who had since left the company, and major overhauls were made to ensure this did not happen again.

Since that time, Fortescue has worked hard to put in place systems across the business, with a zero tolerance for modern slavery.

I believe there can be no absolutely no excuse for companies in Australia to have slaves in their supply chains, and this is why I am urging the Australian Government to put in place legislation that requires companies to report on the steps they are taking to identify slavery in their supply chains.

This is already happening in the UK, where the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015) is in place. Australia has the opportunity to take leadership in the southern hemisphere by doing the same.

I am not a lone voice in calling for an Australian Modern Slavery Act. On 2 December – the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery – Australian faith leaders joined me in publicly asking the Government to enact new legislation. Further, I know that I have the support of Australia's business sector, which would welcome the protection for Directors that an Act would give us. We also know that companies that operate ethically also operate profitably and sustainably.

I am a strong believer in not punishing companies who take the initiative to look deeply in their supply chains only to find problems. Companies must be encouraged, not dissuaded, to look hard. However, I am also a strong believer that those who seek to remain wilfully blind cannot be allowed to hide behind a failure to look. Again, government has a critical role to play here, because companies that look the other way must be held to account. Without this, we punish those who put the time and effort into ensuring they have clean supply chains, while rewarding those who do nothing.

I am encouraged that there are many diverse prongs active in the fight to end modern day slavery. And I know that success will come only through a determined and collaborative effort by governments enacting powerful legislation, businesspeople examining their supply chains, faith leaders appealing to their congregations and protecting and empowering their most vulnerable believers, and all of us as citizens remaining conscious and curious about the products of our consumption.

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