Rescuing Democracy

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This book would not have been written without the initiative of Jamie Kirkpatrick, Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania. His invitation that I engage in research at his school gave me the resources to do the job, so I thank him for his generosity and enterprising spirit. A major part of those resources was academic guidance from Pete Hay and then, as the project developed, Aidan Davison, who backed up warm encouragement with astute queries. Michael Lockwood, Graeme Wells, Kate Crowley and Marcus Haward also assisted. From outside this university, help was given by Graham Smith, now at the University of Westminster, Stephen Coleman at the University of Leeds and John R. Alford at Rice University.

Some of the ideas that are presented here were developed much earlier during several decades of political and environmental activism. In that phase I owed much to the stimulation, suggestions and criticisms of more people than I can recall. My father Edmund (Eddy) Smith started me off in this direction more than half a century ago by taking me along on fishing trips. This contact with the outdoors started to give me an appreciation of that all-encompassing public good, the natural environment. In the 1960s he got me thinking with the suggestion that, for a developed society such as Australia, further economic growth was no longer worth the trouble it caused. No doubt his assessment came from being well-educated in how to enjoy natural and rural environments. He was raised on a farm, learned how to catch trout in a nearby creek and studied science at university. To such experiences he added a political perspec-
tive from his father, a carpenter, prospector and farmer who observed that, as a rough rule of thumb and especially for complex and long-term issues, ‘the majority is always wrong’.

Tasmania’s wilderness has given a strong motivation to write this book. To grow up learning to appreciate the beauty and challenge of wild places and then seeing them being progressively dismembered is a harrowing experience — but it made me think. For twenty-five years I was in a good place to do this, for I worked as a planner and district administrator in Tasmania’s Forestry Commission (now Forestry Tasmania), a government agency that was, and remains, a major force in the destruction of wilderness and other natural values. My acknowledgement of the contribution of wild places to the work presented here is made very seriously. It seems to me that such sources of inspiration drive thinking that may not otherwise occur. In their absence one can be blind to ways in which humanity can flourish.

I thank my brother Marcus, partly for bouncing ideas but mainly for helping me build a small house in the country. This has been an idyllic base for working on the project. Jack and Christine Lomax were very supportive, while fizzing with political indignation. Rod West encouraged me to pursue my concerns at the University of Tasmania and in the final stage of writing, Nick Sawyer gave a helpful review of the synopsis. My ‘scarcity multiplier’ theory in Chapter 5 has brewed for forty years and owes much to ideas, criticism and encouragement from Chris Harries, Geoffrey Lea and three anonymous reviewers for the journal Ecological Economics. My ‘People’s Forum’ institutional design was developed from a discussion with Bob Brown in the late 1980s, eight years before he became the first senator for (and leader of) the Australian Greens. We were concerned about the lack of responsiveness of democratic governments to what appeared to us as important, even fundamental, issues. Bob wondered whether improvement might be effected with referendums, perhaps the citizen-initiated type being used in California. The responsibility for what this thought morphed into, is entirely mine. The result has been sharpened over the years by communication with many concerned people. To ac-
knowledge just a few of these I thank Ted Becker, Professor of Political Science at Auburn University, Alabama; Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, New Jersey; Hugh Mackay, Australian psychologist and social researcher; and Michele Levine, Chief Executive Officer of Roy Morgan Research in Melbourne.

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